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A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF AN AFRICENTRIC RITES OF PASSAGE PROGRAM
USED WITH ADOLESCENT AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN
OUT-OF-HOME CARE: LOOKING FOR UNEXPECTED THEMES

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By

Keith Anthony Alford, B.A., M.S.W.

* * * * *

The Ohio State University

1997

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College of Social Work
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1997
Qualitative inquiry was used to examine an Africentric Rites of Passage Program (AA-RITES) and assess the benefits of this program vis-a-vis self-esteem and ethnic identity enhancement for African American adolescent males in out-of-home care. Interpretive science was the epistemological paradigm of choice that drove this study. To maintain the intended naturalistic tone a purposive sampling method was used with the help of agency personnel, and AA-RITES leaders and elders. Twenty-nine respondents were interviewed and observed. Content analysis was used to identify and subsequently organize themes that emerged from the transcribed text of interviews with the AA-RITES participants. Data reduction, data displays, and conclusion drawing and verification were used to code the data. Analysis of the observations followed the same procedure as was used with the interviews. Through the inductive process, grounded theory was derived and the following unexpected themes emerged: (a) Importance of Learning and Giving Back What You Have Learned and the Will to Strive for Your Best; (b) Family Solidarity and Cultural Interconnectedness; (c) Condemnation of Violence and Unproductive Behavior; and (d) Reverence to the Creator. Each aforementioned thematic construct appeared to add credence to the AA-RITES program's worthiness with regard to the progressive development of the researched population.
DEDICATION

In Loving Memory

of

my mother, Mrs. Marilyn Johnson Alford, whose love, inspiration, and steadfast support paved the way for my determination to make a positive difference in this life. An elementary school teacher by profession, she instilled in her two sons the importance of exercising fairness and consideration to all people at all times. It is through her lifeline that I persevere to do unto others as I would have them do unto me;

my uncle, the Reverend Tallie T. Marsh, whose spiritual example, dignified dress, and dependable nature taught me how to be honorable in my deportment;

my uncle, Mr. Oliver C. Finley, whose stately character, keen wisdom, and generous spirit taught me what qualities embody a true hero;

my aunt, Mrs. Eloise J. Marsh, whose protective persona, special kindness, and invincible strength taught me to stand up for my beliefs and always do my best. Her vibrant presence is greatly missed, but the warmth and power of her prayers and well wishes continue to permeate my life;

and

my father, Mr. James G. Alford, whose untimely death continues to cast bewilderment upon all who knew him. He is best remembered for his relentless work ethic. Through the years and beyond the age of retirement, my father tenaciously operated a successful tonsorial establishment with his faithful business partner. Unbeknownst to Jim Alford was a biological onlooker who has since tried to capture that same work ethic and make it part of his daily regimen.
The light that shines in remembrance of these five individuals will forever burn brightly in my life. As I continue my sojourn on this earth, I am wiser and stronger for the many lessons they so earnestly taught me.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It gives me immense pleasure to acknowledge and express my gratitude to the many people who offered their support and kindness during my doctoral studies. First, I would like to acknowledge my Creator from whom all blessings flow, for without the guidance and mercy of this supreme being I would not be where I am today. Second, I am thankful to my wife, Lisa Dunn Alford, for her untiring love, patience, and support. She literally sacrificed chunks of time, so that I might complete my assignments on a timely basis. In addition, she provided poignant spiritual advice and offered pragmatic wisdom on pressing issues and concerns. She is one of a kind, and I am very fortunate to be her spouse. Her unrelenting faithfulness will be cherished for years to come. In addition, my brother, Myron, and his family always provided motivational encouragement during the times I needed it the most. I was moved by and appreciated their genuine concern for my well-being. Their cheers, along with those of my Uncle Jack and Aunt Marie, were a tremendous source of comfort during my doctoral journey. My cousin, Jackie, and her family never forgot me either and frequently offered huge portions of strength and inspiration.

I am truly blessed to have my Aunt Ethel, whom I also refer to affectionately as Momma Finley, Miss Ethel, or Mrs. Finley, to be among the living as she has witnessed my high school, college, and master’s graduation ceremonies. Ethel J. Finley is a living
legend and a wonderful mentor. She has modeled altruistic behavior her entire life. I can remember Momma Finley telling me when I was only a boy that I must always look for the "good" in everyone. To this day, I try my best to look for goodness in everyone I meet. Deborah, my cousin and Aunt Ethel's daughter, has also offered countless donations of love and support, all of which I very much appreciate. Certainly, I would be remiss if I did not thank my mother-in-law, Mamie Dunn, and father-in-law, James Dunn, for their unwavering concern and support during my days in the doctoral program. Distance did not deter their well wishes and prayers. Interdependence, mutual aid, and interconnectedness are all strongholds of the African American extended family, and rightly so, because I am a die-hard beneficiary of the energy that emanates from these strengths.

I learned at an early age the importance of maintaining solid and positive friendships. My friends have been exceptionally helpful to me during my doctoral tenure. Their random acts of kindness were very much needed and appreciated. Ramona Denby, my friend and colleague, is one such person who sent her unique kindness in my direction. Our shared research interests helped to make my doctoral experience a more pleasant one. Dr. Denby has been a true source of unfailing loyalty and I look forward to continued collaboration with her, for she is a colleague who rises above the crowd. Like Ramona, my childhood friend, Terry Gold, and his wife, Jean, have kept me on their prayer list since I first began my doctoral studies. Terry's telephone calls of praise and support always gave me that extra boost as I persevered to finish a paper or plan for a conference presentation. The camaraderie we share is most definitely therapeutic. Likewise, his
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are now deceased but during their earthly existence offered huge doses of consideration, admiration, and silent strength. To them I am deeply grateful. As in the African ritual of offering libations by which the names of ancestors are announced in reverence for their contributions to humankind, the following persons are posthumously acknowledged: Mrs. Fredrina Tolbert; Mr. John Bassard Sr.; Mrs. Mattie B. McIver; Mrs. Sally M. Moses; Mr. Joshua Martin Jr.; Mrs. Mary Green; Mr. Lewis W. Gold; Mrs. Bertha O. Clark; Mrs. Teresa Mangum McMillan; Mr. Arnold D. Sawyer; Mr. Freddie McMurray; the Reverend and Mrs. F. M. Young; and United States Commerce Secretary Mr. Ronald H. Brown. These individuals sought to build up humanity despite the negative forces that existed. I am a better person because of their example and fortitude.

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“I am because we are, because we are, therefore I am” is an African proverb, referenced later in this dissertation, that colorfully depicts my personal sentiments as I close this chapter of my life and embark on new uncharted territory.
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**FIELD OF STUDY**

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Chapter 1

General Introduction

In recent years, our society has begun to take a closer look at the plight of urban adolescent African American males. This population has come under close scrutiny because of the seemingly pervasive negativity they face on a daily basis. Hill (1992) candidly punctuated the negative forces that are taking their toll on young African American males in cities across the country. He stated that Black males, particularly adolescents in urban areas, have clearly been a vulnerable group in relation to such destructive activities as substance abuse and gang involvement. Families in crises add more gloom to this picture as many of these adolescent males are in various out-of-home placements. Frustration and confusion abound for these youth as they grapple with low self-esteem and a bruised sense of ethnic identity. The social work profession has verbally and, in many instances, proactively addressed the need for innovative interventions that are culturally specific. Such interventions actively seek to work more closely with issues of self-esteem and ethnic pride because these areas are often key toward the amelioration of the client's condition.

Blumenkrantz and Gavazzi (1993) as well as Campbell and Moyers (1988) asserted that in contemporary society, the increase in substance abuse and violent behavior among adolescents can be linked to society's underutilization of Rites of Passage
Informal indicators of adulthood such as drinking, promiscuous sexual behavior, and gang involvement serve as socially proscribed transitional markers (Parham, et al., 1985; Hill, 1992). Contemporary RITES that are culturally specific in design denounce such self-defeating behaviors and promotes pro-social and pro-familial lifestyles.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine an Africentric Rites of Passage program and assess the benefits vis-a-vis self-esteem and ethnic identity enhancement for African American adolescent males in out-of-home care. To fully conceptualize the impetus for this study it is imperative that attention be given to the thousands of youth who are placed in out-of-home care. At the end of 1991, there were 429,000 children in out-of-home care, a 4.1% increase from 1990 and a 64% increase since 1982 (Merkel-Holquin, 1993). According to the most recent data from the Ohio Department of Human Services (ODHS), urban youth are disproportionately represented in Ohio substitute care. The ODHS data also indicate that a significant portion of Ohio's population of youth in substitute care are African American. Of the approximately 6,300 urban youth experiencing out-of-home placement in children services' agencies, over 3,800 (approximately 60%) are African American, yet the total African American population in these 13 counties is less than 20% of the entire population (ODHS Statistical Report, Children in Out-of-Home, 1992).

These ODHS statistics regarding overrepresentation of African American youth in out-of-home care are unfortunately indicative of the national scene (Jenkins & Diamond,
1985; Shyne & Schroeder, 1978). Stehno (1990) reported that African American children have the highest rates of out-of-home placements in such states as New Jersey (63%), Maryland (57%), Louisiana (54%), Delaware (50%), Alabama (49%), New York (45%), and North Carolina (45%). Nationwide, this phenomenon occurs each year, often exacerbating the youth's feelings of isolation and social disenfranchisement. Upon the youths' removal from their families, certain normative developmental paths toward self-sufficiency are altered for them. In particular, youth moving from a dependent custody arrangement to independent living status are faced with relatively abrupt transitions. They are placed at high risk of continued dependency on the community well into their adult lives. Because of the declining economic opportunities within most metropolitan environments, urban youth are at even greater risk in this regard, and this is compounded by ethnic status and related discriminatory practices (Khan, 1982).

Collectively, the previously noted factors, intra-familial problems, and broad institutional racism contribute to the need for a uniform initiative (i.e., RITES) to assist young African American males in accessing their true potential and achieving a more holistic young adulthood development. It is difficult for African American youth to accomplish such tasks as graduation from high school and the maintenance of a job when they have low self-esteem and the worth of their ethnicity is constantly questioned by societal foes and racist practices. Pierce (1975) honed this debilitating reality in his discussion of Mundane Extreme Environmental Stress (MEES). He said that Blacks can be viewed as living in a mundane, extreme environment in which racism and subtle oppression are ubiquitous, continuing, and mundane as opposed to an occasional
misfortune. Intimidation, discrimination, and denial, often manifested through unjust housing and employment practices, add frustration to an already aggravated situation. Peters and Massey (1983) expounded on this very point by asserting that these stresses, subtle or overt, are pervasive, continuous, and discouraging. Research has shown that people of color are constantly watched by store personnel when browsing and, in some instances, pay more for services or merchandise than do members of the dominant culture. These occurrences have become mundane because of their regularity (Denby & Alford, 1996; Peters & Massey, 1983). For adolescent African American males the condition of MEES is not foreign. Franklin (1989) stated that racism is among the many pressing issues facing Black adolescents. He noted, "What confronts the clinician in work with the urban Black adolescent are essentially problems borne out of racism and stressful life conditions masked by common developmental concerns..." (p. 309). These developmental concerns might possibly don another mask that could be labeled, "problem behaviors." Without a true understanding of the core issue(s), strategic and proactive therapeutic intervention will falter.

The aforementioned issues articulate a need to actively address the social and cultural demands of young African American males. The Office of Child Care and Family Services, which is part of the Ohio Department of Human Services, has attempted to tackle this task. They have implemented an African American Rites of Passage Program (AA-RITES) to meet the particular cultural needs of these young men. The AA-RITES program, operated by local county children service agencies with the help of some community organizations, was specially constructed as a complementary component to the
life skills training efforts within the Independent Living Program. It was designed to create opportunities for self-esteem enhancement and continued ethnic identity formation. According to McKenry et al. (1989) and Spencer and Dornbusch (1990), ethnicity is still one of the most understudied and underutilized variables related to the successful transition into adulthood status.

This qualitative dissertation is one part of a two-part study that involved a collaborative effort between the Ohio Department of Human Services and the Department of Family Relations and Human Development, College of Human Ecology at The Ohio State University. More specifically, the Office of Child Care and Family Services of the Ohio Department of Human Services wanted an evaluation of the AA-RTTES program as it is currently implemented with African American male adolescents in out-of-home care. The quantitative analyses, which are not presented in this dissertation, comprise the second part of the study. These analyses are expected to generate basic research data concerning predictors of African American male adolescents' successful transition from out-of-home care to self-sufficient adulthood status.

The Research Questions

The AA-RTTES program is not the only one of its kind; many such programs have been established across the country, but adequate evaluation of these programs is scant. Hence, the following research questions, given the content of Ohio's AA-RTTES program, are salient in an effort to determine whether primary program goals are being achieved:
1. Are adolescent African American males in out-of-home care who participate in the AA-RTTES program developing positive self-esteem as they mature?

2. Are adolescent African American males in out-of-home care who participate in the AA-RTTES program developing a strong sense of ethnic identity as they mature?

In qualitative terms, these questions serve as sensitizing concepts. Sensitizing concepts as termed by Blumer (1954) have been described as precursors to thinking about a class of data (van den Hoonaard, 1997). Such concepts assist the researcher in sensitizing him or herself to a particular category of data; thus, providing an initial guide or avenue of direction to the given research endeavor (van den Hoonaard, 1997).

Significance of the Proposed Study

There are those who may argue that programs have been in place through the years that emphasize self-esteem through self-sufficiency and survival tactics in relation to life skills development. A paramount reason why these programs have not experienced great success may be the lack of focus on issues related to the cultural background of the youth (Gill & Jackson, 1983; Mullender & Miller, 1985). A critical notion that one must consider when surveying this problem is that when youth are taken from their families of origin, they often are removed from their immediate social and/or cultural community as well. This transition is difficult and often not welcomed, but, nonetheless, it occurs and youth are left with feelings of loss and confusion. More specifically, ethnic identity
enhancement is hampered because of the subtraction of an important source of life support. This is damaging to the well being of an individual, because the establishment of a sense of ethnic identity is a decisive factor in the adolescent’s ability to develop other forms of identity related to occupation, ideology, and interpersonal relationships (Steinberg, 1993).

In the past, because of what Akbar (1991) has coined “democratic sanity,” the application of normative mental health diagnoses, treatment procedures, and standards to all cultures, the African-American community has been resistant to traditional quantitative approaches or studies that do not explicate indigenous strengths of the African American culture (p. 339). Often these approaches or studies have been used against them (e.g., Murray, 1994; Moynihan, 1965); therefore, program evaluation has not been a priority (McKenry et al., 1989). However, it remains a necessity, especially in an effort to improve and provide optimal service to specified populations receiving treatment and to accurately determine if the primary goals of the program, self-esteem and ethnic identity enhancement, are fully being reached.

This study is a qualitative program evaluation and has significance in providing a venue for AA-RITES participants’ stories to be heard as they relate to their RITES experience. This type of research permits respondents to share personal life scenarios involving how they integrated or plan to integrate into daily living the knowledge acquired through RITES participation.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Overview of Historical Rites of Passage

A review of the literature with regard to RITES for adolescent African American males is crucial in understanding the operation and significance of this initiative. However, attention should be given to the historical foundation of RITES in the diaspora to fully appreciate the development of contemporary AA-RITES programs. The following paragraphs will cover the historical underpinnings of RITES, culture and RITES, evaluation research and RITES, and an overall examination of the theory and rudiments of the Ohio AA-RITES program for adolescent males in out-of-home care.

Historically, RITES have been viewed as ritualistic acts (rituals of initiation) that occur throughout the life cycle (Vivelo, 1978). These acts have been labeled symbolic and meaningful. They mark transitional periods for individuals as specified stages of life occur. Vivelo (1978) stated that birth, maturation, reproduction, and death are socially marked phases of the life cycle. In primary cultures, RITES were used to facilitate the transition from childhood to adulthood status (Eliade, 1958). In contemporary times, the attention paid to phases of life may or may not be surrounded by pomp and circumstance; but in no society are they totally ignored. Pomp and circumstance are important rituals that give credence and stature to the RITES process. Warfield-Coppock (1990) stated
that rituals are symbolic acts that bring stability, ease of transition, and continuity to life. They also bring groundedness, balance, and order to life; therefore, rituals and rites appear to go hand in hand. In the following quote, Warfield Coppock (1992b), a pioneer in the development of African American adolescent Rites of Passage, traced the origin of this replicated practice to ancient Kemet (Egypt):

The African concept of rites of passage or initiation has its roots in Ancient Kemet (Egypt). Egyptian society required its novices to undergo an elaborate, extremely intense, and difficult process before they could be considered eligible for initiation (Haich, 1974). Initiation was only for priests who had supernatural powers due to their training in the Higher Mystery Systems (James, 1954/1986). A neophyte took many years to reach the required level of spiritual and physical development and knowledge....For the people of Kemet, the development of virtuousness was an essential part of the growth and educational process. Ancient Kemetic traditions emphasized the development of qualities that put the neophyte in harmony with other people, nature, and God. (pp. 472-473)

The necessity to endow the interconnectedness of human life, nature, and spirituality was pervasive in Ancient Africa. They sought to accomplish this task through the ceremonial tradition of rites. Hare and Hare (1985) stated that in pre-colonial Africa, customs, rituals and ceremonies not only regulated the roles of the people but also gave special qualities and purposes to the land and animals. These practices were revered and deemed sacred by the people of that era.

As it was in ancient Africa and other countries of yesteryear, so it is today that RITES emphasize the importance of a youth’s preparation for adulthood status. More specifically, initiation rites functioned to introduce the adolescent male to the older male
kinship and all the trappings thereof (Cohen, 1969). Anyike (1992) corroborated this notion with regard to African history in the following quote:

African people are known for taking responsibility to prepare their progeny for adulthood. Our ancestors knew that each generation must be trained in order to prepare them to take their proper place in the society. At the proper time, youth would go through a rites of passage to culminate a process of learning that began at birth. This process of learning is fulfilled once the rites are completed and the older generation allows the younger generation to take on the responsibilities that they have been trained for. (p. 1)

The aforementioned quote was further expounded upon by Hill (1992) who believes that males should experience definite rituals in the African culture in order to be recognized as men. These activities, according to Hill (1992), prepare young people in matters of sexual life, marriage, procreation, and family/community responsibilities, while fulfilling a great educational purpose. Hill (1992) also noted that the occasion often marks the beginning of acquiring knowledge which is otherwise inaccessible to those who have not been initiated.

Culture and Rites of Passage

Separation, transformation, and reincorporation have been distinguished as three essential stages that comprise Rites of Passage (Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1987). Both symbolically and physically separated from childhood roles at the beginning of the initiation ritual, the children of primary cultures subsequently completed a series of transformative experiences that marked their acquiescence and readiness to become a contributing member of society’s adult sphere (Campbell, 1949). The completion of the
Rites of Passage was marked by a child’s reintroduction to the entire community as a new adult member. Reincorporation into society was accompanied with a new set of responsibilities and privileges commonly shared by all adults along gender-specific lines (Gennep, 1960). These responsibilities and privileges were rooted in the essence and uniqueness of the culture. The newly initiated adult members felt a cultural affirmation for their accomplishments which gave credibility to their acquired status.

In contemporary times, African American youth, like youth of yesteryear, require cultural affirmation. Pseudo affirmations that are normative do not provide the cultural specificity needed to help people in this population achieve their full potential. Gavazzi et al. (1996), purported that African American youth have different identity and personality formation patterns stemming from cultural differences and societal oppression (e.g., Hauser, 1971; Taylor, 1976, 1989). Ethnic group status cannot be filtered out from an identity development/progressive functioning equation as it pertains to African American youth. The African American social context is the primary source of social comparison in relation to self-evaluation and self-esteem for many Black children and adolescents (Cross 1985; Taylor 1989; Gibbs 1985; Gavazzi et al., 1996). This social context as well as familial support may not be prominent in the lives of Black youth who are in out-of-home care because of their displaced status (Gavazzi et al., 1996). As a result, negativity about one’s Blackness may surface (Jackson & Westmoreland, 1992). Maintaining a positive culturally responsive social context through well crafted service delivery is critical for African American youth who bring with them distinctive socio-cultural experiences.
Evaluation Research and Rites of Passage

The literature is sparse regarding culturally specific program evaluations vis-a-vis contemporary AA-RITES. Warfield-Coppock (1992b) conducted a preliminary survey of 20 culturally specific rites of passage programs targeted for a variety of youth. This survey resembled that of an evaluation, though it was not officially given that title. It focused on the operation or implementation of programs. The programs studied by Warfield-Coppock (1992b) were established as a result of the various problems facing African American youth, including violence, crime, and teen pregnancy. The programs surveyed used some variation of an Africentric premise as their guiding framework with the conviction that such culturally specific training could provide participants with self-esteem skills and survival techniques that would help in their transition to adulthood in an oppressive and often unfriendly society (Gavazzi et al., 1996). Warfield-Coppock (1992b) affirmed that there is an interlocking relationship between self-esteem and ethnic identity, particularly regarding African American adolescents.

Blumenkrantz (1992) utilized both quantitative and qualitative measures to evaluate the Rite of Passage Experience (ROPE). A 21-hour, 13 session program for youth in elementary and middle schools, ROPE sought to engage community members in activities to encourage healthy and positive youth development, validate the importance of having fun in life, and promote student-community service. The qualitative reports from ROPE participants indicated a high degree of satisfaction with the program. Their voices stated that they had learned cooperation, perseverance, and teamwork. Additionally, they indicated that they had gained more self-esteem and self-confidence.
The evaluative data in this dissertation will shed light on how the AA-RITES experience impacted the special sample population of adolescent African American males in out-of-home care. The sample population utilized in this dissertation did not have the advantage of immediate and extended family involvement in the traditional sense. Consequently, the AA-RITES experience appears to serve many of the tutorial functions that a family unit might otherwise provide. Such familial oriented functions as the inculcation of moral values, the formulation of a benevolent but prudent frame of reference, and a denunciation of repugnant and reprehensible behavior may be linked to AA-RITES programming as a result of this study's findings. Given the fact that individuals who fit the description of this study's sample population have been labeled, "at risk," the findings of this study can serve as a spring board to future research in an effort to better assist existing and new intervention efforts (Woodford, 1988, p. 3).
The African American Rites of Passage Program

Theoretical Perspective

The Africentric theoretical perspective undergirds the African American Rites of Passage (AA-RITES) program. This theoretical framework places Africa as the historical point of generation. Warfield-Coppock (1990) stated that to place Africa at the center of one's belief system or to be centered in African concepts is to adopt an Africentric posture. The holistic premise of Africentricity is thought to be functional, because it gives guidance and purpose to the thoughts and actions of African American people (Hill, 1992). Hill (1992) explicitly defined the Africentric theoretical perspective as follows:

The Africentric perspective, often referred to as the Black perspective, is first and foremost a theoretical frame of reference or worldview centered in Africa as the historical point of generation; unity that contains and transcends all opposites...it is both conceptual and pragmatic, concrete and functional. It enables one to approach feelings, knowledge, and actions as a comprehensive whole rather than as disparate segments. It enables one to move from a position characterized by a neo colonial mentality to one of relative autonomy....Paramount in the Africentric perspective is that the struggles of African Americans have historically had the central goal of gaining some measure of human dignity in a society which too often disregards the culture of non-Western peoples. Africentricity promotes an appreciation for, and utilization of, the collective experiences of Black people in every dimension of existence. (pp. 34-35)

Africentricity involves interpretation and analysis from the perspective of African people as subjects rather than as objects on the fringes of the western experience (Kelsey, 1991). Thus, furthering the knowledge base of participants about their African and African American heritage is a central component of the AA-RITES experience. Instead of competing over material items or engaging in territorial altercations, AA-RITES
participants endeavor to support and assist each other in acquiring more knowledge about their culture and ethnicity. Learning about African culture and the contributions of one’s African ancestors permits AA-RITES participants to gain greater appreciation of their ethnic and racial identity and learn about the prominence of people who look like themselves (Harvey, 1994).

Ideas of interconnectedness, collective consciousness, and oneness with nature are considered primary concepts of the Africentric theoretical perspective (Warfield-Coppock, 1990). Interconnectedness promotes the idea that all things are interdependent and interconnected. It also provides the foundation for all human interactions, because harmony and positive relations are necessary parts of relational activity (Warfield-Coppock, 1990). Africentric relationships are inspirational, because interactions are not only physical but also emotional, psychological, spiritual, and intellectual (Asante, 1988). A relationship is not reciprocal or satisfying when one person is always the giver and the other person is always the receiver (Asante, 1988). Collective consciousness refers to the sense of being related to the members of one’s ethnic group. This sense of relationship to everyone is the cornerstone of interdependence (Warfield-Coppock, 1990). Oneness with nature espouses the premise that spiritual forces, humans, and nature are invaluable and deserve ubiquitous respect (Warfield-Coppock, 1990).

Role and Scope of Program

The African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child,” (Hill, 1992, p. 55) reflects the basic educational approach of the AA-RITES program. This community-
agency-based program has a circumscribed target population of adolescent African American males in out-of-home care. Hill (1992) purported that the successful execution of a male AA-RITES program should include objectives that emphasize youth’s achievements in the following areas: (a) a sense of true identity and feeling of connectedness to the Black community and diaspora; (b) a degree of social knowledge and understanding that will equip him to overcome racism and other debilitating circumstances; (c) a reverence for the natural worth and dignity of one’s parents, extended family, and community; (d) a masculine ideal that conforms to profamily and prosocial values; and (e) a philosophy that honors and facilitates continued growth and development. In essence, with the guidance of program leaders and elders, AA-RITES participants are helped to understand who they are, where they came from, and what they should be about.

Caseworkers and group home workers from participating county social service agencies refer the names of adolescent males they believe would benefit from participation in AA-RITES. These are often youth who either show much potential and need the educational as well as the emotional uplift that an AA-RITES experience provides or youth who for various reasons exhibit low self-esteem and have made poor behavioral choices. Likewise, the caseworker or group home worker may refer a youth whose ethnic identity simply needs to be validated, because it has been bruised by negative societal structures. A common reason that exists for all referrals is that an AA-RITES experience supplements the maturation process. Equipping youth with the necessary developmental and educational tools to successfully transition from adolescence to adulthood is the
fundamental aim of the AA-RITES program. The project director or site coordinator tries to accommodate all referrals. These positions may be either separate or combined. Whether the jobs are one in the same depends upon the availability and skill level of the people needed to fill these positions. The director/coordinator's function is mainly administrative in that he directs, coordinates, and sometimes facilitates ongoing AA-RITES training activities for group leaders and youth. The director/coordinator is required to have completed the Africentric Rites of Passage training course and received certification. Because the adolescent males are in substitute care, their longevity in the Ohio AA-RITES program varies contingent upon their substitute care status. Human service and AA-RITES personnel, however, try to maintain participants in the program for at least a year (Kelsey, 1991). Many remain in AA-RITES longer. The additional time is good, because it affords the participant more opportunities for further acquisition of the curriculum content.

The Ohio AA-RITES program follows the Africentric Self-Knowledge for Independent Living (A-SKIL) curriculum composed by Kelsey (1991). The content of this curriculum is discussed in the following paragraphs. Like other RITES programs, the Ohio AA-RITES believes in the symbolism of rituals. Warfield-Coppock (1992a) asserted that rituals bring stability to the lives of people and create groundedness, balance, and order. One of the first rituals AA-RITES participants learn is the pouring of libation which is an acknowledgment of people who have departed from their earthly lives but whose great works and contributions to society have not been forgotten. This is a way to honor the African and African American ancestors who paved the way for the
opportunities inherited by those who live today. From the tradition of ancient Africa, the libation generally requires the pouring of a liquid onto the ground while calling the names of various ancestors (Warfield-Coppock, 1992a). A second ritual that is rooted in hierarchal respect is that of requesting elder permission. "This is an on-the-spot request for permission from an elder to begin proceedings or the event at hand. This ritual places the older person's knowledge and wisdom in the perspective of balance and respect for the proper order in the community" (Warfield-Coppock, 1992a, p. 93). Rituals solidify the seriousness of an act and provide invaluable opportunities for the evolution of camaraderie among the AA-RITES participants.

Warfield-Coppock (1992a) stated, "A rite is a ceremony or celebration. Passage refers to the movement from one stage to another" (p. 27). Marking the accomplishment of AA-RITES participants with regard to their acquisition of particular A-SKIL content areas provides participants with meaning and significance. The elders decide upon this action and upon when they think a youth is ready to advance to another content area. Often there is more than one elder who works with a RITES group. The acquisition of A-SKIL content areas culminates in a celebratory ritual. Because the group concept is vital to the AA-RITES experience, usually several participants are recognized in a joint ceremony. Such a celebration unifies and promotes greater connectedness between all parties inclusive of participants, leaders, and elders, because everyone rejoices in the accomplishments of others. The more public ceremonies inclusive of extended family, friends, agency personnel, and community leaders provide additional recognition.

According to Warfield-Coppock (1992a), public observance verifies, reinforces, and
sanctions the rites of reintegration to the larger community. Hill (1992) compared the AA-RITES approach to "big brother" mentoring, self-esteem, and manhood development programs whereby adult leaders become role models and mentors for adolescent males. African American male entrepreneurs, educators, human service professionals, health care providers, artists, and lawmakers have served as leaders of AA-RITES groups. These leaders must successfully pass the Africentric Rites of Passage training course which consists of skill and knowledge development in African and African American history, interpersonal relations, conflict resolution, organization planning, financial management, and physical fitness (Warfield-Coppock, 1992a). Once they have demonstrated mastery in these areas through a series of tests, certification in Africentric Rites of Passage is awarded and leadership assignments are issued.

Such initiatives as the Ohio Africentric Rites of Passage Collective, which evolved from the Ohio Rites of Passage Network, was formed in August, 1990, to ensure that minimum standards are set for the leaders of Africentric Rites of Passage groups throughout the state (The African American Community Annual, 1995). Other states have formed collectives, and together they meet annually at the national Africentric Rites of Passage Conference. The leaders typically range from 20 to 50 years old. Adult men over 50 who wish to assist in RITES-based programs are encouraged to receive the proper certification. They are, however, viewed as elders rather than leaders. Notwithstanding, these men must show evidence of maturity, wisdom, respect, knowledge of young people, and commitment to youth and the African American community (Warfield-Coppock, 1992a). Warfield-Coppock (1992a) posited that elders should be
viewed as the trunk of a spreading tree. "The roots of the tree are the ancestors, the trunk is the foundation for the offshoots and branches... Everything works in order and in balance. None of the parts are functional without the others" (Warfield-Coppock, 1992, p. 109). The leaders and the elders attempt to promote ethnic pride and positive self-esteem through the teachings of African-centered principles and values. For instance, class, color, and economic status have been used to exclude and oppress groups of people; therefore, AA-RITES participants are taught the value of inclusion. "To be inclusive is to make no distinction on the value of one human life over another based on personal situation or attributes" (Warfield-Coppock, 1990, p. 102). Likewise, mutual aid is a principle based on interdependence in which members assist in meeting the primary needs of the family and community (Warfield-Coppock, 1990). This principle helps AA-RITES participants to understand that they now have a responsibility to give back to their community what they have been given (Kunjufu, 1993). The "giving back" may merely be helping a senior citizen with household chores or sharing lessons of truth with a wayward youth. Nevertheless, being reciprocal with what one has been taught is consistent with an Africentric frame of reference.

Leaders and elders experientially build upon the affirming energy of the group modality in an AA-RITES program through discussions and exercises that center around African proverbs. The literal and figurative meanings of one or more proverbs may be explored during each session. Such proverbs as "I am because We are, and because We are, therefore I am" (Warfield-Coppock, 1990, p. 124) foster a greater understanding of inclusivity and interdependence, two values that are strongholds within the African
American community. Likewise, the AA-RITES participant gains insight into the importance of excellence and responsibility through the teaching of the African proverb "The day on which one sets out on a journey is not the time to begin preparation" (Warfield-Coppock, 1990, p.124). These proverbs provide a nexus to the cultural heritage of African Americans which, in turn, facilitates a greater appreciation for their daily application.

The Nguzo Saba (Seven Principles), driven by the Africentric perspective, adds credence and application to daily interactions. The Swahili terms that define the Nguzo Saba, designed by Karenga (1988) in the mid 1960s, are at the heart of the Ohio AA-RITES initiative. They include Umoja (unity) -- striving and maintaining unity in the family, community, nation, and race; Kujichagulia (Self-Determination) -- defining and molding ourselves from a strengths-oriented perspective as opposed to being incorrectly defined or spoken for by others; Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility) -- working collectively toward resolving problems and maintaining our community; Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics) -- building and preserving our stores, shops, and businesses in an effort to jointly profit from them; Nia (Purpose) -- making a concerted attempt to build, develop, and cultivate our community in order to reclaim the inherent greatness of our people; Kuumba (Creativity) -- thinking of and executing ways to improve our community both intrinsically and aesthetically; and Imani (Faith) -- having steadfast determination and belief in ourselves, parents, teachers, and leaders, all of whom have struggled for racial justice and equality (Warfield-Coppock, 1990).

Hill (1992) contended that the Nguzo Saba is the moral minimum value system
African Americans need to rescue and reconstruct their history, humanity, and daily lives in their own image and interests. For AA-RITES participants, the Nguzo Saba is realized through team interaction and steadfast perseverance of community service projects. Such endeavors foster cooperativeness and mutual aid. For instance, a community service project for one AA-RITES program in Ohio was to perform capacity assessments in one or more African American neighborhoods. The results of this effort helped residents increase their understanding of how to improve their respective situations. Moreover, this endeavor operationalized for AA-RITES participants the Nguzo Saba principles of Ujima and Kuumba. Another AA-RITES program in Ohio sought to implement the principle of Ujamaa in which participants and their families actively identify and patronize African American businesses. Some AA-RITES participants acquired jobs from these businesses which facilitated a strong sense of Umoja, while another AA-RITES group engaged in a communitywide cleanup and restoration. This activity advanced their appreciation of Nia and Umoja.

Serving the same function as the Nguzo Saba, the principles of Ma’at (path of righteousness), also emphasized in the AA-RITES program, draw upon the teachings of Egyptian men and women. These individuals believed that they had to practice the principles of righteousness, truth, and justice in daily living if, at death, they hoped to be divinely judged and successfully enter the afterlife. Other principles of Ma’at include reciprocity, balance, harmony, order, sense of excellence, and sense of appropriateness (Kelsey, 1991). Both the Nguzo Saba and the principles of Ma’at supply AA-RITES
participants with a constructive outlook and serve as cultural bulwarks in the context of an unpredictable societal milieu.

Program Activities

A variety of session topics and activities have been designed to facilitate AA-RITES program objectives. Educational content and activities include academic tutoring, financial management/budgeting, household management, home economics, political awareness, African and African American history, family and community history, sexuality, sex education, etiquette, personal hygiene, nutrition, and problem solving/decision making (Warfield-Coppock & Harvey, 1989).

Physical activities are offered to build self-esteem (Warfield-Coppock, 1990). These activities also contribute to physical development which affords youth an opportunity to learn how to cooperate and work as group members. This part of the AA-RITES experience is often the easiest, because most participants relish the opportunity to explore and expose their physical abilities. Specific components may include martial arts training, sports, drumming, and dance (Warfield-Coppock & Harvey, 1989). The emphasis is clearly on helping youth recognize and cultivate those components best suited for them.

Spirituality is universal and it is addressed in the AA-RITES curriculum, because the Africentric perspective views the person as a spiritual as well as a physical being. This is in keeping with the holistic nature of the AA-RITES experience. The message conveyed to AA-RITES participants is that the nonmaterial and nonphysical essence of a
person is his or her spirituality (Warfield-Coppock, 1992a). The topic of spirituality may be discussed in one or more sessions. It may also be discussed as it relates to various points in the life cycle (e.g., birth, puberty, marriage). The negative and often frightening associations of such things as ghosts or evil spirits with the concept of spirituality are eliminated by discussing frankly the validity of these claims. This, in turn, opens the door for revelations of accessing that which is positive about one’s spirituality. Warfield-Coppock (1990) posited that the ontological principles of an African-centered thought recognizes the person within the spiritual life cycle; therefore, the acknowledgment of spirituality reflects the process of being aware of one’s spiritual existence. The inclusion of spiritualism in the AA-RITES curriculum does not represent an endorsement of a particular formal religion. The spiritual components of the AA-RITES program simply are understanding the roles and differences of spiritualism and religion, values clarification, interpersonal relationships, and rituals.

AA-RITES is designed to enhance African American youth’s commitment to family, race, community, and nation and effect self-responsibility and self-mastery (The African American Community Annual, 1995). This is facilitated by such activities as bonding trips, survival experiences, wilderness training, ritual practice, retreats and tour experiences, sharing and instructional meetings, arts and crafts sessions, socials, and festivals. Further, visitation of cultural sites in the community serves the critical purpose of putting participants in touch with people, artifacts, pictures, and books, all to educate and fully expose them to their ethnic heritage (Kelsey, 1991).

All too often television screens are filled with negative images of African
Americans. These images are portrayed through unsavory movie characters and the pervasive and often questionable evening news coverage of apprehended criminals and status offenders. Likewise, many inner city neighborhoods saturated with the ravages of drugs and crime gain dubious publicity through various media outlets. Favorable aspects and strengths of the African American community somehow receive far less visibility. The functions and activities of the AA-RITES program, inclusive of an Africentric perspective, underscore the stamina and talents of Africans and African Americans. Warfield-Coppock (1992a) noted, "Rites of passage are rituals of wholeness. The activities and ceremonies have saved the purpose of creating harmony and wholeness in the community" (p. 97). Thus, to look at only the negative aspects of a community and not seek new ways to improve these conditions demonstrates a fragmented viewpoint. Harmony and wholeness are achieved through accentuating the community assets and expanding its capacities.

The utility of the RITES experience has expeditiously entered into an array of clinical settings. For many of the same reasons as expressed in culturally specific RITES programs, a rite of passage in auxiliary clinical modalities seems to function as a catalyst in the spawning of movement from one stage or transition to another. Similarly speaking, Lantz and Pegram (1989) noted that a rite of initiation symbolizes this process of death and rebirth and is found in almost every major treatment form or program directed towards helping people change. Hence, clinicians may not have labeled their ritualistic acts as such, but, nonetheless, they exist. More specifically, family therapists working in crisis intervention have been employing rites of initiation to assist clients and families who are experiencing problems moving to and from the various life stages such as the
children's leaving home, divorce, and retirement (Laird, 1984; Lantz, 1987; Lantz & Pegram, 1989). Family therapists also use RITES as a therapeutic intervention with the hope of ameliorating family problems that center around transitional issues (Gavazzi & Blumenkrantz, 1993). This expansive role of RITES appears to speak to its broad appeal as it relates to creativity and problem resolution in mental health services. Gavazzi and Blumenkrantz (1993) support this premise as follows:

A new era of prevention and intervention with youth is upon us. We can no longer accept the notion that mental health professionals should only be connected with adolescents at the point of intervention (once a problem or set of problems have already developed). Clearly, there exists strong evidence to support an initiative...in meeting this challenge. (p. 65)

RITES programs strive to address the needs of youth in the midst of a pool of societal activity—both positive and negative—that surely affects self-esteem and group identity. Hare and Hare (1985) purported that these programs have not achieved the popularity associated with birthdays and graduation ceremonies but are worthy of the same respect and should be given serious consideration as an adjunct to existing therapeutic interventions.

In sum, the literature base with respect to the pragmatism of contemporary RITES and content of RITES based programming is sufficient. Nevertheless, more empirical research is needed to further explain and support the efficacy of RITES programming, particularly with specific ethnic groups and at-risk populations. Studies such as this one are needed and welcomed in an effort to increase the public's understanding of the RITES initiative in its totality.
Many would say that freedom to choose is basic to the human experience. From an epistemological standpoint, choice is pivotal in the conceptualization and presentation of any given phenomenon. Equally so is the belief that the acquisition of knowledge should be pursued and the pursuit should be governed by a scientific process (Powers et al., 1985). Choosing an epistemological paradigm to guide one's scientific inquiry is often both a matter of personal conviction and judicious examination of the desired research topic. According to the positivist paradigm, also known as the dominant, traditional paradigm, the aims, concepts, and methods of the natural sciences are also applicable in social science inquiries. Moreover, knowledge is considered objective and value-free, and only the observable is capable of being studied. Conversely, the interpretive paradigm says that human beings are different in kind from that which is studied in the physical world and thus require different methods of inquiry (Polkinghorne, 1983). Unlike positivism which asserts an ontological premise that there is a single reality and that social values are outside the purview of scientific inquiry, interpretive science supports the notion of multiple realities and the belief that values are personally relative and deserve collective understanding (Thyer, 1993; Coomer, 1984; Culbertson, 1981). Human beings
develop stated categories which are better conceptualized as realities that explain their lived experiences. The utility of interpretive science and the qualitative methodologies therein often sheds new light on phenomena that are sometimes scantly explained through a positivist perspective. In the following paragraphs, the tenets of interpretive science will be discussed with regard to their appropriateness for research design. Interpretive science is the epistemological paradigm of choice that drives the conceptualization and presentation of this study.

Many scholars and human service professionals believe that human expression must be understood within its context. Moreover, historical, cultural, and social structures which support the social order must be considered. These aims undergird the interpretive perspective. Interpretive science supports an understanding of the assumptions and meanings that make up the texture of everyday life. A frequently used synonym of the interpretive approach is hermeneutics (Schriver, 1995). According to Polkinghorne (1983), hermeneutics is the science of correct verstehen (Understanding) or interpretation. Correct verstehen refers specifically to the comprehension of meaning from the standpoint of confirming authentic Understanding beyond the surface level. The capital U in this usage of Understanding is intended to distinguish it from the more common usage without a capital letter (Polkinghorne, 1983). The hermeneutic philosophy enhanced by verstehen was expanded by Wilhelm Dilthey and other German philosophers (Schriver, 1995; Patton, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1983). According to Patton (1990), “the term, hermeneutic refers to a Greek technique for interpreting legends, stories, and other texts” (p. 84). The following quote explains the rudiments of hermeneutic thought:
Hermeneutics takes the position that nothing can be interpreted free of some perspective, so the first priority is to capture the perspective and elucidate the context of the people being studied. The researcher's own perspectives must also be made explicit, as must any other tradition or perspective brought to bear when interpreting meanings. (Patton, 1990, p. 85)

True interpretation of a text from a hermeneutical slant requires understanding intended meanings. It also requires setting documents in a historical and cultural context (Patton, 1990; Palmer, 1969). Concisely speaking, it is the study of interpretive understanding.

The human experience is not stationary. It is interactive and moving, and it requires researchers to respect various structural orientations that are realized through values, customs, and cultures that comprise human existence.

Unlike the dissociated quality of deductive science used in the positivist perspective, the interpretive, hermeneutic approach is more involved in attempts to understand and share the realities of the researched. Schriver (1995) noted the utility of hermeneutics to the social work profession in the following quote:

This interpretive, hermeneutic approach is quite similar to what social workers mean when we talk about such basic concepts as “empathy” and “beginning where the client is.” These interpretive approaches to knowing are concerned in large part with understanding the meaning of human experiences... They take us out of the laboratory and into the everyday worlds in which we and the people with whom we work actually live our lives. (p. 31)

As in the practice setting, the hermeneutic approach permits free expression which often illuminates the experiential worlds of the researched. People define their own realities; consequently, credence is given to their stories. The stories they tell are verbal reports of their respective realities. This is why the interpretive paradigm does not align itself with
methodologies used in the natural sciences. Critics maintain that methodologies used in social work research, borrowed from the physical sciences, are inadequate in the analysis of the varying complexities of social phenomena (Reid, 1987). Likewise, others assert that the human element is intrinsic to social sciences and is complemented by the personable nature of the interpretive, hermeneutic approach.

Clinical social workers often seek therapeutic assistance at various intervals during their lives, particularly while they are practicing their craft. This is done largely to ensure that they do not contaminate the therapeutic process for their clients by permitting unresolved personal issues to interfere with services rendered. One might simply call this "practitioner cleansing" which can function as a deterrent to counter-transference. As described by Hepworth and Larsen (1993), counter-transference involves feelings, wishes, and unconscious defensive patterns of the practitioner that are derived from past relationships and impede objective perception and productive interaction with clients. Similar to practitioner cleansing, the interpretive approach encourages the observers to understand their own biases and consider their own values and personal world views (Dean & Fenby, 1989; Schriver, 1995). In agreement with the aforementioned, Patton (1990) stated in his discussion of hermeneutics that a person can only interpret the meaning of something from a certain perspective, standpoint, praxis, or situational context, whether this individual is reporting on his or her personal feelings or the perspectives of people being studied.

Intuitive understanding facilitates an appreciation of the interpretive perspective. It is legitimate as claimed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Intuitive ways of knowing involve
the allowance of revelations regarding situations and phenomena. Often people are unable
to express their intuition in words, but their understanding thereof is lucid and plain.
“More commonly, we talk about ‘the light bulb going on’ in our heads when we suddenly
attain new understanding, but we are not sure precisely how we attained that
understanding” (Schriver, 1995, p. 33). It is again crucial that, like other aspects of
interpretive science, respect for the personal experience of all is revered. For individuals
who subscribe solely to the dominant paradigm it may be difficult to grasp the intuitive
element (Schriver, 1995). Because one’s intuition may not be shared by others is no
reason to negate it or cast it aside. This speaks clearly to the different realities that are
generated through the execution of interpretive science. Making a concerted effort to
Understand these realities is a major goal of the interpretive paradigm. Such an effort
provides entree to intellectually grasping the element of subjectivity of the researcher and
the researched. The interpretive, qualitative perspective permits the researcher to elevate
the meaning of subjectivity, so that it is viewed not as something to abolish but as a state
of being to unabashedly acknowledge.

Qualitative Research Through Interpretive Lens

Qualitative approaches are valued in the interpretive paradigm, and the
exploratory element of qualitative research is considered one of its strongholds.
Qualitative analysis is the nonnumerical examination and interpretation of observations to
ascertain underlying meanings and patterns of relationships (Rubin & Babbie, 1989).
Inductive theory construction is closely associated with interpretive, qualitative inquiry.
With induction one explores observations and then explains these observations in general statements (Vogt, 1993; Sanders & Pinhey, 1983). "The strategy of inductive designs is to allow the important analysis dimensions to emerge from patterns found in the cases under study without presupposing in advance what the important dimensions will be" (Patton, 1990, p. 44). For the interpretive, qualitative researcher this is a comfortable method of inquiry, because multiple realities are being sought. These realities are often realized through the exploration of open-ended questions as opposed to the testing of deductively driven hypotheses (Patton, 1990).

Qualitative ways of knowing are very much akin to the concerns, practices, and values of social work (Schriver, 1995). The profession emphasizes individual stories and observations, descriptive documentation, subjective and contextual meanings, an understanding of multiple realities, empathy, and respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all people (Schriver, 1995). These characteristics are hallmarks of social work practice. Furthermore, they are interlocking aspects of interpretive, qualitative inquiry. Two data-gathering sources in qualitative inquiry that match assessment interventions in social work practice are in-depth interviews with informants and observations of the researched environment, both of which are used in this study. Interactive interviews help the researcher "understand and put into a larger context the interpersonal, social, and cultural aspects of the environment" (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 85). It is this venue in which multiple voices and realities are given an opportunity to be heard. Juxtaposed to the art of interviewing is the power of observation. Succinctly, "observation allows the researcher to discover the here-and-now interworkings of the environment via the use of the five
human senses” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p.94). Both techniques can be viewed as vehicles for implementing qualitative inquiry. They are integral to the research process.

Are qualitative methods restricted to certain uses? Sanders and Pinhey (1983) poignantly asserted that in actuality all methodologies, even quantitative ones, involve some kind of qualitative work. They (1983) provided greater understanding of this assertion in the following:

In setting up the different categories and questions for survey research, for instance, the investigator must first make several qualitative judgements. He or she must state what qualities go to make up a particular category. In differentiating between upper class and upper-middle class, for example, the researcher describes the qualities of each to be differentiated and counted in separated categories. (p. 355)

For the most part, the qualitative decisions in quantitative studies are made at the beginning or early stages of the research. These same decisions are made both during and after the process when it pertains to qualitative studies (Sanders & Pinhey, 1983). Such activity in the qualitative realm is consistent with the flexibility element of qualitative design. The naturalistic and inductive nature of qualitative inquiry does not require or force initial design plans that seek to “specify operational variables, state testable hypotheses, and finalize either instrumentation or sampling schemes” (Patton, 1990, p. 61). The interpretive, qualitative process of inquiry unfolds as engagement between the researcher and the researched progresses. In essence, qualitative research encompasses a wide range of activity (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

Knowledge building that is facilitated through the inductive process appears to parallel the prevailing sentiments of the social work profession. Social workers are
reminded to always respect the dignity and worth of their clients. This is operationalized through the lived experiences of social work practice. At the moment of engagement, the social worker is mindful of his or her influence with, and sometimes over, clients. Unconditional respect for individuals, regardless of socioeconomic class, race, and gender is the vanguard of professional conduct. Each client who enters a helping relationship with a social worker brings a unique set of circumstances to bear. Though there may be similarities between and among cases, each person has his or her individual story to tell. For instance, such questionable generalizations as all RITES participants have a history of severe mood swings or all Asian American women who have elderly parents living in the home should seek respite care diminish the personal stories of these individuals. It is critical that attention to individual needs be given. As noted previously, with inductive theory construction one looks at specific cases and subsequently moves to identifying a theoretical variable or general principle. (Hardy & Jensen, 1974; Rubin & Babbie, 1989). This “ground up” process continues to have enormous potential for knowledge building in social work practice, because individual stories are given and heard. These stories often provide in-depth and fruitful information. There may or may not be similar or identical patterns across cases, but positive regard is given to all who enter the process and such inclusiveness can yield insight and increase awareness.

Because a goal of social work is to ameliorate a myriad of social and interpersonal complexities, the interpretive paradigm and the use of qualitative inquiry lend themselves easily to the aims of this discipline. There is much openness linked to interpretive science that facilitates extensive exploration of social phenomena and behaviors. “Being open and
pragmatic requires a high tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty as well as trust in the ultimate value of what inductive analysis will yield" (Patton, 1990, p. 62). More often than not such open-mindedness poses problems for funders of evaluation research and people more comfortable with the dominant paradigm's methodology (Patton, 1990). Researchers utilizing the interpretive, qualitative perspective basically assume that social interaction is complex and that they will uncover some of that complexity through immersing themselves as much as possible in the lived experiences of the researched (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Given the unique social disposition of many ethnic groups in the United States, such an immersion appears to be useful in attempting to uncover their respective realities. Too often quantitative analysis of these groups has taken a pejorative stance in facilitating understanding and drawing conclusions. For instance, most research evidence concerning the dynamics of counseling African Americans has been gathered in a comparative context with Caucasians. This practice advances the misconception that African Americans are a monolithic entity (Lee, 1991).

Interpretive research is often criticized for being too subjective, but by the same token major scholars in the field say that qualitative approaches and processes are more appropriate than experimental methods that are deductively driven when studying natural human groups (Greenlee & Lantz, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Essentially, qualitative efforts can provide specific, valuable information into why and how certain situations evolve for such ethnic groups as African Americans. Listening to their voices and hearing their stories can greatly increase one's understanding of the realities associated with these groups. The meaning of their realities may be transferable to others with similar
circumstances. Hence, as generalizations are consistent with the positivist, quantitative
tradition, so too is transferability consistent with the interpretive, qualitative perspective.
The onus for proving or demonstrating transferability belongs to those who would apply it
to the receiving context (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The worker-client relationship is a critical part of social work practice. The
relationship process involves several phases, with much emphasis being placed on building
a positive alliance. For many clinicians, this emphasis serves as a motivating force to learn
more about the client’s life experiences. It also serves as a way to empower the client. In
addition, interpretive science promotes the use of the human instrument. The human
instrument is the expression of one’s natural abilities and competencies to engage the
researched. The human instrument can and should act as a filter in deciphering and
acknowledging personal biases and beliefs that may inhibit the fluidity of qualitative
research. This characteristic is quite compatible with the worker-client relationship aspect
of social work practice. Though different in its primary function, the human instrument
aligns itself well to the engagement process of social work practice which, in turn, permits
a natural and easy flow of information exchange. Such a discourse is ripe for knowledge
building, because it relates to the impetus that drives the social concerns of our society.

A critical aim of the interpretive perspective is to look at the whole picture of a
given phenomenon. By doing so, one is being holistic. The holistic approach involves
gathering information on multiple aspects of the setting under study to deliver a thorough
and comprehensive picture (Patton, 1990). This is best achieved through active discourse
with the researched. In his discussion of conceptual issues in qualitative inquiry from an
interpretive perspective, Patton (1990) noted that each case is unique and special and should be respected for its inherent details. He added that the researcher has direct, close contact with the people, situation, and phenomenon under study. Moreover, the researcher's personal experiences and insights are an important part of the inquiry and critical to understanding the phenomenon. Considering the relational connection between the researcher and the researched, as well as what is known about good social work practice, one would agree that increased dialogue occurs when there is a positive or affirming relationship. Unlike the detached nature often linked with the quantitative aspects of the dominant paradigm, interpretive, qualitative researchers seek to permit the researched to express their thoughts and feelings to the fullest degree. Such a disposition can usher in an abundance of transferable knowledge. Critics assert, however, that prediction, a goal of behavioral and social sciences, cannot be achieved by the outcomes and conclusions of interpretive science (Polkinghorne, 1983).

Interpretive, qualitative research is usually preferred when studying unfamiliar and unstructured phenomena (Rubin & Babbie, 1989). Further discussion about the far-reaching implications of design flexibility in qualitative research is warranted here; it is a desired characteristic when entering unfamiliar territory. Studying homelessness and seeking insight into complicated phenomena to foster conceptualizations and formulate hypotheses are prime examples of the need for flexibility when qualitative methods are employed (Rubin & Babbie, 1989). The essence of design flexibility is being open to adapting inquiry as understanding deepens. Interpretive, qualitative inquiry avoids becoming locked into a rigid design that hampers responsiveness (Patton, 1990). Such
suppleness provides ammunition for sceptics who question the validity of this perspective. According to Polkinghorne (1983), "the data of the hermeneutic sciences remain open to further interpretation, and thus they cannot meet the criteria of complete intersubjective agreement" (p. 238). To this, intersubjective agreement is not the intent. Equally important is that alternative ways of knowing should neither be challenged because of the supposed paucity associated with their predictive power nor be measured against the pillars of positivism (Taylor, 1971). Flexibility in interpretive, qualitative inquiry is analogous to a flowing river that is subject to shifting movement. More specifically, it permits the pursuit of discovering emerging paths.

**The Praxis Perspective of the Researcher**

In this section and throughout the remaining sections of this dissertation, the pronouns "I," "my," and "me" will be used. These pronouns directly refer to the researcher of this study. The use of these pronouns at this juncture in the dissertation provides a sense of personal accountability and directly relates to the researcher's realities and assertions versus those of the respondents. According to Patton (1990), one must know about the researcher as well as the researched in order to place a qualitative study in a proper, hermeneutic context. In keeping with this premise, the following paragraphs will entail a discussion regarding my praxis position on cultural specificity in social services; the importance of a strengths-based orientation toward multicultural social work practice; and my experiences as the researcher vis-a-vis the researched. From a hermeneutic orientation, these are key areas that relate to the subject matter of this study. In addition,
these areas will bring to the forefront my perceptions and beliefs as a qualitative researcher.

Having worked as a child protective services casemanager, family therapist, group facilitator, clinical supervisor, social work instructor, and human services administrator, I have formulated, implemented, and been exposed to a variety of clinical interventions. Though similarities exist between and across cases in terms of the client’s presenting problems, I have found that strong consideration must be given to the ethnic background of the client in assessment and treatment planning. It is critical to note that no particular ethnic group is monolithic. I have always contended, however, that having a general knowledge base of the given group’s predominant values is both helpful and appropriate. The client, usually upon the practitioner’s request, will inform you as to whether certain cultural values or practices are applicable to his or her individual situation. In essence, practice is driven in an environment based on culturally preferred choices as opposed to culturally blind interventions (“Culturally Competent Guiding Principles,” 1993).

Being culturally aware and competent in one’s practice complements the values of our profession. We often allude to the importance of affirming the worth and dignity of the client; developing and utilizing resources; and affirming problem-solving capacities and the client’s right to self-determination (Hepworth & Larsen, 1993; National Association of Social Workers, 1980). These value points parallel the effectuation of cultural competence; therefore, mere lip service to their validity is unsatisfactory. There is no question that individuals make choices based on cultural forces that must be considered. In essence, I believe that credible social work practice with people of color must recognize
that empowerment includes indigenous capacity building and creating a therapeutic climate that permits cathartic discussions of racism and intra-race concerns. High self-esteem and a positive sense of cultural identity are closely correlated (Pinderhughes, 1989). Succinctly speaking, intervention on the part of the practitioner should include advocacy with regard to assisting his or her clients in overcoming race-related pressures and instilling or recharging racial pride (Denby, 1996).

Within the past decade, much has been said about moving from a deficit perspective in social work practice to one that is strengths-based. Never is this more critical than now as we promote and celebrate our cultural diversity (Alford, 1996). I believe that social workers build upon strengths of individuals by tapping that which is good and in working order. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) proclaimed that there is power in releasing the capacities of individuals. Liberation and execution of the skills and talents of individuals will give entree to solidarity, intragroup and intergroup cohesion, and community pride. Operating from a deficit model by which ills are sought out and stamps of disapproval made is counter to a cooperative spirit. Needs are not ignored through utilization of a strengths-based perspective. They are clearly examined while capacities are concurrently identified to help in problem resolution or compromise. In highlighting the efficacy of capacity building, Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) asserted the analogy of a glass of water filled to the middle. Visually, the glass is half full as well as half empty. People of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds have weaknesses, but they also have strengths. The half full glass symbolizes the mass of strengths that have yet to be used. The capacities or strengths to work out social, political, and economic problems are part
of the very fabric of our multicultural society (Alford, 1996). Such strengths as genuineness, empathy, direct communication, fairness, and shared commonalities should be counted as affirmations of cross-cultural collaboration and camaraderie. The various worldviews we encounter should not be navigated by the ethnocentric practice of viewing one's own culture as the standard for all other lifeways. Such a mind set has no place in a progressive, multicultural society where diversity is both appreciated and celebrated. Ethnocentrism should be replaced with cultural relativity which involves a concerted effort to remain unbiased and not rank particular people or groups (Vivelo, 1978). In short, we must inventory our strengths and those of others and apply the force and energy from these strengths to daily living (Alford, 1996).

Being culturally responsive and understanding that needs and strengths concurrently exist are strongholds for working with people of color. From a research standpoint, sharing the same race as the respondents provided a hermeneutic commonality between me as the researcher and the AA-RITES participants as the respondents. The respondents appeared to tacitly acknowledge their acceptance of my credibility as the researcher when they saw that I too was African American. This sense of ease was most likely heightened as well by my sharing the same gender as the respondents. The content of the interview was race and gender laden. I believe my commonalities with the respondents permitted a certain degree of social comfort and greater entree into their lived experiences.

Being aware of the commonalities was important to me as the researcher, particularly as I listened to their individual stories, but equally important was knowing
what stark differences existed. As the respondents vividly discussed their abhorrence to violence, I was in awe at the intensity of their spoken word. Having been reared in what some would consider a middle-class lifestyle, I had never seen, firsthand, some of the blatant acts of violence referenced by the respondents. As they continued their dialog, I was reminded of the opportunities for individual, familial, and cultural enrichment I had experienced at their age as an African American adolescent. Though commonalities existed between us, substantial differences from a socioeconomic level could not be ignored. According to the respondents, many of them were reared in inner-city neighborhoods where gangs and crime were commonplace. Survival for them was to know how to physically protect themselves and their loved ones. In contrast, I was reared in a suburban community where all the adults were home owners. Some held professional jobs, and others were entrepreneurs. Despite these differences, the similarities of race and gender surmounted any dissociation with the researched that would have otherwise ensued. Much to my dismay, a personal tragedy turned one previously noted difference into a commonality shared between the respondents and me. After completing approximately 18 interviews, I was shocked and saddened upon learning that one of my family members was killed in a violent crime. All violence is senseless, and this incident was no different. After this tragedy, I was unequivocally able to say that I had been acquainted firsthand with violence and its unsettling touch. Furthermore, I better understood the intensity in the cries of the respondents when they spoke of this subject matter, and, more than before, agreed with their condemnation.

Suffice to say, going into this study, my thoughts, opinions, and perceptions about
culturally specific programming and a strengths-based orientation in social services were very favorable. During and since the completion of this study, my viewpoint has sharpened in greater favor of the viability of these efforts as epitomized through the Africentric Rites of Passage Program. Denzin (1989) affirmed the notion that the researcher brings perceptions, experiences, and interpretations to the research experience. In addition, he stated that value-free, interpretive research is impossible. With this understanding, I am at ease, because I have exposed my praxis perspective for naturalistic illumination and general review.

Conducting the Interviews

As the researcher, I visited four specified Ohio counties, Lucas, Cuyahoga, Franklin, and Summit, where AA-RITES sessions were held. I conducted most of the interviews at these sites and the rest at the foster homes of the respondents.

The site for the interviews was crucial, because I wanted to ensure that the respondents were in a familiar environment so as to maximize their comfort level. Interviewing them in their natural setting was apropos for this type of research. In addition, the probe questions were developed with the goals and curriculum of the AA-RITES program in mind. This may have been a slight deviation from a more purist form of qualitative research, but it greatly served the purpose of facilitating the interview process and it was consistent with the research methodology used for data collection and analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Adolescents occasionally need a primer of sorts when attempting to express their feelings and viewpoints about matters of interest. This
belief held true for the AA-RITES respondents in this study. Although some of the probe questions directly facilitated the emergence of the expected themes, as the researcher, I also looked for unexpected responses during both the data collection and analysis phases of this study that would give rise to unexpected themes. All the questions were open-ended and were reviewed by twelve scholars and practitioners who were knowledgeable about the program and population being researched (see Appendix A). A few questions were eliminated and others added, based on the comments of the reviewers. Through my keeping the probe questions as open-ended as possible, the natural flow of qualitative research was facilitated and several leads developed with respect to the emergence of unexpected themes. This freedom of exploration is in keeping with the qualitative tenet of design flexibility.

Conducting the Observations

The second source of data gathering used in this study was naturalistic observations. Observations has been defined as “the systematic description of events, behaviors and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study” (Marshall and Rossman, 1989, p. 79). Erlandson et al. (1993) noted that observation allows the researcher to discover the here-and-now interworkings of the environment via the use of the five human senses. Lincoln and Guba (1985) corroborated this notion by stating that further depth into the here-and-now is achieved through the incorporation of observations as a source of data collection. In general terms, observations provide opportunities for the researcher to see the world as the subjects see it building upon his or her own knowledge and that of the
researched (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

Because the AA-RITES program places a heavy emphasis on experiential learning, the power of observations as a data gathering source provided a more well-rounded picture of the AA-RITES experience. A concerted effort was made to record as many observable points of interest as possible. This was done in an effort to capture the qualitative value of the moment in which the observation occurred. According to Erlandson et al. (1993), the observations reported in this study include descriptions of the researched environment, respondents' behavior, ambiance of the facilities where AA-RITES sessions were held, artifacts related to the program, and the general mood of the AA-RITES participants during program sessions.

The analysis and reporting of observations followed the same format used for the interviews. In this study, the observation field notes recorded in the reflexive journal underwent content analysis and subsequent categorization consistent with corresponding thematic constructs (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing sessions were selectively held when greater articulation was needed on my part in describing what had been seen and heard.

Data Collection

Pilot Study

One pilot study was conducted with ten RITES participants serving as respondents. The impetus for the pilot study was to discover any possible pitfalls that might in some way hamper the actual study. This effort proved useful. During the pilot
study, I initially recorded in a notebook the comments of the respondents after each interview. Around the fourth interview, I realized that my field notes were not as conclusive as they needed to be compared to the breadth of information shared by the respondents. As a result of this conclusion, all subsequent interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. Tape recording the remaining interviews allowed for a more comfortable exchange of dialogue and greater rapport building between the contributing respondents and me as the researcher.

Sample Selection

The purposive sampling method was used in this study. This form of sampling as opposed to representative sampling is relied upon in qualitative inquiry (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The process to secure a purposive sample started by contacting agency personnel and AA-RITES leaders and elders of the four AA-RITES sites. Some of these individuals were contacted by an ODHS official informing them of the study's parameters and the need to identify likely informants. I made subsequent calls to the designated people to verify and, in some instances, request identification of participants that I may interview and observe for this study. Given the transient nature of this population, my goal was to access a large number of respondents. The total number of respondents in this study was 29. Such demographics and study variables as age, time in RITES, gender, race, reason for placement, time in substitute care, location of substitute care placement home, location of family of origin home, number of residence
changes since entering substitute care, and extent of present contact with family of origin are specifically delineated for each respondent in Table 1 of this dissertation.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current Age (years)</th>
<th>Time to RITES (months)</th>
<th>Gender /Race</th>
<th>Reason for Placement</th>
<th>Time in Substitute Care</th>
<th>Location of Substitute Care</th>
<th>Location of Family of Origin</th>
<th>No. of Residence Changes Since Entering Substitute Care</th>
<th>Extent of Present Contact with Family of Origin</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Urban</td>
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<td>Urban</td>
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TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESPONDENTS  
n=29
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current Age (years)</th>
<th>Time in RITES (months)</th>
<th>Gender /Race</th>
<th>Reason for Placement</th>
<th>Time in Substitute Care</th>
<th>Location of Substitute Care Placement Home</th>
<th>Location of Family of Origin</th>
<th>No. of Residence Changes Since Entering Substitute Care</th>
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<td>Urban</td>
<td>Urban</td>
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</tr>
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</table>
Protection of the Respondents

Human subjects approval through The Ohio State University (Protocol #: 93B0243) was granted before embarking upon this project. The respondents were fully informed of the study's parameters (see Appendix B). They were told that they could refuse to answer any question that made them feel uncomfortable. Likewise, the agency personnel responsible for securing the interviews were briefed about the details of the process (see Appendix D). The respondents were asked to sign consent forms before the actual interviews occurred (see Appendix C). Guardian consent forms were signed by custodial agency representatives or, when possible, the birth parent(s) of the RITES participant (see Appendix E). The respondents were advised that all information shared during the interview would be confidential. In other words, no information from the interview would be placed in their permanent agency file. In addition, the respondents were told that the findings from the study would be presented as a combination of everyone's answers to the questions asked.

All protocol materials inclusive of tapes, field notes, and transcripts were kept in locked files. Case numbers were assigned to each respondent's file. These numbers were used on the tapes and transcripts to safeguard all identifying information.

Data Analysis

According to Glesne and Peshkin (1992), one must categorize, synthesize, search for patterns and interpret the data that have been collected. In this study, content analysis was used to identify and subsequently organize themes that emerged from the transcribed
text of the interviews with AA-RITES participants. An inductive analysis of the interviews was made, preserving the purity of the data with the hope of developing “grounded theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 2).

The coding of data entailed three concurrent flows of activity (a) data reduction; (b) data displays; and (c) conclusion drawing and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data reduction involves the process of simplifying or transforming the data that resulted from the transcribed text (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Coding, teasing out themes, and sorting through the transcribed text made up the data reduction phase of this study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This process occurred simultaneously with data analysis. In fact, the organization of this study’s findings that appear under the heading of “Expected Themes” is congruent with the anticipatory capacity associated with data reduction. Miles and Huberman (1989) stated that even before the data are actually collected, anticipatory data reduction is occurring as the researcher determines which conceptual framework, cases, research questions, and data collection approaches he or she will select.

A data display is an organized collection of information that allows the researcher to formulate data conclusions. In this study, matrices and charts were used to assemble the information into a simplified form. This display of data made it easier for me to pinpoint patterns and data commonalities (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Tentative conclusion drawing was progressive; however, culmination of the conclusions did not occur until all data collection had ceased. According to Miles & Huberman (1994) verification can be achieved through utilization of any one of the following ways: (a) return to the original transcriptions to check for clarity; (b) consult with colleagues; (c)
replicate the findings with another data set; and (d) consult with the respondents so as to verify what they have said. With the exception of replicating these findings with another data set, all of the aforementioned points of verification were performed.

Establishing Trustworthiness

What makes research findings in naturalistic inquiry worthy of attention is a question best answered through sound establishment of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Generally speaking, there are specific criteria that must be met for any research to be considered trustworthy (Erlandson et al., 1993). In qualitative research, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are the criteria needed for data to be considered trustworthy. Conversely, with the logical positivist tradition the rigor of research design is explicated by internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Because this is a qualitative study, it is fitting that issues of research rigor be addressed solely by the properties that inform the given paradigm. Sparkes (1992) corroborated this point by stating that it is inappropriate for positivistic criteria to be utilized when passing judgement on a piece of interpretive or critical research. The criteria noted above for establishing trustworthiness are considered foundational blocks for such qualitative procedures as data gathering, data analysis, and report preparation (Erlandson, et al., 1993). The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to further delineation of each criteria.
Credibility

In the logical positivist tradition, credibility is referred to as internal validity. Internal validity involves the degree to which one can draw valid conclusions about the causal effects of one variable on another (Vogt, 1993). In qualitative research, credibility entails the degree to which the interpretations constructed by the respondents mirror those presented by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the following quote, Patton (1990) further elaborated on this issue by pinpointing three distinct but related queries that are important for achieving a credible qualitative study:

1. What techniques and methods were used to ensure the integrity, validity, and accuracy of the findings?
2. What does the researcher bring to the study in terms of qualifications, experience, and perspective?
3. What paradigm orientation and assumptions undergird the study?

(p. 461)

Questions two and three have already been addressed in this dissertation through the respective discussions of the researcher's perspective and interpretive science as the epistemological paradigm of choice. In answering question one, the techniques and methods used to reach credibility in this study were member checking, prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling, all of which will be explained in the following paragraphs.

Member Checks

According to Erlandson et al. (1993), it is critical that interpretations obtained be verified by the people who rendered them. This technique is called member checking and
it serves to fortify the credibility factor of qualitative research. Erlandson et al. (1993) noted that member checking permits the respondent to immediately correct errors of fact or challenge interpretations.

In this study, member checks were conducted during and at the end of the interviews. The respondents appeared eager to ensure that I understood the essence of their comments. Hence, they appreciated my efforts to perform member checks.

**Prolonged Engagement**

Prolonged engagement refers to the amount of time spent by the researcher in the culture under study (Erlandson et al., 1993). It also provides an external check of the inquiry process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The goal is to overcome distortions that may arise because of such matters as the researcher's biases or the effect of seasonal events (Erlandson et al., 1993). In addition, prolonged engagement permits trust and rapport to be developed between the researcher and the researched. By safeguarding the elements of prolonged engagement, the research process runs more smoothly and the credibility of the data is elevated.

In this study, the investment of prolonged periods of time at each research site was not always possible. The process would have been too intrusive, given the regimen of the substitute care settings. Time spent immediately prior to the actual interview to get to know one another, build rapport, and set the tone for a trusting milieu was fruitful. During this period, I made sure that the respondents fully understood the parameters of this study. My sharing the same race and gender as the respondents appeared to help in
building trust and rapport. On a few occasions, the respondents and I, at their request, left
the group and went downtown or to a fast food restaurant to complete the interview.
Their desire to leave the premises with me was an indicator that trust and rapport had been
achieved.

Unfortunately, out-of-home care for children and adolescents does not come with
a guarantee that they will remain in their present dwelling for extended periods of time.
Youth in out-of-home care may leave their temporary home environment to return to their
natural families, enter another placement facility, reach emancipation age or even be
labeled as AWOL. For the youth in independent living programs the length of stay in a
particular dwelling is more certain than that in other forms of out-of-home care. There are
several factors and situational occurrences that contribute to the reasons for the transient
nature of this population. Knowing this fact, I wanted to obtain as much information as
possible from the AA-RITES participants, given the time allotted. Therefore, prolonged
engagement in this study resulted in a new dimension and expanded its purview to
encompass “wide engagement.” Wide engagement simply refers to there being a large
number of respondents in the study. Twenty-nine AA-RITES participants were
interviewed for this research endeavor. According to Erlandson et al. (1993), “Enough
time in the context (culture) can be considered that amount that enables the researcher to
understand daily events in the way that persons who are part of that culture (i.e. natives)
interpret them” (p. 30). Wide engagement with the AA-RITES participants permitted me
to gain “time in the context (culture)” not only through the actual time spent conducting
individual interviews but also in the number of respondents interviewed over the course of time (Erlandson et al., 1993, p.30).

Peer Debriefing

Peer debriefing is another strategy used in the quest to establish credibility.

Erlandson et al. (1993) provided a solid definition of peer debriefing in the following:

Occasionally the researcher should step out of the context being studied to review perceptions, insights, and analyses with professionals outside the context who have enough general understanding of the nature of the study to debrief the research and provide feedback that will refine and, frequently, redirect the inquiry process. (p. 31)

I was fortunate enough to have had four impartial peer debriefers who unselfishly gave of their time and expertise in providing feedback on various nuances of this study. Three of these debriefers had social work practice experience in working with African American adolescents. They were also familiar with the rudiments of qualitative research. The one remaining debriefer had practical experience in working with African American adolescents. Often, I met and spoke via telephone with each debriefer to discuss methodological and coding issues. My conversations with the debriefers enabled me to talk in general terms about personal thoughts and feelings related to the study. Peer debriefing not only ameliorates the probability of credible findings but also creates a threshold for exploration of other parts of the study that deserve examination (Patton, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Transferability

Generalizability of research findings is not a goal of the interpretive, qualitative paradigm. Transferability is parallel to generalizability when one is engaged in naturalistic research. Transferability demonstrates the applicability of a study's findings to another context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Erlandson et al. (1993) asserted that as opposed to attempting to select isolated variables that are equivalent across contexts, the naturalistic researcher attempts to describe extensively the interrelationships and intricacies of the context being studied. Erlandson et al. (1993) additionally noted that the search for data must be guided by processes that will provide rich details about it. The AA-RITES participants who served as respondents in this study offered insights that only they could provide, given their collective and individual realities. Other people who have backgrounds similar to those of the sample population or who can relate at some level with their lived experiences will most likely reap the benefits of transferable knowledge.

Dependability

Guba and Lincoln (1989) articulately defined dependability as it relates to qualitative research as follows:

Dependability is parallel to the conventional criterion of reliability, in that it is concerned with the stability of the data over time.... Methodology changes and shifts in constructions are expected products of an emergent design dedicated to increasingly sophisticated constructions. Far from being threats to dependability, such changes and shifts are hallmarks of a maturing -- and successful -- inquiry. (p. 242)

Dependability in qualitative research is comparable to reliability in quantitative studies.
Field notes, memos, and the reflexive journal are all important items in a qualitative study, for they serve as documentation needed to maintain an audit trail. The audit trail in this study consisted of the above noted documents as well as copies of correspondence sent to agency personnel and agendas from meetings with my adviser, committee members, and peer debriefers.

**Confirmability**

The traditional researcher seeks to insure objectivity throughout the research process to avoid biasing the findings of a given study (Erlandson, et al., 1993). In contrast, the qualitative researcher seeks to ensure confirmability with regard to verifying that the data and interpretations presented in a given study are, in fact, insulated in the contextual experiences of the researched. Erlandson et al. (1993) provided further depth regarding this position in the following:

The naturalistic researcher, however, realizes that objectivity is an illusion and that no methodology can be totally separated from those who have created and selected it. The naturalistic researcher does not attempt to ensure that observations are from contamination by the researcher but rather to trust in the “confirmability” of the data themselves.... Confirmability, like dependability, is communicated through an audit. (pp. 34 & 35)

In short, the audit trail for this study had a two-fold purpose of substantiating the dependability and confirmability criterions.
The Reflexive Journal

Further bolstering of such foundational considerations as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability is achieved through the utilization of the reflexive journal (Erlandson et al., 1993). In this study, the reflexive journal served as my record of impressions after interviews and meetings. It also served as a record of my observations and reactions to the researched environment, demeanor of the respondents, and the witnessing of various program functions. Equally important, the reflexive journal was a source to chronicle methodological changes and decisions which often gave rise to cathartic expressions regarding the joys and challenges of qualitative research.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS: EXPECTED THEMES

The purpose of this study was to examine an Africentric Rites of Passage Program and assess its benefits vis-a-vis self-esteem and ethnic identity for African American adolescent males in out-of-home care. In this chapter, the respondents' voices are presented in their own words. The benefits of the program appear to clearly resonate through their responses. This group of findings is called, Expected Themes, because the themes represented are consistent with primary AA-RITES program goals and curriculum content. As the researcher, who gained a detailed understanding of the program's thrust, I expected to find these themes or a reasonable facsimile thereof. However, the depth of discernment in the respondents' voices was a revelation in both sets of findings, expected and unexpected. When applicable and at the conclusion of the transcribed text that supports the corresponding theme, expected observations that I encountered as the researcher will be presented.

POSITIVE SELF-CONCEPT AND SELF-RESPONSIBILITY

It is often very difficult to forge ahead in life when you have neither positive self-esteem nor the desire or ability to act responsibly about matters affecting your well-being. These respondents indicated an upbeat attitude about their abilities. One respondent said
excitedly, "I've got the potential to go up. I got unlimited potential." This theme is consistent with the RITES program's goals of providing self-empowerment and self-sufficiency as survival skills. The sense is that if one has high self-esteem and knows how to reasonably manage the vicissitudes of human existence he or she has a better than average chance of leading a comfortable and fruitful life.

"A good perspective of your life not to let no one get in the way of your dreams."

"I've got potential to go up. I got unlimited potential. All I have to do is apply myself."

"I have good social skills. I have a lot of skills, but I think it is important that I learn and develop math skills."

"I'm going to try to get to college. If I don't get through college, I'm still going to reach my goal."

"I mean a lot to myself. I've had a lot of low self-esteem in the past, but thinking of what's been going on with me and when I started Kuumba, I started to realize I mean a lot."

"I gotta believe in myself and keeping striving for my goals, because can't nobody else do it for me because I'm getting older."

"...Like they say, ain't nobody gonna be there to watch your back all the time. You gonna have to take up for yourself and stuff like that. And that's what I'm trying to do now, because when you get up in age ain't nobody gonna be feeding you and putting clothes on your back cause you gonna have to start doing it yourself."

"...one day you may need one of these areas or something like that. Like you know, one of them like as you know moving out on your own and stuff like that. Know how to clean up your house and keep it neat and cook for yourself. That's important areas because, you know, just in case you may get a wife or someone who is lazy and they don't cook or nothing like that, you could cook for yourself."

"You know you have role models and you can't always look up to them,
because they make mistakes themselves, and you don’t say you fill their shoes. You gonna end up making the same mistakes they make, so you have to be your own person. You might look up to them, but you know you have to find out for yourself. Learn from their mistakes, so you won’t do the same thing they went through.”

“You got to depend on your own self sometime. You can’t always depend on others before...be there for you. That’s mostly it.”

“...get back to that positivity and values and don’t feed into the negative European values... If you don’t know how to be positive, look at somebody else that’s being positive and learn from them. Good qualities. Exercise your mind with time.”

“Like when I was little, my brother and sister really used to look down on me. You ain’t gonna be nothing. You got....now they look up to me. I got brains, I got a job, doing good in school, and they, like, I wish I could have did that. They proud of me now. I be helping them. I just send my brother some money. I give my sister money.”

“To be understanding, strong, and proud of yourself and always believe and have courage and complete you goals.”

“...I know how my confidence is now. I have good confidence, but if my self-confidence improves then I can be more to where if I’m going in for a job interview, I can carry myself to where, you know, I’m going to get this job. This is my job, nobody else is going to get this job, this is my job, nobody else is going to take this job from me.”

“... Does not mean the guy with the biggest gun have control. Have knowledge, responsibility, and respect for self.”

“Something important about that saying “you are your own person.” You are making the rules for yourself, you manage yourself. You have to take responsible actions not endangering yourself or others. If you are going to be yourself, use your brain.”

An astute sense of positive self-regard and self-responsibility is communicated by the following respondent as he personally operationalized specific principles of the Nguzo Saba.
"Nguzo Saba means a lot to me. I usually use Umoja and Nia. Umoja means unity. I use that so I can help myself and people around me to survive... I'm going to start where I'm from at the time. And Nia means purpose -- I use that because I always got a purpose. My first purpose was to complete the program that I'm in now and now I completed it and I completed one of my goals that I achieved for myself. And there's a lot of other things out there I'm gonna use Nia for my whole life including Umoja, Kujichagulia, and all the Nguzo Saba."

**IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL HERITAGE AND BEING GROUNDED IN ONE'S ROOTS**

Consistent with the RITES program's goal of ethnic history enrichment, the respondents overwhelmingly felt that knowing one's African and African American roots is imperative for a healthy sense of ethnic and cultural pride. There was an unwavering tone amongst the respondents regarding the need to pass on historical facts to others, especially the next generation, so that mistakes and atrocities against people of African descent are not repeated. In addition, several respondents felt that one must know his or her roots to make informed choices in the future.

"A person's always got to remember where they come from. I mean, even cause White people remember where they come from.... Know where you come from so when somebody asks you about yourself you know why -- you know you like that. Why you look at things in an African American view but don't know much about their history. And then some people be like, I don't want to hear that shit. You know what I'm saying. I mean basically...why not know about it?"

"I think it is important for everyone to know your roots -- understanding of your people. You need to know yourself. It is real important to know your roots whether you are White, Black, Asian, or Hispanic. Stop at the library and look things up."

"...if you don't know your roots, you're doomed to repeat it. If you don't know your history, you're doomed to repeat it."
"Malcolm X refers to not knowing your past, clueless to your future. The future he talked of is our present... It is important to have a history to pass on to future generations. That will become their asset."

"History repeats itself. What goes around comes around... So knowing where I come from and the things that happened... they act as teachers to me."

"...having your own set ways and have already knowing about your culture and able to defend yourself when somebody tell you something that’s not true about it."

"You need to know where you come from to know who you are."

"If you don’t know your history, you are damned to repeat it. That’s where I see the world going now, because Blacks don’t know their history and it’s hurting. So knowing your history -- it’s like the Jewish and the Holocaust. They keep telling people about their Holocaust, because that’s not going to happen again."

"Teach my people about their African heritage so they can stop killing each other."

...if you don’t know where you came from, you don’t know where you are going."

"...know from where you came, and know where you going. You’re able to talk to your kids. It’s -- there’s a lot to it."

"... your roots is like a tree and the tree needs roots to grow to keep going -- to know where you come from. So you know where you’re going constantly, constant consciousness and the more you think about your roots as far as like Black history or roots as far as familywise --your roots as you done in the past. Everything is roots basically. I try to learn from my roots, because basically everything is in cycle."

"It means to have roots in the neighborhood and being proud of that. It is knowing that you should not forget or be ashamed of your heritage and not let anyone take advantage of it."

"So then if you know your roots you know where you came from. You know what you’re fighting for in life. If you stop fighting, you know who you’re letting down."
"...if you don’t know your roots you really can’t know yourself. You can be told anything about your roots, you know, they could tell you, you came from here, when you really came from somewhere else. So it’s really important to know your roots. Because without knowing your roots, you really can’t know yourself or find yourself. To be an African American man is to be a man who knows his roots."

“There’s people that died for us -- cause without Africa that’s basically where we all came from. Without that we would be nowhere.”

“Because you gotta know where you come from - your heritage. If you were to tell somebody that you’re Black they ask you where you from and what part of Africa. If you were to say you were from Africa, you gotta know everything about it. You gotta know yourself. You can’t let nobody tell nothing wrong or lead you to the wrong path.”

“Well, I think everybody should know where they came from. I am not just talking where you born like New York or nothing like that but all your ancestors. How this world was shaped.”

Importance of Cultural Heritage and Being Grounded in One’s Roots

Observations of the Researcher:

“When I arrived at Parmadale Children’s Home, the leader of the AA-RITES program, Mr. Smith, greeted me with a warm welcome and handshake. He then took me to his office and offered me a seat. As I sat down and gazed around the room, I was pleasantly surprised by the strategically placed African artwork and artifacts. Mr. Smith asked one of the RITES participants to come into the office and explain the origins and history of each piece. This individual, who will be referred to as John, very willingly and proudly walked into the office and began to provide a verbal synopsis of the various meanings associated with the African masks, statues, artwork and musical instruments. His articulation of these valuables was impressive for a sixteen year old. The enthusiasm in his voice increased as he shared how he had played some of the musical instruments that were present during past AA-RITES celebrations.

According to Mr. Smith, John had been in several different out-of-home placements before coming to Parmadale. He really seemed to begin believing in himself once his family’s problems began to subside and when he began participating in the AA-RITES program. John told me that he
would like to eventually go back home to live, so he can teach his biological brothers and sisters what he learned in AA-RITES. I thought to myself, 'Is he really being honest?' He seemed sincere and, according to Mr. Smith, John's willingness to explain the site's African art collection was not coerced. John was quite methodical in his account of each piece.

"Today I was fortunate enough to witness an AA-RITES session in progress. One of the elders was conducting a session on African American history. The lesson involved a chronology of the struggles African Americans have had to endure since their arrival in this country. This session was complete with a film, lecture, and discussion. Every participant was keenly attentive while the elder spoke. It was obvious that he commanded respect and rightly so. I was spellbound as I sat in amazement at the group dynamics as well as the poignant delivery of the speaker.

It is not an easy task to captivate the attention of adolescent males, but they were quite intrigued during this session. Individuals raised their hands to seek clarification on various points of interest. The respect and admonition shown to the elder was unanimous, based on my observations. The participants appeared to want to know as much as possible about their heritage. Likewise, this type of information is not taught in public schools. The elder provided information on the maltreatment of Blacks as well as the accomplishments of Black Americans."

**STRONG RACIAL IDENTIFICATION**

The people who illuminated this theme spoke boldly and affirmatively about their racial contentment. They spoke of strengths, talents, and potentialities Blacks have to offer. Also, they appeared to refute, for their personal growth and development, racism and negative race-based stereotypes.

"They (African Americans) are strong and basically they try to strive for their goals. They go for their goals. They don't quit. Keep working on their goals."

"Because we as African Americans been through a lot. We demand a change. We got good talents. You know, I'm just proud to be Black."
You know. We got a lot of heritage and talents.”

“To be an African it means to me to have blood line of kings and queens. That means I can go there. You know, I got the potential to go there.”

“Black people fight for what they believe in. Black men are proud, happy, and try not to let anybody pull them down.”

“Unity means to me that Blacks all getting together, so we can one day come up — one day rise up.”

“...we still survived all the pain and suffering of enslavement. We are still striving. They need us to keep the country functioning. We are very important.”

“Black people are smart and intelligent and real creative, real creative. We can make anything.”

“Because I’m a Black male, I have like so much magnetic power, man. It just draws people to me.”

“African American people accomplish so many things, but the reason why we accomplish all this is not just for our race but to better the world, I hope.”

“We have a lot of Black entrepreneurs, and I am proud of them. I want to be one and make it better for Black people.”

“...from all the struggles, we are still going strong. After you know, I mean from slavery to now, and really it’s not... we still going through it. We came a long way. It’s a lot of bad faults that Black people have but you know, I can’t blame all of us for that. You gotta blame them. That’s just they’re not taking care of business.”

“...being yourself. You ain’t trying to go around and acting like you are this and acting like you that. You just being yourself. In other words, you just going around, doing what you gotta do, taking care of your business and being, you know, being respectful young Black man, or young Black sister.”

“To be strong and proud of themselves and what their color is. Just because people put them down because of their color don’t mean that they should listen. If somebody — well, I ain’t going to use no bad words — but if somebody is telling that they stink or something because they Black they
shouldn't listen to them because they should be proud of their color. God put them there and made them that color and that's the color they gonna stay. They not gonna change for nobody else."

"... So really the only thing it is, is that we have different color skins. So like, if I was White, I'd probably say that Black people need to change, the same thing I'm saying now and I'd probably say that White people have it, and all that kind of stuff. I don't really have nothing against White people, it's just that some of them — they are just prejudice and it's wrong how they treat good Black people ... innocent Black people that do nothing to them. And they take it out on them.... I'm glad I'm a Black African American. I guess that's the way my Mom and Dad brought me up, but that's good because any color I'd be, I'd be Black, White or mixed, or whatever, and I'd still be grateful with the color I am."

The following respondent spoke of the African culture as having been at one time great and magnificent. This reality is consistent with the RITES' teachings of African history whereby participants learn the majesty of ancient and modern African culture. In addition, this respondent concisely voiced a desire to rejuvenate such majesty today in people of African descent.

"I see Africans as a progressive race and a regressive race. We had a potential to flourish and expand with knowledge and wisdom because we did it once in the past...."

Strong Racial Identification

Observations of the Researcher:

"I ate lunch at Tower City with one of the respondents from the Cleveland site. Tower City is a large mall located in downtown Cleveland. At the respondent's request, I conducted most of the interview with him there. At first, I thought the noisiness and combustion in the mall would hamper my ability to facilitate an open-ended interview, but I was wrong. Lee, as he will be referred to for the purposes of this study, talked boldly about how the AA-RITES program taught him how to live in a racist society.

After lunch we walked around the mall and his gait reflected an air of confidence and self-assurance. He began to freely tell me which merchants
were culturally friendly to African Americans and which ones were not. We later walked around downtown Cleveland, and though he condemned Black on Black crime he shared with me certain areas in which 'one must wear heavy boots.' Literally, according to Lee, the shoes you wear may make a difference as to whether you will be a target of crime. It was obvious that Lee knew how to physically and emotionally take care of himself. It also seemed apparent that he knew how to socially navigate the racial and cultural idiosyncracies of our society.

When we went into the stores, he interacted with the merchants in a proactive fashion. Basically, his rationale was that you engage the merchant up front so that he does not label you as a thief or thug. Lee had a lot of what I call people skills. He was very engaging and this personality trait has been a shield for him in maneuvering his way through some tough and physically rough situations. Basically, Lee intimated that the way to stay out of trouble is know what trouble looks like. We spent the majority of the afternoon together, and he gave quick analyses of various sites which assured me that he knew the streets of Cleveland and the ways of the world. More importantly, he knew that the negativity of this world is off limits to him.”

**INTRINSIC VIEW OF SUCCESS**

The respondents spoke of success in a proactive manner. They talked about what is needed to achieve success by citing such examples as completing one’s education, having integrity, having and maintaining goals, and finding happiness in life. A tone of affirmation permeated the respondent’s comments. Given the upheavals of multiple and sometimes disrupted placements faced by the respondents, the caliber of their comments speaks keenly to their fortitude and vision.

“My idea of being successful is making sure you’re happy with yourself.”

“Success is what you cover in your heart and word. Basically, what you feel, the goals that you have set you have made. And once you have made them, the goals you have set for family and friends, what you have made with them, that’s success.”
“Success to me it means to achieve what you can achieve. Not limiting yourself — doing your best. Cause you know to some people being successful could be rich. A billionaire. But then to others it could be a school teacher. Just making it out of college to be a school teacher. So success to me is being the best you can be.”

“Success... well, it’s like doing whatever. It’s like a goal. Doing whatever, you know, you think you can do in life. Well, it’s a goal. Set a goal and achieve that, whatever you can achieve in life.”

“It (success) means to be able to accomplish your goals. It does not mean to be rich or anything like that but to accomplish any goal that you have set aside for yourself. It could be to pass a class or whatever like that — and you know, that’s like being successful or something that you want to accomplish any goals that you have set aside for yourself.”

“Being successful means having a dream, something you can look forward to in the future, you know. If you’re still in school and you have something that you want to keep on doing while you’re in school, keep going at it, keep going at it, and try to succeed in it. Eventually you will be successful.”

“...success... To maintain your goals in life. Get the things in life by working at it.”

“To succeed in anything basically that you want to. Accomplishing your goals that you set for yourself.”

“You did good with your life.”

“Success is reaching your goal. Doing what you want to do. I mean, doing the thing that’s good for you.”

“Really — just like anything that’s positive. That’s what it says to me. Positive matter. You know, successful day — nothing bad happened”

INNER POWER, WISDOM, AND MANHOOD

Power, wisdom, and the attributes of manhood are woven together as one theme from the transcriptions of the respondents. Their binding characteristics were expressed
succinctly in the voices of the following respondents. As one respondent stated, "...a wise man is to be able to think before you react...." Being mindful of consequences before one takes action seems to be correlated with a certain inner power. This assertion is corroborated by one respondent's remark that power is something within that reminds a person to do the right thing.

"...power is you got to have knowledge."

"I think power is all in the mind. The power is within your mind."

"...it's all about how you use power and then it could mean something else to others. So but to me, power is just a word unless you use it in a positive way. You know, that's it. Other than that it's just nothing."

"Power is respect for yourself and other people respecting you."

"Power is nothing but knowledge and wisdom -- what you have and others lack."

"Power is something that's inside you that you want to do the right thing -- inner power -- inner conscience."

"... There's like the 'rich and famous' power, but then there's the power of the mind and it's like the power of the mind. If you can control yourself and your state of being, then you have power...If you think about it then you empower everything else, because once you empower yourself then that's all you need."

"...learn from everything you go through. That's being wise.

"...to do things that a person or a man does, the right things, not the wrong things. Like, if you was a wise man you wouldn't do something that you know you would get caught, or get yourself into trouble doing things you shouldn't do."

"...a wise man is to be able to think before you react. If you always think before you react you're bound to come up with at least a decision. You
know what I'm saying. That's half way decent, if not all the way decent, you know."

"...When I'm able to take on all my responsibilities, then that's when I'm able to be a man. When I don't have to rely on anyone or anybody. I'm not saying that you not gonna have to rely on anybody, but when you are able to rely on yourself then you know you can rely on yourself. That's when you become a man. So it's all in your mind. Wherever you feel comfortable with your mind and you think you can rely on yourself, that is when you become a man."

"...you know, follow yourself. Don't be a follower. Be a leader. Just you know, follow your mind, don't follow everybody else's mind. Do what you got to do. Go to work, take care of your business, whatever. Do what you gotta do. That's what it means to me to be a wise man, you know, and you live and work hard."

"Live and experience life and learn from your mistakes and learn from your errors."

"Takes more than knowledge to be wise. Live life, understanding. Life from more than one viewpoint. Live a full life."

**RESPECT FOR WOMEN**

The comments of these respondents show solid support for the respect and fair treatment of women. They also emphasize reciprocity in the issuance of respect. In other words, both males and females should treat each other with the proper respect. The voices that follow articulated what they believe is the proper manifestation of respect:

"It's important to be there for her, treating them like queens. Not telling them, well you gotta do this and you gotta do that."

"I think they should-- as a teenager --not be having sex, because really none of us is old enough to have a child. They don't have to have sex to love each other."
"What I'd like to see is we become people again like we used to be and all the women become Black queens. Back then it was a nation but now everybody fightin' for themselves. That's about it."

"Understanding, mutual love, Like being there for each other. If these things ain't there, you really can't say she's your woman."

"It seems like with me, you know, how I really look at it is you respect a girl and you know, they're gonna respect you and stuff. It's just the way I feel. But if you ain't gonna respect them they ain't gonna respect you.... that's just the way my dad showed me. If you respect that person, they'll at least give you some respect back. But they may not all the time and stuff, but at least you know you're trying to respect them."

"You have to have respect for a female prewarrior. You know, you have to be a courteous man, manlylike. You don't have to be the big brave kind, but you know, show courtesy. Let's see another one -- and I guess help each other out basically."

"Well, number one -- I think we should treat them with respect. You know, just treat them like -- put them on the same level as you would treat their brother. Not like looking at them.... Not saying that they're female and she can't do this or she can't do that. She might be just as smart as you. That's another reason."

"Understanding, honesty, and trust. I feel with those that your relationship can get bigger and bigger and it's easier to trust that male or female to get through that relationship, to get through thick and thin no matter where that relationship may lead to."

"To look out for that person, to never say...disrespect her...."

"Well, one thing is to always care about that person. Two is what most people -- most Black males do these days is hit women and stuff like that, but I don't see why you would hit your own race, well, fight against your own race... because when you hit up on a woman that's the wrong thing to do, and stuff like that."

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CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS: UNEXPECTED THEMES

The voices in this set of findings spoke of matters that are deemed unexpected from a thematic standpoint. Unlike the expected themes, these categories did not directly emanate from the probe questions that were consistent with AA-RITES program goals and curriculum content. They portend a hermeneutic value all their own. Table 2 depicts a comparative listing of both sets of themes, expected and unexpected. As in all cases, the respondents were encouraged to expound and speak freely about matters of importance to them. In this set of findings, many of the responses appeared cathartic in nature. In my opinion, this is not necessarily a concern because “the unexpected” often stems from a person’s emotional release. As previously indicated in relation to the expected findings, unexpected observations that I encountered as the researcher will be presented when applicable and at the conclusion of the transcribed text that supports the corresponding theme.

IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING AND GIVING BACK WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED AND THE WILL TO STRIVE FOR YOUR BEST

The way to escape urban plight is to get as much education as possible. This sentiment was clearly and overwhelmingly conveyed by the respondents as they discussed...
explicitly the desire for a better life for themselves and others. According to the respondents, achievement through education and passing knowledge and encouragement to others are hallmarks of African American survival. The essence of these respondents’ stories suggested that giving back is just another way of reminding each other that when we achieve we must not forget the individuals whom we left behind. In addition, it means that we must offer assistance to other members of humankind when we can and when we are needed. Though the concept of mutual aid is taught to AA-RITES participants, its quintessence was categorized as unexpected because the respondents spoke of giving back in conjunction with the importance of learning and striving to reach your full potential.

The combination or blending of these three ideals gave entree for its unexpected emergence.

"...I think it’s important that you know how to read and do something, because out in this world you got to have an education, you know.... The right crowd is doing what their mom tell them to do. Do their chores before they leave the house. Get good grades, go to school, have nice friends. Something like that.”

“You learn from everything you go through.”

“You learn from your mistakes, and it’s important to teach others also so they don’t make the same mistakes that you made or that you seen other people make.”

“...And when I’m a man I’ll be wiser. I will have learned from the mistakes that I’m making now. Hopefully I’ll be alive. Hopefully I’ll be successful and achieve what I can achieve. And not limiting myself to nothing...”

“You have to stay in school and you have to learn about your heritage, and if you are from the streets, always try to keep your street smarts.”

“Well, first thing is I hope to grow up and be something, follow in my brother’s footsteps hopefully. And go to the Marines, but if that don’t
work I'll go to college and take up computer programming.... Because if you don't do nothing early, it's gonna be too late when you get up in age. You won't be able to start off of what you was doing before. And if you start young and you're already... you can better yourself..."

"Everything I learn I gotta pass on. If I got the answer, why not give it to everybody else, because I'm not the only one in the world."

....I'll be thinking like a man like, um, I won't make no stupid choices, because I know once you pass eighteen you make a stupid choice you can wind up in jail for a long time.... I want to start working out again. I want to make myself look better and I think that will help me get farther in life. 'Cause I'll be able to last longer. Uh, I want to gain more knowledge so then I can express my points of view like I want to. That's about it."

"To have knowledge and use it and help other people learn.... correct what you have done wrong so you don't do it again... You could go back... and do it right the next time.... I like to see them (African Americans) be somebody with nice, good jobs and trying to get up there like the White people are these days. Instead of being on the streets, they are out there trying to get a better family and life."

"I guess it's just the color of people because I just state it like this. Everybody's the same color on the inside. No matter what people did to us (African Americans) back then, we should try to become better people now and prove to them that we can become better people. Now, if we can stop them from bringing us down.... You get to bring like another person in the world to raise up to try to become something in its life, to try to prove to White people that us Black people can become something in our life...."

"....be an example to somebody else, I go and look at the example before me and I'm learning.... We seen them prove it all the time that Black people can't come together for nothing in the world. You know what I'm saying? So, I'd like to see that change. Because that's not only a myth with other races... but it's kind of rough when you start thinking it's yourself and you inside the clan.... I haven't met one straight up hard African American yet that just ain't got a big heart. We all got big hearts. Regardless of what causes it -- whatever cause we believe in we are going to give in to it. Whether it be a negative or positive thing -- if that's what we really want to contribute to -- that's what we gonna do. I believe we are giving people -- big hearts and stuff."

"To know the circumstances of the situation, that is the strength. 'Cause
you’re Black and to see them out there working -- making better for
everyone else just trying to make situation better, when it’s already messed
up. Basically, like there’s no hope but them out there struggling -- trying
to make things better makes us think there’s hope.”

“We are all strong willed. We have a strong will to survive because that’s
what we been doing all along. We always stick up for what is ours.”

“Well, if you have any kids you should take care of them and if you go
through something, something that was wrong, try to help others that are
going through the same thing.... Well I would like to see them (African
Americans) get together more. Stop all the arguing, fighting, killing. And
you know, help each other out. You know. If you see somebody that ain’t
got no food, you should give them food if you see them — just basically
help everybody.”

“It’s important to get our education and, you know, just stop going to be
following people, but being a leader of our own people.”

“Well, first, they can give back what they got out -- look out for the
children in their community -- basically, each one, teach one.... Working is
‘give back’ such as programs as this.”

“You can basically be more role models to the younger African American
males and basically just stop the killing .... And teach young people, so they
won’t make the same mistakes you made.”

“You gotta go back and help out the other people in the neighborhood.
You gotta do -- okay, you gotta give back what gave to you.”

“Put money back into your community. The money you get out of your
community, or whatever, put it back into your community.”

“.... We have a lot of Black entrepreneurs and I am proud of them. I want
to be one and make it better for Black people.”

“Be part of any organization to help raise funds to put into the Black
community, i.e., everything should be about the community.”

“Collective work and responsibility. We gotta help one another. We all
have a job to do basically as far as African Americans.”

“Getting themselves employed and contributing back to the community
through Black businesses.”

“...Spending time with the younger people in their community, and if you have money, give back to them, but not all the time people have money, but at least spend time with them. Because a lot of young people out here don’t even think that we have understanding for each other. They grow up—their brothers are out in the streets serving crack. You know what I’m saying... They 7 years old looking at this. They serving crack at the age of 8, 9, and 10.... So I think that more people should just get involved period....Like, say if I do, do some... whatever, because I am human, I can make a mistake, but still in the back of my mind I still know that I did wrong or whatever. A lot of people can’t face that. But I think that an incentive for the African Rites of American Passage was good because that kept a lot of people - some people off the street....”

“...stop fighting, more recreation, more community groups on Africentric history, that might be a choice.”

“Being positive if you’re by yourself, or if you try to raise a family—raise a family right, do things to help yourself and in a way lead that way that people can look at you as a leader that’s contributing. Because if somebody catch you and see what you’re doing, if you’re doing something positive you will always have a glow and people see you—you can make a stand. Maybe contributing to the homeless or some home or something. That’s contributing. But if you contribute within your own heart and mind, do what you got to do, people is gonna watch you regardless.”

“You can spread the words and the wisdom that you learn and Rites of Passage, or you can ask them to come with you to the Rites of Passage and ask them if they want to learn some more about their history.... Because if you know what you want to improve in yourself...once you can improve that problem, you can see what else you need help in and solve that problem also, but first you gotta start at the first one and the biggest one that you see.”

Importance of Learning and Giving Back
What You Have Learned and the Will to Strive for Your Best

Observations of the Researcher:

“Today I witnessed what appeared to be in my opinion, a good example of the power inherent in brotherhood. I experienced some hesitancy on the part of one respondent regarding his participation in this study. I am not
sure if his reluctance was borne out of suspicion as to the reason for the research project or simply a case of informant apathy. I was thorough in my delivery to Joe (an alias used for the purposes of this study) but that did not seem to matter. He mumbled a few words about his lack of time to really complete the interview. While he was talking, the respondent that I had previously interviewed, who will be referred to as Jamal, overheard the exchange and voluntarily spoke to Joe, person to person, about the importance of this study. His influence was greater than mine and subsequently Joe complied with the format of the interview and openly shared his thoughts. Also, Jamal commented to Joe that this study was 'a good thing to do' because it might help prolong the existence of the AA-RITES program.

FAMILY SOLIDARITY AND CULTURAL INTERCONNECTEDNESS

Closely related to the previous theme, Importance of Learning and Giving Back What You Have Learned and the Will to Strive for Your Best, Family Solidarity and Cultural Interconnectedness distinguishes itself through the voices' concentration on familial and cultural cohesiveness. Despite their out-of-home care status, the respondents communicated a strong belief in the continuity of family and extended family ties. The interconnectedness of African Americans and their families has long been considered a strength of the African American culture. In many instances, the African American family has served as a protective shield to its members against racism, discrimination, and other divisive societal structures. Ties are often maintained to some degree, even when internal conflicts arise and force changes in familial configurations. The voices of these respondents appear to both directly and indirectly indicate the presence of a special bond between RITES participants, participants and their respective families, and the African American community as a whole.
“Well, if you have any kids you should take care of them and if you go through something, something that was wrong, try to help others that are going through the same thing.” ...I’ll be missed. I won’t be running after girl from girl, won’t be doing that kind of thing. And, hopefully, I’ll be able to achieve my goal, do what I want to do in life and have kids.

“For one we all made of skin, we all got our mind to think with. We all got some of the same opinion, and everybody like to help one another. Everybody got some kind of feelings deep down inside. Some people can’t express themselves and some can.”

“Uh, they (African Americans) take pride in their hair and their skin and health uh.... like usually they try and stick together as a whole instead of tryin’ to fight alone....”

“I got to work to earn a living. Pay bills. Just about it. Be a responsible person in life, like — all what this is — it’s a prelife, and when we become a man, it’s like the real thing — be a role model for younger kids, you know. Raise them to be right.”

“....Walk around — they see you playing with their kids. Let them come over and be a neighbor. Be in the community. Carry yourself as a dignified Black man. You know, don’t walk around being ignorant, laughing at people, you know, disrespecting people while they walk down the street. Just be yourself.”

“....I’m trying to make it. I’m close to it already, trying to make a man out of myself. With the help of my foster mother, she helping me out too, teaching me things I should and shouldn’t do and stuff like that.”

“For you to be older and be able to tell life experiences that you have had to the younger youth.”

“.... Second, to be able to sit somebody down and to talk to somebody that can listen to you amongst your people — besides other people that’s behind you or in front of you, you can talk to someone.”

“Being able to do for yourself and others more or less like family, support friends — any task that you are more or less capable of handling.... To take what we have been given to achieve something from it — to make it come up to not be secondhand — not being greedy but getting what we deserve. Black men need to acquire the respect. Just because the clock is stopped, go over and help your brother or sister, don’t leave them hanging. Some
things are supposed to be done, not asked — goes with responsibility.”

"....You know, being as wise as he can, being as successful as he can. That’s being — and helping out his people at the same time. You know, trying to get us out of the oppressed state that we’re in. You know. Right now we are kind of messed up.”

".... Get jobs that are real good that will help other Black people. So that’s I’d really like to see them (African Americans) do that.”

"... Trying to help young kids -- help young kids out and try to put them on the right track and not the bad track. Like some kids follow the bad track. They — like if you got a boy out and he walking, he got some head rag on, he walking down, like to have them, wish I were in a gang. You don’t want to get in a gang, but then you see another person, a normal...person, doing normal stuff and some people want to be like them, so you just follow the right track. If you got brother in the house and he doing good, he follows the right track, you should look up to him.”

"....If we trying to reach for world peace or whatever, and if I got the answer, why not give it to everybody else, because I’m not the only one in the world.”

"Interaction, watching each other succeeding even when someone fails. It’s a collective group to help him get back on his feet. It’s motivation also. When one person has a problem it’s everybody’s problem...”

The following respondent elucidated the far-reaching effects of family solidarity and cultural interconnectedness by denoting the goodness in seeing one individual’s attempt to lead a righteous life and the importance of supporting this effort at the appropriate time.

"...I think the whole African view is different, because even though African American males like we feel strongly that we have -- we feel like if somebody mess with us than we have to defend ourselves. That’s true, but once you become a friend with one of us we love you.... Dwayne (a fellow RITES participant) had like a father or something like that, some dude, he trying to raise his family right. He trying to be a right Black man. He trying to raise his family, he still with his woman and everything-- that he had a baby by. He trying to raise his family right. His friend’s car broke
down that he usually use. He walked to the store and everybody wanted to jump on him. We come down and we were there to support him and let him know that it's more than him. You know. Like 50 people sitting in front of his house. They ain't doing nothing no more.”

Family Solidarity and Cultural Interconnectedness

Observations of the Researcher:

“Today, leaders/elders of the AA-RITES sessions wore African garb. Actually, this was not the first time I had seen them dressed in this manner. Their garments were distinctly of African origin. Kente cloth, a colorful fabric made of various patterns germane to African culture, has been the textile of choice for many of the leaders/elders who render their services at this particular site. These individuals appeared unaware that their attire impacted the mood and general atmosphere of the sessions. The garments made a statement and appeared to contribute in setting the tone for an Africentric educational experience. On a metacommunication level, these African textiles facilitate a cultural uniformity that speaks to solidarity and interconnectedness. One’s outward appearance can speak to his or her inward persona, given the environmental circumstances. The participants greeted the leaders and elders with a special handshake signifying their cultural connection. The African garb appeared to give greater definition to the Africentric tone of the AA-RITES program.”

CONDEMNATION OF VIOLENCE AND UNPRODUCTIVE BEHAVIOR

These respondents wholeheartedly denounced violence, drug abuse, and other forms of destructive behavior. Having been surrounded by violence in urban settings prior to entering out-of-home care and the RITES program, many of these respondents condemned drug trafficking in their neighborhoods and were appalled by violent acts of Black on Black crime. Moreover, the respondents felt that the violence in African American neighborhoods and the larger community is senseless and does not solve anything.
“More conversation towards one another... and we do kill each other - that's another thing. You know. We need to sit down and talk to each other.”

“Mostly try to keep the young males off the street. And get them off the corners and stuff, rather raise themselves up in the houses and stuff and not behind bars and stuff like that.”

“Really stop killing each other. That's really all they're doing now is killing each other.”

“...stop selling drugs.... Quit shooting people. That's basically it.”

“Stop the violence. Stop the gangs. Stop drugs.”

“...most Black males do these days is hit women and stuff like that, but I don't see why you would hit your own race, well, fight against your own race... because when you hit up on a woman that's the wrong thing to do, and stuff like that....”

“You know, they help they self and get off of drugs and try to do something better for their life.”

“...Stop the violence and the drugs and the killings. Put down the guns.”

“...We got like a need for violence -- to see violence or being violent exist. I think we learned it over the years that's what it is. I'm not saying because of violence being dished out on us or whatever, but I think that what we are used to seeing and what we are used to knowing... I think that is what needs to be changed. Because we got like this violent streak in us Black people. White people may be saying that Black people are violent. That's not all true but when we -- you really look at it a lot of Black people are violent I'm not saying a lot of White people aren't violent but we are not talking about them 'cause they not killing themselves as fast as we are killing ourselves....”

“I would like to see our self-respect - I would like to see some of the gangster rap - like some of that, it's making us look bad. You know, I'd like to see, I'm not saying stop them - but I'd like to see us have more respect for ourselves. You know, stop the violence. Have more respect for ourselves. Treating others like they - like you want to be treated.”
“Stop the violence. Clean up their acts. Help other people instead of helping themselves.... To see them stop the violence. Stop killing their (African Americans) own race.”

“.... Not to let no one get in the way of your dreams. Know what to do under pressure not necessarily by way of fighting and or guns.”

The voices of the following respondents not only vehemently condemned the violence and unproductive behavior that has so adversely affected many African Americans, but also called for a unified effort to stop the violence through greater incorporation of the Nguzo Saba principle of Umoja. Other means of preventing violence were also offered. One respondent stated that the Black on Black violence is what White America (the White man) wants, while others continued to state the importance of drug dealers’ and crime perpetrators’ giving up their old behaviors and coming together to make a positive difference. These respondents believed that such individuals have great influence in their respective neighborhoods. Consequently, this influence can be used more positively to eliminate criminal activity as opposed to making matters worse by “killing our own selves off.”

“...help out the Black brothers and Black sisters out here today. Help us bring each other together instead of having us fighting each other, you know. And that’s what, basically that’s what the White man want us to do because they ain’t got the killers. We killing off ourselves.”

“....We found a lot of our Black brothers and sisters out on these blocks, you know, selling dope, peddling dope, whatever, but you find others that are determined to make something out of themselves. I’m happy and proud that our Black brothers and sisters are making something out of themselves. Being lawyers, judges, firemen, police officers, or whatever....I would like to see African American brothers and sisters to come together as one instead of fighting and killing each other off....That’s
the one thing all Black brothers need to get together is Umoja. Black brothers and sisters get Umoja together so we got unity. For everybody -- all Black brothers and sisters instead of fighting each other and killing off each other, cause that’s one thing we doing. Nobody else killing us off. We killing our own selves off.”

“Black American males can stop being violent. Stop starting trouble. What they should do -- we should all get together, be somebody and try to be better than what we are now because that’s what the White man wants to see if we get killed and all that stuff like that. So they should think about instead of stealing, robbing and things like that.”

“I mean, if you talking about a gang, I don’t know. Mostly gang bangers are punk niggers, man. I mean you gotta run with all these guys so you can be hard. With that kind of group, I don’t. With another group, but just knowing you got support you can fall back on somebody. Just like drug rehab programs, you know what I’m saying?.... You know, I would rather get rid of the violence and work on the drugs, you know what I’m saying, because drugs is bad, but the violence is even worser. I’d rather all these dope dealers come together, from all these neighborhoods. If they come together instead of rather having everybody be cool and sell their drugs then be enemies and sell their drugs, so we losing twice as many like that. Just work on one at a time.”

“Well, first of all, if you can basically like be more role models to the younger African males and basically just stop the killing. Stop the things they doing now. And take care of the kids. If they have kids, take care of their kids. And teach younger people so they won’t make the same mistakes they made.”

“...stay away from drugs and alcohol and all that stuff but at the same time lead your life in the right direction so you can reach all your goals.... Have crime prevention meetings, um having more activities, more restrictive activities, um that does not concern violence.”

“Like, have a crime watch. Make a crime watch. Get all the drugs out and stuff.”

“By stop fighting, more recreation, more community groups on Africentric history that might be a choice.”

“Quit killing each other. Stop the violence. Bring African American people up as a whole instead of individually.”
"I'd like to see the drugs/gang situation as far as the Black on Black crime change. I know brothers don't know each other but the relationship needs to be better. Because it's all a part of making a positive change."

"They could more or less start going on citizen patrol. This would slow down crime. People could walk in groups. It could be a full-time neighborhood watch. They need to stop being afraid of the younger Black kids. You shouldn't be scared of some child, especially when you have far more experience. You should stop fearing Black children.... A young mind is a terrible thing to waste. I want to see the killing of young people stop because that is our future — we are killing them off. The killing needs to stop. A person may need to step in, a role model, young or old."

"...stop killing each other and start getting along with other people and to try to become somebody.... just think, Rites of Passage is a good program for us Black kids to try and change our lives around and try to stop some of the violence. That's about it."

"Raise up and act like a man. For real. Because I truly believe... the world won't be right until the African American male gets himself together first. You know. I think once we finish, if we doing all the drugs and selling and killing and robbing and all that kind of stuff, we stop all of that who they gonna blame it on? You're supposed to be done. We finished it."

The following respondent poignantly asserted an affirmative link between knowing one's African heritage and eliminating violence. This connection, which has been discussed in the literature, purports the message that once a person feels validated through knowledge acquisition of his or her ethnic roots, he or she develops a sense of pride and is less apt to desecrate the honor that has come to symbolize his or her people.

"I guess try to help my little Black kids so that they can have a better life in the future. Teach my people about their African heritage so they can stop killing each other."

Condemnation of Violence

Observations of the Researcher:

"This particular respondent, who will be referred to as Nathan, appeared
empowered by the interest I exuded regarding his participation in the project. However, his consent came with a condition that he be able to perform a rap composition at the end of the interview. I quickly gave him my permission. Several other group home residents were still on the premises when the interview was completed. These individuals served as the audience for Nathan’s rap performance. His rap had an anti-violence message and a call for togetherness amongst ‘the brothers and the sisters.’ When he was done, a hearty round of applause was lifted on his behalf. I looked at the faces of the individuals present and saw what seemed to be expressions of admiration. Rap music is very popular for this generation of young people and I was glad to hear a positive message associated with it. Maybe through such a medium as rap individuals who would otherwise ignore corrective redirection might heed the call for alternatives to violence so that more people will live as opposed to die.”

REVERENCE TO THE CREATOR

Given the tremendous familial and social hardships faced by these respondents, one might think that faith in God would be nonexistent. On the contrary, a certain reverence to the Creator existed for many of the respondents. As one respondent quipped, “...with God on your side, that’s more than anything...” Though operationalization of their faith was not necessarily outlined, their comments still reflect a distinct allegiance to a higher power. The RITES’ curriculum, as previously noted, does not endorse a formal religion; however, it does include discussions about the parameters of spirituality. As alluded to by several respondents, spirituality is actualized through practicing the doctrines of a particular religious order. Again, a strength of the African American community has been the steadfast influence of “the church,” “the mosque,” or “the temple.” Through their voices, the respondents exhibited a surprising level of conviction regarding a belief in the Creator.
“Because He... wakes us up everyday. You know, we just want to go to Heaven, you know, and we pray to Him in Jesus’ name for all the things that we need.”

“...your personal relationship with whomever your God may be is very important in your life in this world and your eternal life with your Creator. If you have a personal and trusting and willing relationship — well mine is with God — all right, if you have a personal and trusting relationship with that person or that Creator, then anything can be accomplished within Him and within you.”

“You...it’s like, if you don’t know who your Creator is, you’re never gonna know who to thank, you know what I’m saying? You’ll thank the wrong people. Like if I get $100 — like I get paid, right? I know the bank pays me, but if it weren’t for God I wouldn’t have that job, you know what I’m saying? Some people, some people need to wake up today. Some people probably die right now, you know what I’m saying? If I’m living and stuff, I’m always thanking the Lord. And I might kick it, I ain’t gonna lie. I might drink a brew, I might smoke a blood or something...puff...but every time, man, I ask the Lord to forgive me. You can ask anybody I kick it with, every time I break up, I be like God bless you. So you know, I got some kind of ...line. I never disrespect nobody’s peoples, nor their mother, nobody like that. I ain’t never like that. I was raised like that and I never will...”

“Because when the Son comes back one day you want to go to Heaven and be able to see Him. And not only that you want to live the right life on this earth so you won’t go to hell.”

“...having a relationship with God, with God on your side, that’s more than anything. If somebody got 50 people on their side, 50 humans, you know what I’m saying, all of the humans, all of them ain’t equal to God. You can’t go against God. If you got God on your side, 200 people could be trying to run after you and they can’t find you, for some reason. You know.”

“...because without the Creator, nothing could be accomplished. Can’t get nothing done. Can’t get nothing done. It would just be chaos without the Creator.”

“Positively yes. Whether you believe in Jesus Christ, God, Allah, whoever it may be, as long as there is a supreme being that you have a relationship with, all this would not be possible. It had to start from somewhere.”
"... it's good because I pray for nothing bad to happen to me and stuff. I pray that I wake up in the morning and stuff..."

"... I'm not gonna say a name. Everybody have their different opinions about the name. But if you knew the Creator, say you didn't know him before and then you know him and then you find him -- then that's the most important thing in the world. That's saying your Creator is your safe haven, regardless, the world could be cruel to you or whatever, that's your safe haven -- where you can go and everything is correct regardless, no matter how wrong it is when you're there. Everything seems right. Everything is good so that's why it is important to acknowledge the Creator cause everybody needs a safe haven regardless of how good your life is."

"...all I can say is He's been there for me when I've needed Him to be there. You know what I'm saying. I believe and you know, there's a greater power out there than just me or the next man. So, having my relationship with the Creator, I believe no harm will come to me. If it is, the Lord will provide... Ain't really nothing to be worried about, you know. I ain't worried about it. All I do is pray and the Lord helps those who help themselves. Ain't no reason to struggle."

"God sticks behind you 24 hours a day, and God looks over you 24 hours a day. I feel God kept me in this world this long, He'll probably keep me a little bit longer. God is very good to be around -- to have in your mind because -- when you do something wrong -- God sometimes does forgive you if it's not too bad... God helps you -- do your prayers every night and then say 'Praise the Lord.'"

"...I believe God had to make this world and make our lives possible... or how else did the world get here? And when people have like good things every day, like...and stuff like that, it's like faith. Just like faith. Because it's like having faith in people every day. Because it's like when you go to McDonald's or something and somebody cook your food, you don't know them and you don't know what they put in your food. So that's like faith every day in somebody. So I say like this, you put faith into them, you put faith into God."

"Because if you don't have a relationship with Him, then it's almost impossible to go to Heaven."

"It's important to know you have a relationship with the Creator so as long as you are clear on what type of relationship or beliefs you have. You
should be clear on your relationship with the Creator; helps you to fully understand yourself, what goes on around you and be able to understand what happened in the past.”

“Whoever your Creator may be, if you believe in him strongly enough you can have a relationship with him. Some people need to have a belief in a Creator. Having a belief in the Creator is good. It takes a load off your mind. It gets a lot of people through hard times having an unseen person giving them hope. Some people have organized groups like church to give thanks and come together and bless the Lord.”

“...you gotta know where you come from. That is who provides for you. He is the provider and the guardian.”

“...with him looking over me at all times, I can never feel unprotected. I feel safe at all times.”

“...I think it’s important because, you know, I’m a Christian and I believe like, you know, if you’re having problems you pray to the Lord. He helps you out. He might not help you like when you want the help right then and there, but He -- help comes right on time. That’s how... That’s why you need Him. You need Him for spiritual guidance.”

“First of all, the Creator got power. But it is important to have a relationship with Him. You can call the Creator for more power in that circle. You can also call the Creator as if you need something like for food somehow -- someway you get that money....”

A conservative reverence to the Creator is communicated by the following respondent. Though he is not as devout in his belief as the other voices, his comments appear to provide an acceptable measure of credence to this theme.

“Um... I believe in God to an extent. I’m just starting to believe in Him or the Creator, or whatever you want to call Him. People still got their different opinions on God on how He look and what color He is, but to me I’m just starting to believe in -- I’m trying to get that far.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXPECTED</th>
<th>UNEXPECTED</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. POSITIVE SELF-CONCEPT AND SELF-RESPONSIBILITY</td>
<td>1. IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING AND GIVING BACK WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED AND THE WILL TO STRIVE FOR YOUR BEST</td>
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<td>2. IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL HERITAGE AND BEING GROUNDED IN ONE'S ROOTS</td>
<td>2. FAMILY SOLIDARITY AND CULTURAL INTERCONNECTEDNESS</td>
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<td>3. STRONG RACIAL IDENTIFICATION</td>
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<td>6. RESPECT FOR WOMEN</td>
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TABLE 2: EXPECTED AND UNEXPECTED THEMES GENERATED FROM THE TRANSCRIBED TEXT OF INTERVIEWS WITH AA-RITES PARTICIPANTS
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Restatement of the Research Questions (Sensitizing Concepts)

1. Are adolescent African American males in out-of-home care who participate in the AA-RITES program developing positive self-esteem as they mature?

2. Are adolescent African American males in out-of-home care who participate in the AA-RITES program developing a strong sense of ethnic identity as they mature?

Summary of Grounded Theory

Qualitative inquiry can produce grounded theory (Glazer & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is essentially an inductive strategy for generating and confirming theory that emerges from close involvement and direct contact with the empirical world (Patton, 1990). Strauss and Corbin (1990) affirmed that grounded theory describes the data and makes connections between the data and conceptual representations thereof. The grounded theoretical framework generated from this study is supported by the four unexpected themes that emerged from the data. Unlike the expected themes that appeared consistent with AA-RITES program goals, the unexpected themes were not specified as direct linkages to program content areas or goals. The unexpected nature of these themes
remains in place, based upon their intrinsic value which is supported by the representative quotes of the respondents. Likewise, it is my contention that the following summary of grounded theory provides an affirmative response to the research questions of this study. Positive and strong connotations of self-esteem and ethnic identity certainly resonate throughout the Expected Themes findings, but they also appear quite visible in each thematic construct that constitutes the grounded theory.

Importance of Learning and Giving Back What You Have Learned and The Will to Strive for Your Best is the first unexpected thematic construct presented in the findings. Learning through formal education and acquiring common sense were emphatically supported by the respondents. They spoke of knowledge as liberating and something that no one can take from you. Incorporated in the acquisition of knowledge, according to some respondents, are lessons on common sense. These respondents voiced the importance of making positive choices and learning from one’s mistakes. In addition, passing on knowledge in the form of giving back to other African Americans was boldly voiced. Spending time with younger people, making sure one shares valuable lessons in life, and putting your money back into the African American community through deeds and services were critical points communicated by the respondents. African Americans, on the average, are well aware that a racially charged climate exists in this country and, as a result, believe they must do everything they possibly can to buffer this atmosphere.

Coupled with learning and giving back what you have learned is the will to strive for your best. The respondents stated in collective terms that one must keep improving and persevering against the odds. This message is connected to the cultural stance of
never dwelling on negativity. In the African American community, anxiety, frustration, insecurity, and self-doubt must not hold one back. Pressing forward and maintaining optimism are essential ingredients in the actualization of doing and achieving one’s best.

The second thematic construct, Family Solidarity and Cultural Interconnectedness, focuses on the importance of kinship and cultural bonds. The respondents’ voices that supported this thematic construct have all experienced familial separation and loss. Their comments, however, clearly accentuate an altruistic propensity to play active roles in maintaining familial ties as they mature. They spoke of being responsible, taking care of one’s children, paying bills, supporting friends, and helping other Black people. These attributes and tasks may or may not have existed in their families of origin, but a keen sense of determination to incorporate such characteristics in their personal lives exists today. The sense of collectivity with one’s culture reifies the family solidarity element.

The commonalities of African Americans extend beyond blood and legal ties. They include historical highs and lows as a race of people which, in turn, has facilitated a collective consciousness (Pinderhughes, 1989). In essence, family survival can be realized through group survival.

The thematic construct condemnation of violence and unproductive behavior, was overwhelmingly supported by the respondents’ comments. The respondents’ voices, as expressed through their individual realities, strongly spoke out against the wave of violence and repugnant behavior that has invaded many urban African American communities. A call for the Nguzo Saba principle of Umoja was made. In other words, more unity would likely lead to less violence. A sense of tremendous discomfort
permeated the voices of respondents as they spoke about Black on Black crime and the unproductive lives of drug dealers and users. The concern for the safety and longevity of loved ones and one's own life is a grave matter. Moreover, raising a new generation of children who are gullible to the false prestige associated with criminal activity would be a somber commentary on the many achievements of African and African American heroes and heroines. Essentially, giving in to violence and unproductive behavior would dramatically decrease the opportunities of many African American children to realize their true potential.

Knowing, feeling, and appreciating that there is something or someone beyond human existence that provides a sense of peace and forgiveness is the impetus, as communicated by the respondents, for the thematic construct, reverence to the Creator. Again, overwhelmingly the respondents' comments reflect varying degrees of conviction regarding a reverence to God. At a minimum, acknowledgment that there is a higher power is evidenced in their comments. Other comments reveal a deeper, more devout belief in the Creator. Seeking relief from a hostile and distrustful society, many African Americans turn their cares and worries over to God in an effort to facilitate divine intervention. From their frame of reference, the respondents articulated that coping with MEES and other burdensome aspects of life is made easier when one can go to God in prayer.

There has been debate as to the empirical meaningfulness of theoretical triangulation in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, Denzin (1978) advances the worthiness of theoretical triangulation, with specific reference to the
plausibility of using several different perspectives in the analysis of one data set. Glazer and Strauss (1967) stated that for existing theories verification is a vital task for the researcher. Thus, in the following paragraphs the above grounded theory summary will be examined as it relates to the Africentric theoretical perspective. This association seems fitting in light of Africentricity's role in the implementation of the AA-RITES program. Also, a review of existential philosophy and its relatedness to this study's grounded theory will be presented. Both theoretical frameworks possess enlightening viewpoints toward transferable understanding of the respondents' voices.

Discussion of The Africentric Theoretical Perspective and Grounded Theory

Attention was given to the Africentric theoretical perspective earlier in this dissertation. The information presented in this section will build upon what has previously been noted. Africentricity has been described as a cognitive map that reflects one's worldview (Rasheed & Johnson, 1995). It incorporates and promulgates values and principles that are central to people of African decent. Baldwin (1981) stated that the Africentric theory is a system of knowledge (philosophy, definitions, concepts, models, procedures, and practice) concerning the nature of the social universe from an African centered perspective. He affirmed this position by highlighting such supporting principles of an Africentric framework as groupness (survival of the group), sameness or commonality, cooperation, collective responsibility, and interdependence. These principles parallel Ho's (1987) description of African American cultural themes. These
themes have a historical connection that some say can be traced to Africa (Ho, 1987).

They include the following:

1. Strong kinship bonds among a variety of households;
2. Strong work, education, and achievement orientation;
3. High level of flexibility in family roles;
4. Strong commitment to religious values and church participation.

Along with these cultural themes, the
5. Humanistic orientation and
6. Endurance of suffering are added to form a broader base for understanding and appreciating the patterns and functioning of Black families. (p. 180)

Before the word Africentricity was in vogue, African Americans were already practicing the tenets of this perspective as evidenced by the above referenced cultural themes.

The grounded theory of this study tells us that the respondents sensed the relevancy of interconnectedness as espoused by Africentricity. Their understanding of this tenet was expressed in the thematic construct, Importance of Learning and Giving Back What You Have Learned and the Will to Strive for Your Best. Likewise, there is a congruent relationship between interdependence and the thematic construct, Family Solidarity and Cultural Interconnectedness. Knowing that one cannot exist emotionally or socially independent of others and believing that positive coexistence can be achieved through respect and a healthy sense of interdependence are mainstays in the African American culture. What some may call familial enmeshment in the African American culture, Africentrists would call embracing groupness. The respondents’ voices suggested that they concur with the Africentrists on this matter, and, more importantly, that they believe in its cultural salience.

Operating from a different conceptual framework, the European American
worldview has connotations of linearity, individualism, and a survival of the fittest orientation (Swigonski, 1996; Harvey, 1985). These aims are important in their own right and serve a revered purpose for many people. In contrast, an African worldview stresses collectivity and harmony. Hence, giving back to the community and striving to ensure that everyone is cared for in some manner is just and right from an Africentric point of view. This sentiment is reminiscent of the informal adoptions of children that once occurred, and, in some instances, continue to occur, in the African American culture. The village, not just biological parents, was responsible for raising all children. Nobles (1985) parallels the importance of the individual, family, and collectivity to cultural identity formation as it relates to an African centered perspective. He stated that the individual consciousness is bonded with the family, and the family constitutes a person’s reference point. According to Nobles (1985), this notion is analogous to the traditional African view of “self” that places great significance on being connected to the existence and well-being of others.

For the respondents of this study, all of whom are in some form of out-of-home care, the family per se, as a reference point, is not as visible as it would be for someone living with his or her biological relatives. Fictive relatives or kin can fill this gap. They can be viewed as a supplement or a substitute network of concerned individuals who will provide care and refuge much like that represented in established familial bonds. Fictive kinship is a viable self-help mechanism in the African American culture that encapsulates individuals in a protective net of warmth and security. Hall and King (1982) referred to fictive kin as non-blood relatives who take in individuals, young or old, and care for them as if they were their own. Taking in individuals could mean, as in the case of informal
adoptions, permitting a person to live in your home if they need shelter or providing some other method of assistance during hard times. Beneficiaries of this act of kindness would be expected to do their share in terms of exerting responsibilities for the good of the household. This expectation is always age appropriate, given the specific duty or duties to be filled. These duties might include assisting with child care, paying money toward household bills, or performing household chores. However, the predominant benefit of fictive kinship is the sense of family and generation of love that usually develops and emanates from all parties involved. AA-RITES leaders and elders appear to embody the attributes of fictive kin as they persevere in their relationships with the participants of the program. This is a positive link in light of the participants’ familial status. Also, if Nobles’ (1985) premise is true regarding the conglomeration of individual, family, collectivity, and identity formation, the fictive kin contingent, represented by the AA-RITES program hierarchy, is a welcomed intervention for working with adolescent youth in out-of-home care.

It would appear that the thematic constructs of Condemnation of Violence and Unproductive Behavior and Reverence to the Creator are parallel to the Africentric perspective’s view of oneness in mind, body, and spirit. Again, the emphasis is on the collective as opposed to an individual identity (Swigonski, 1996). Because Africentricity is holistic, one cannot fully enjoy the fruits of this state of being if violence and turmoil abound. Such ills are disharmonious to the general good of nature and the universe. Equally critical is having peace with one’s spirituality. The thematic construct, Reverence to the Creator, permits an openness that many respondents use to access their spiritual
side. They find refuge in their belief in a higher power who can help guide and protect them. Activation of their belief may be a challenge for some, but, nonetheless, they view their adoration of the Creator as significant. It appears to be a starting point for the respondents in their quest to live a more honest, caring, and trustworthy life.

Discussion of Existential Philosophy and Grounded Theory

The discovery of meaning and meaning potentials in living serve as primary tenets of an existential conceptual framework (Frankl, 1984). Frankl (1984) who survived a Nazi death camp ordeal, asserted the notion that there is a human capacity to transcend suffering, trauma, and terror through finding and exploring meanings associated with one's given experience. More specifically, "meaning does exist under all circumstances and the will to discover meaning is the most basic reason for human behavior" (Lantz, 1993, p.21).

According to Frankl (1984), there is an inner emptiness when people are unable to discover meaning in their lives. As a result, these individuals experience an existential or meaning vacuum (Frankl, 1965, 1984, 1988) and need help in addressing their frustrations and other adverse reactions to the void they feel within themselves. Identification of the underlying problem of meaninglessness facilitates the process of meaning discovery (Frankl, 1984). Therapeutically, the goal is to help individuals reduce their meaning vacuum through the development of meaning potential awareness and actualization (Frankl, 1969, Lantz, 1974, 1993, Lantz & Alford, 1995). Repression of meaning when some form of trauma or terror has occurred is very common. This is a reaction to the
stress of the trauma situation. Though repression can prevent individuals from feeling the pain of trauma, it can also deter individuals from experiencing meaning potentials (Lantz, 1993). Helping individuals recall and work through the trauma that has negatively affected their lives can also be a method to assist them in gaining or regaining meaning potentials (Lantz, 1993).

The purview of meaning discovery is broad and the grounded theory of this study shows us that in the midst of societal and familial challenges, there are certain values and beliefs that bring meaning to the lives of individuals who share the same or similar cultural history. The richness of a shared cultural history and belongingness is evidenced by each thematic construct of the grounded theory. Frankl (1984) stated that individuals can discover meaning through engaging in one's work, interpersonal connectedness via nature or culture, and one's attitude toward human suffering. The cultural connectedness for the respondents of this study appears to be a vibrant strength. Its inherent interpersonal value is reason to explore how it may be used to help these respondents or people who have similar backgrounds and circumstances achieve meaning potential. In this instance, individual meaning potential discovery may not be the answer. The collectivity and sense of groupness from a cultural perspective will need to be examined in terms of meaning discovery for populations that resemble the sample population of this study. According to Krill (1979), "the existentialist feels a bond with others and is responsive to their needs and to friendship" (p. 150). From an existential perspective, a sense of groupness is analogous to the affirming tone of camaraderie. In other words, finding meaning for
African Americans as a community of people may be the individual desire of one as well as others.

The inescapable human suffering of MEES and the overt racism that the respondents of this study have faced on a regular basis are alarming and sad. According to Frankl (1984), when a person finds meaning in personal suffering, it no longer should be called suffering. The voices of the respondents spoke openly and vividly about the discomfort of living in a racist society as well as watching their African American brothers and sisters resort to violence against each other. Despite these realities, their suffering seemed lighter because of the hope and meaningfulness they expressed through Family Solidarity and Cultural Interconnectedness in which many pledged to care for one another.

The same as above occurred in the findings that supported the thematic construct Importance of Learning and Giving Back What You Have Learned and the Will to Strive for Your Best. There was also a meaning discovery by some respondents of wanting to be a better father to their offspring than their own natural fathers were to them. Moreover, the magnitude of the thematic construct, Reverence to the Creator, as a source of meaning discovery should not be underestimated. The findings clearly indicate that this particular meaning awareness provides a solace that commands respect and honor. Working with these thematic constructs from an existential perspective requires the treating party to think in global terms. The cultural universality of this study’s grounded theory has great merit. It provides the existentialist with an array of meaning potentials that may be applicable to matching situations.
Limitations of the Study

The naturalistic researcher understands that the world is not perfect. This can certainly be said for all research endeavors. There are a few limitations to this study that warrant acknowledgment and discussion. To begin, the respondents in this study did not enter the AA-RITES program at the same time, nor did they share equal amounts of time in the program. Though the findings added credence to the qualitative criterion of thick description, one is unsure whether more or less information would have been shared by interviewing young men who together had spent an equal amount of time in the program. If such a configuration could have been achieved, the findings might have provided more details of what made the AA-RITES experience more impactful for some as opposed to others who were in the same cohort.

The degree to which a concentration on cultural issues may influence factors related to the AA-RITES participants' transition from out-of-home care into independent adulthood cannot be gleaned from this study (Gavazzi et al., 1996). These respondents were only interviewed during one point in their maturation. Though there were verbal indications via the findings that they plan to incorporate AA-RITES teachings into their daily lives, the benefits of knowing how these respondents might fare and apply their knowledge as they become adults has yet to be researched.

Limitations of research studies are sometimes debatable, given the vantage point of the researcher versus the reviewer. At other times they may simply be a matter of research design. In any case, the a priori construction of open-ended probe questions might be
viewed as a limitation, given the inductive nature of this study. Probe questions in qualitative research are permitted. The probe questions in this study did not appear to interrupt the respondents’ freedom to talk. The findings seem to indicate that the respondents spoke openly about the subject matter and often veered in related and unrelated directions. Nevertheless, constructive criticism in the use of probe questions is good. It encourages the researcher to think twice about the intricacies of orchestrating and planning qualitative interviews.

**Implications for Practice**

The call for cultural competence in social work practice is still an issue which needs attention. Greene et al. (1996); Harper and Lantz (1996); Devore and London (1994); McAdoo (1994); Billingsley (1992); Lum (1992); White and Parham (1990); Martin and Martin (1985); McGoldrick (1982); and Pollard (1978), among others, believe that ethnic sensitive practice is a necessity if one is to promote and employ optimal service delivery to his or her clients. This postulate assumes greater meaning as our society approaches the 21st century. By the year 2000, it is expected that more than one third of the United States’ population will consist of various ethnic groups (Sue et al., 1992; Sue, 1991). The findings from this study suggest that the cultural groundedness of the AA-RITES philosophy has had a pragmatic impact on the participants’ worldview (Gavazzi, et al., 1996). For the most part, it has heightened their understanding of who they are as people of African decent. Whether one refers to it as cultural competence or ethnic
sensitivity, the underlying message is that there is much utility in utilizing ethnic identity as a primary agent of social work intervention.

McMahon (1990) said that cultural sensitivity can be advanced through knowledge of the fundamental value orientation of the specified ethnic group. In fact, the empowerment tradition in social work is made more complete when practitioners and paraprofessionals can help clients feel positively connected to their ethnic identity (Greene et al., 1996). As evidenced by this study of an AA-RITES program, children who have experienced social, political, and economic disenfranchisement benefit from initiatives that promote a healthy sense of self and culture. Such initiatives provide treatment opportunities that are rich with possibilities of culturally indigenous redirection. When intervention is guided by an appreciation of the client’s cultural roots, there is a greater chance that curative outcomes will occur. The respondents of this study were clear about the life choices they value. Social work practitioners must capitalize on these values to help the respondents and others like them launch healthy beginnings toward adult self- and familial sufficiency. In addition, social work practitioners who work directly with children at risk for foster care or children who are already in some form of out-of-home placement can focus on cultural issues to elevate a child’s self-esteem as well as lessen the stress associated with separation and loss.

The AA-RITES program examined in this study used a full range of supports available from the African American community. Social work practitioners could increase positive turnarounds for their African American clients if they too accessed community support networks. For instance, the elders of the community often go underutilized in
terms of life’s lessons they could offer to clients in need of enlightenment. Alex Haley (1990) once said that when an old person dies, it is as if a library has burned down because of the wealth of information that the individual takes with him or her. Accessing the oral history of elder men and women in the African American community could quite possibly lead to greater cultural awareness. This, in turn, could lead to greater appreciation of cultural strengths for clients who might otherwise experience a void in this area. It might also facilitate mentoring opportunities whereby elders would serve as role models to clients. Practitioners who expand their scope of thinking to include elder mentoring and other types of community resource procurement are surely answering the call for cultural competence in social work practice.

There are many RITES programs throughout the country. This study, as indicated, is based on data from the Ohio Rites of Passage initiative for adolescent African American males, under the auspices of the Ohio Department of Human Services, Office of Child Care and Family Services. However, similar RITES programs with regard to program goals and philosophy can be found in such locations as Baltimore, Maryland (Baltimore, Rites of Passage Kollective); Oakland, California (HAWK—High Achievement, Wisdom and Knowledge—Federation); and Dallas, Texas (West Dallas Community Centers, Inc.), to name a few (Fleming, 1996). Again, teaching children and teenagers how to become strong responsible adults is the thrust of these programs.

Some RITES initiatives are strictly for boys, while others are strictly for girls. The age range for participants varies as well. Warfield-Coppock (1992b) noted that there are specialized Rites of Passage programs that promote a particular concentration with
regard to their programmatic orientations. For instance, community-based RITES programs are typically sponsored by grassroots organizations and/or agencies. Agency- or organizationally based RITES programs often have a designated target population they serve. Slightly different, school-based RITES programs are sponsored in the school setting. Adult leaders of these programs are either teachers and/or counselors or outside community members. According to Warfield-Coppock (1992b), “most public school rites of passage programs for African American youth target 7th through 10th graders and are provided as a cultural activities supplement to the public school curriculum” (p. 475).

Other types of RITES programs include church-based initiatives which incorporate the churches’ religious teachings as part of the RITES process and family-based initiatives that provide a socializing experience for their children in an effort to foster collective growth, development, and empowerment, Warfield-Coppock (1992b) said that such family-based programs may be done on a one-time basis or they may mirror some community-based programs complete with ceremonial rituals.

Attention to issues of sexuality, sexual activity, teen pregnancy, violence, criminal activity, and drug abuse may or may not be incorporated in the various RITES initiatives noted in the preceding paragraph. Often, coverage of these issues varies depending upon the amount of time one has to orchestrate and execute a RITES program. Nevertheless, from the findings in this study, such concerns appear to weigh heavily on the minds of the respondents. Given this reality, it would behoove social work practitioners who are involved in RITES programming to further examine the need for more acute specialization of Rites of Passage initiatives. This may involve concentrating most of the program’s
effort on a particular issue (e.g., violence, substance abuse). Developing a RITES program for African American youth around a particular issue that has adversely affected this population and intertwining Africentric principles so that the emphasis remains culturally appropriate would most likely yield favorable results. Practitioners who assist clients in making healthy life choices must do so with an understanding of and an appreciation for their culture and familial value base.

One should not assume that African American practitioners by virtue of their race need little or no training in ethnic sensitivity or the Africentric perspective. Shared cultural traditions, mores, and customs do not always constitute homogeneity within a race of people. From a practice standpoint, there are often socioeconomic extremes between practitioners and clients that often contribute to value differences. These value differences are largely realized in the form of family obligations, discipline styles, education, and material possessions. Therefore, social work practitioners desiring to institute an AA-RITES program for their agency’s clientele should obtain the proper training and certification as mandated by the local Africentric Rites of Passage Collective in their respective areas. Receiving the appropriate training for this endeavor will likely enhance one’s realness when relating to RITES participants. This becomes more keenly important if practitioners are employed by traditional social service agencies. These agencies are sometimes perceived by clients as “white establishments” (Boyd-Franklin, 1989, p.105). From a consumer’s perspective, this connotation means care should be exercised when interfacing with agency personnel, because the element of trustworthiness may not be present.
Given the level of suspicion that clients experience regarding traditional social service agencies, African American agency personnel should examine their personal views about self-esteem, ethnic identity, and other aspects of the RITES philosophy. Once this is done, a determination should be made about whether there is compatibility between the program's philosophy and their personal beliefs. In fact, this directive aligns itself nicely with the social work competencies of genuineness and empathy. When people are genuine, they know themselves and are unafraid of what they see in themselves (Compton & Galway, 1994). In addition, genuineness is being clear about the process of entering any relationship with another individual. Honesty, openness, concern for others, sincerity, and realness are key ingredients in conceptualizing and operationalizing the meaning of genuineness. Like genuineness, empathy requires first the ability and willingness to examine one's own ethnicity, attitudes, and actions as they relate to others. This formula is apropos for the process of building ethnic and cultural sensitivity (Devore & London, 1994). Once self-introspection has been achieved and the results are compatible with a healthy cross-cultural nexus, empathic initiations and responses should ensue (Alford, 1996). Being empathic figuratively entails stepping into the shoes of another (Hepworth & Larsen, 1993; Luce & Smith, 1987). The art of executing empathy is the capacity to enter the feelings and experiences of another without losing one's self in the process (Compton & Galway, 1994).

Boyd-Franklin (1989) warned African American human service professionals to not overidentify with their African American clients. If this occurs, the treatment professional risks losing therapeutic objectivity. Overidentification is analogous to "going
native,” a qualitative research canon that reminds the investigator that he or she must guard against overrapport with the researched (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 307). In the AA-RITES program, there is informal and formal mentoring. The lines of demarcation with regard to overidentification may not be easily seen, so it would behoove the adult working with a RITES participant to assess the extent of his or her involvement and, if needed, seek consultation from the elders of the program. In short, there are advantages to being of the same race as one’s clients, but it is certainly not a panacea to the treatment process. Self-reflection and the appropriate training are essentials for combating agency-client distance.

From a cross-cultural standpoint, support for AA-RITES programming is critical in an effort to educate the masses about its positive impact on African American youth. If the social work profession is to operate from a strengths-based orientation, cross-cultural support should be commonplace. Broadly speaking, patience should be employed when trying to understand different worldviews. It should also be exercised when enlightening individuals within one’s own cultural group about the mores and customs of others. Essentially, cultural sharing should not be solely stipulated for people within a specified group. Open sharing among different cultural groups is needed as long as assertions and descriptions affirm rather than condemn (Alford, 1996). This viewpoint is very significant when promoting the viability of RITES programming and exploring funding sources. For the most part, all social service initiatives require some form of funding. More acutely, funding for culturally specific programs has historically been limited because of the concentrated nature of the population being served. Sometimes program evaluations that
highlight the efficacy of such initiatives and are replete with supportive quantitative and/or qualitative data are not enough to favorably influence funding sources. However, from a cross-cultural posture, persistent advocacy for AA-RITES programs manifested through word of mouth at the mezzo and macro human service levels can lead to informed understanding and continued financial support. Individuals who do not have the same cultural background as others but are willing to support and uphold the rights of all peoples should be considered champions of cross-cultural advocacy. In many instances, they have more influence than the people or program they are promoting, because they are often speaking to an audience of peers and cultural counterparts.

In keeping with cross-cultural implications associated with AA-RITES programming, individuals who do not fully understand the cultural value of a RITES initiative should not hesitate to ask questions of the program’s leaders and trainers. Direct communication and flexibility are cross-cultural strengths that too often go unnoticed and underutilized. Moreover, one should also access the strength of flexibility when engaging in rituals or activities of other cultural groups. The AA-RITES program is no different from other culturally specific initiatives in facilitating functions that add meaning to the program’s thrust which, in turn, satisfies the underlying cultural needs of the population being served. Simpson (1990) affirmed that successful social work intervention occurs when practitioners of all racial and ethnic backgrounds adopt an ethnoconscious approach. Such an approach requires the practitioner working with clients from diverse populations to consider the impact of culture, historical experiences, the culture-coping bond between family members, the client’s unique family identity, and self-culture analysis (Simpson,
Each of these tenets holds inherent significance in the quest by practitioners to provide optimal service. However, the latter tenet of self-culture analysis necessitates an acute demand on the part of the practitioner to personally examine the influence of culture in his or her own life. Understanding and being at peace with one’s position on this matter are crucial states of being for effective implementation of ethnic sensitive practice. Such an understanding can also lead to revelations of how coping styles and culture-coping bonds formulate and are maintained for various ethnic groups (Simpson, 1990). Cross-cultural flexibility entails an appreciation for an ethnoconscious approach and its far reaching curative capability.

Implications for Future Research

There are several implications for future research associated with AA-RITES programming. The sample population in this study was adolescent African American males placed in out-of-home care. Charting how these respondents applied their acquired RITES knowledge over an extended period of time could prove enlightening. In keeping with this query, future research might examine how independent living skills are impacted by culturally specific programming. A longitudinal and/or experimental design would be useful in responding to these research interests (Gavazzi et al., 1996). Likewise, quantitative measures might prove useful in building upon the existing qualitative data, particularly in relation to self-esteem and the impact of the foster family’s characteristics on the AA-RITES participant (Gavazzi et al., 1996). The findings from this qualitative study appear to show a definite relationship between the philosophy of RITES and the
perspectives of the participants, but this information can only be viewed as transferable information. Transferable knowledge in clinical social work practice is valuable and should be used appropriately in treatment planning and assessment. Such knowledge is relevant when the life experiences of the researched match or are similar to those of the clients being served.

Quantitative analysis would be expected to yield generalizable results. Major tasks to be accomplished in using quantitative measures are to find scales that would be feasible for use with ethnic populations. Such scales exist (e.g., Helms & Parham, 1985; Landrine & Klonoff, 1994) but advisement from practitioners working in the field regarding the use of these scales and others may be needed when assessing their applicability to the population being served. This practice takes on greater significance if one chooses to use scales that have been typically designed with people of European decent in mind. The use of such scales for African Americans may or may not be worthy. Andersen (1993) reminded us that sociological studies of race have often been distorted by being centered on the perspectives and experiences of dominant group members. This caveat holds true across academic disciplines and fields of study. Relying upon the expertise of African American academicians and practitioners who have studied and worked with the proposed research populations is prudent as one methodically composes his or her research endeavor. Such outward expressions of collegiality can facilitate positive coexistence from culturally diverse professionals.

Research efforts that are geared toward capturing the workability of AA-RITES programs as a model for other ethnic groups could prove useful. This process might be
tedious, because there are a variety of program types. Many RITES programs are based on the needs of individual communities (Gavazzi et al., 1996; Warfield-Coppock, 1992). Nevertheless, the possibility of AA-RITES program standardization has great promise. Ethnic groups that have been accustomed to linear treatment services would experience a holistic difference by adopting an intervention model adapted from AA-RITES programs. Utilizing such program elements as ethnic history education, self-esteem enhancement, life skills acquisition, and the use of rituals and ceremonies contributes to the holistic nature of AA-RITES programs.

There is certainly reason to explore standardization of AA-RITES programs, but their individual and collective uniqueness should not be ignored or diminished. An exploration of this kind could provide great opportunities for increased collaboration between practitioners and researchers. Unfortunately, in many social work circles, the partnership between practitioners and researchers is strained. The university system of higher education has evolved into a tradition of somewhat limited relations with the problems of everyday life in the external world (Powers et al., 1985). Also, unscrupulous reporting of research findings and a lack of readership by practitioners related to social work literature are monumental factors that have contributed to the distance between scholarship and practice. Program replication, like that of the AA-RITES program, facilitated through sound research design and credible execution could begin the process of bridging this gap. Practitioners might learn from their research oriented colleagues scientific methods and techniques used for systematic and orderly
problem resolution (Powers et al., 1985). In contrast, researchers would learn from practitioners the intricacies of grassroots social work practice.

The findings of this study presented the voices of the AA-RITES participants in response to the probe questions. An extension of this study would include interviewing the leaders and trainers of the Ohio AA-RITES program which could provide additional support for existing themes. Denzin (1978) referred to this augmentation of the research design as data triangulation. It would also highlight the voices of the individuals providing the treatment via RITES as opposed to hearing only from the ones receiving it. The researcher might also discover what program components are more widely used than others and how implementation of these components differ, if any, at the various Ohio sites. Methodological and investigator triangulations could also be employed to expand upon the existing research. Data gathering methods of interviews and observations used in this study generated plausible findings, considering the demographics of the sample population. Other research methods such as participant observation by a RITES leader or trainer or the review of documents inclusive of training materials, photographs of RITES field trips all serve to better educate one about the realities of the participants as they experienced the AA-RITES program. The triangulation of a second research investigator could effect some qualitative challenges if this person were to enter the study after the original investigator had already established rapport. Such an entrance is not impossible if the researcher is committed to working diligently toward building sound naturalistic relationships with the researched. Equally important would be the findings of the second
investigator compared to those of the original investigator. Similar or identical findings would strengthen the efficacy of the study.

Finally, research is needed on out-of-home care populations who utilize culturally specific programming compared with samples of in-home care adolescents (Gavazzi et al., 1996). Such a research effort from a program evaluation standpoint is portentous as it may provide new information on how to better serve adolescents in need of social work intervention (Gavazzi et al., 1996). On the whole, further qualitative inquiry can only expand our existing knowledge base of the sample population. The investigator(s) can build upon this study’s probe questions or facilitate more open sharing among a variety of topics. Most of the respondents appeared excited about the opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings. They wanted their voices to be heard. The emancipatory tenor of naturalistic research should never be underestimated.
APPENDIX A

PROBE QUESTIONS
Probe Questions

1. What does it mean to you to be a wise man?

2. What does success mean to you?

3. What does power mean to you?

4. How can African American males contribute to their community/neighborhood?

5. You are a teenager now, what would be different about you as a man?

6. What are the areas you like to see improved in yourself? Why is it important to know?

7. Why is it important to know your roots?

8a. What is important about being an individual?

8b. What is important about being a part of a group?

9. What makes you proud about African American people?

10. What would you like to see improved among African American people?

11. What does it mean to be an African American man?

12a. What are some of the common beliefs, attributes, characteristics of Africans wherever they are?

12b. Do you believe that there are African people on every continent throughout the World?

13. As a young African American male pre-warrior, give me three things that are important about relations with a female pre-warrior?
14. Explain Nguzo Saba (unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith)? What does each principle mean to you?

15. Is it important to have a relationship with the Creator? If so, why?
APPENDIX B

ORAL SOLICITATION TO ADOLESCENTS IN OUT-OF-HOME CARE
Oral Solicitation to Adolescents in Out-of-Home Care

The people who work with you as part of your involvement in the Independent Living Program (NOTE: for appropriate adolescents we would indicate the link to the RITES program) are working on a research project with some professionals at The Ohio State University, including Dr. Stephen Gavazzi, Dr. Patrick McKenry, and Mr. Keith Alford. These people are interested in finding out more about how teenagers are doing in the Independent Living Program (Note: As warranted we would identify the evaluation of the RITES program).

We are asking that you consider taking part in this study. Your participation is completely voluntary, which means that it is completely up to you to decide whether you want to be involved in this study. Before you make a final decision about whether to participate, you should know about the study.

First, you should know that we will be asking you about your experiences in the Independent Living Program (Note: as warranted we would identify our interest in discussing experiences regarding the RITES program). You will also be asked some questions about your foster family and the family that you originally came from before you were put into foster care. Although we think that all of the questions we want to ask are important, you are free to refuse to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable. Also, some selected information will be taken from your file by caseworkers and given to the researchers.

Your participation in this study is completely confidential. That means that no information that we obtain from you will be kept in your permanent file, nor will anyone except OSU researchers see your information. We will keep all information in locked files at our office at OSU. The findings from the study will be presented as a combination of everyone’s answers to the questions we ask. You will be assigned a code number in order to keep your name confidential. It will take about two and three hours to complete the first part of the questions in this study. A break is scheduled halfway through your participation, and other breaks are allowed to be taken as often as is necessary. If you take part, you will be given a small reward as part of your involvement. The reward will be something from The Ohio State University.

If you choose to take part in the first part of this study, we will be contacting you again about six months from now and about one year from now. You do not need to make your decision about participation at these other times now. We are simply letting you know that we would like to have some time to talk to you in the future as well. We would like to do this in order to see what has changed and what is different in your life after this amount of time goes by.
We hope that you will choose to help us in this study. If you choose to participate, you will be making a big contribution to our beginning to understand more about how African American teenagers are doing in the Independent Living Program (and as warranted identifying the RITES program as well).

Adolescents are then asked to go through the consent form point by point before signing the document.
APPENDIX C

ADOLESCENT’S CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION FORM
I consent to my participating in a research project entitled:

THE RELATIONSHIPS AMONG RACIAL EXPERIENCES, PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT ISSUES, AND PROBLEMS AND COMPETENCIES IN A SAMPLE OF URBAN, AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN SUBSTITUTE CARE: A COLLABORATION BETWEEN OSU RESEARCHERS AND THE OHIO DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

Dr. Stephen M. Gavazzi, Dr. Patrick C. McKenry, (Principal Investigators), Mr. Keith Alford (Graduate Research Associate), or my guardians have explained the purpose of the study, the procedures to be followed, and the expected duration of my participation.

I acknowledge that I have had the opportunity to obtain additional information regarding the study and that any questions I have raised have been answered to my full satisfaction. Further, I understand that I am free to withdraw consent at any time and to discontinue participation in the study without prejudice to me. Also, I understand that portions of the study will be audiotaped, and procedures for handling this material in a confidential manner have been described to me.

I understand that the Principal Investigator is held to all local, state, and federal laws concerning the reporting of information regarding situations where an individual would be a threat to themselves or to someone else. This includes the reporting of neglect and abuse where warranted.

Finally, I acknowledge that I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy has been given to me.

Date: __________________________  Signed __________________________

Signed __________________________
(Principal Investigator or Authorized Representative)

Adapted from HS-027 (Revised 3/87) — To be used only in connection with social and behavioral research
APPENDIX D

WRITTEN SOLICITATION TO ODHS INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAM PERSONNEL
Written Solicitation to ODHS Independent Living Program Personnel

In cooperation with researchers from The Ohio State University’s Department of Family Relations and Human Development -- including Dr. Stephen Gavazzi, Dr. Patrick McKenry, and Mr. Keith Alford -- the Ohio Department of Youth Services is conducting a study of African American male adolescents in substitute care. The study has two goals: (a) to evaluate the African American Rites of Passage program (AA-RITES); and (b) to generate basic data concerning the predictors of African American male adolescents’ successful transition from substitute care and into self-sufficient adulthood status.

We are asking for your help in identifying potential participants for this study. Participants must be adolescent African American males who reside in out-of-home care. Participation in this study is voluntary. Participants will be made aware of the fact that they are able to refuse to answer any question that makes them feel uncomfortable, and that they may withdraw from their involvement in the study at any time, with no negative consequences. Participation in this study is confidential. No information from this study will be entered into ODHS files. Some selected information will be assigned a code number, and no record of participant names will be kept beyond the completion of data collection.

Adolescents who choose to participate will be asked to report on various experiences in substitute care (including the AA-RITES program if appropriate), certain characteristics regarding the nature of their relationships with both foster parents and their family of origin, as will as reporting on their own adjustment and well-being. Participants will be given a small OSU memento as an incentive and reward for their involvement.

Initially, participants will fill out questionnaires (or will be helped to fill them out if there is any sort of reading difficulty present) and will be interviewed for approximately two to three hours. A break is scheduled at the halfway point of their participation, and other breaks are allowed to be taken as often as is necessary.

Your help in identifying participants is critical to the success of this research project. This study will generate some important data concerning the impact of the RITES program on its participants and concurrently provide some indication of how this program may be improved. Also, the study will examine the usefulness of gathering information about a number of factors thought to be related to adjustment and well-being of adolescents in a substitute care environment.
APPENDIX E

GUARDIAN CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION FORM
Guardian Consent For Participation Form  
Protocol #: 93B0243

As an authorized representative of The Ohio Department of Human Services, I consent to ___________________________ participating in a research project titled:

THE RELATIONSHIPS AMONG RACIAL EXPERIENCES, PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT ISSUES, AND PROBLEMS AND COMPETENCIES IN A SAMPLE OF URBAN, AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN SUBSTITUTE CARE: A COLLABORATION BETWEEN OSU RESEARCHERS AND THE OHIO DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

I understand that this project involves collaborative work with Dr. Stephen M. Gavazzi, Dr. Patrick C. McKenry, (Principal Investigators), and Mr. Keith Alford (Graduate Research Associate), any or all of whom will have contact with the participants of this study. Further, I understand the purpose of the study, the procedures to be followed, and the expected duration of the adolescent’s participation.

I acknowledge that the adolescent has had the opportunity to obtain additional information regarding the study and that any questions that have been raised about the study have been answered fully. Further, I understand that the adolescent is free to withdraw consent at any time and to discontinue participation in the study without prejudice. Also, I understand that portions of the study will be audiotaped, and procedures for handling this material in a confidential manner have been described to me.

I understand that the Principal Investigator is held to all local, state and federal laws concerning the reporting of information regarding situations in which an individual would be a threat to themselves or to someone else. This includes the reporting of neglect and abuse where warranted.

Finally, I acknowledge that I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy has been given to me.

Date: ___________________________  Signed ___________________________

Signed ___________________________
(Principal Investigator or Authorized Representative)
LIST OF REFERENCES


Kretzmann, J., & McKnight, J. (1993). Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets. Chicago: ACTA.


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