A RETROSPECTIVE EXPLORATION OF THE FACTORS AFFECTING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AMONG A SAMPLE OF OLDER AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

by

JACQUELINE BURSE

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate my dissertation to the six participants who had the courage to tell their stories. I would also like to dedicate this to those women who wanted to share but were not ready and to those stories untold. May all these women find the strength.

Abstract

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Jacqueline Burse

The University of Texas at Arlington, 2017

Supervising Professor: Noelle Fields and Debra Woody

African American women experience domestic violence at a rate that is 35% higher than the domestic violence rate of White women. Moreover, African American women encompass 8% of the U.S. population but account for 22% of domestic violence-related homicide victims. African American women are at greater risk for facing economic difficulties, homelessness, unemployment, and health and educational disparities due to domestic violence. However, little attention has been given to the lived experiences of older women who are domestic violence survivors. No extant literature related to the experiences of African American survivors of domestic violence from a retrospective lens was available, suggesting the need for conducting this study. Therefore, this study explored factors affecting survivorship among African American women aged 55 years and older who experienced domestic violence in the past. Six semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with older African American women to understand their lived experiences as survivors of domestic violence. Theories of phenomenology and hermeneutics provided the theoretical framework for this study. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework guided the research design and data

analysis process. Findings resulted in three major themes related to the lived experiences of study participants including *understanding the past, acknowledging the journey, and reclaiming and rebuilding life*. Study findings also suggest several factors related to domestic violence survivorship, including *social support, church, resources,* and *education*. Overall, the findings pointed toward the need for generating more culturally-sensitive and culturally-tailored programs and services to address domestic violence in the African American community. Additionally, services are needed that include faith-based education, training, and prevention programs to enable churches and social workers to address the unique cultural needs of African American women who have endured domestic violence.

KEYWORDS: *African American, older women, domestic violence, faith*

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Chapter 1

Introduction to the Study

Domestic violence remains one of the most serious social issues with direct and indirect impacts on the individual, their families, and the communities in which they reside as well as has long-term consequences to society (Breiding, Basile, Smith, Black, & Mahendra, 2015). Domestic violence is considered a serious public health issue that affects all ages, races, ethnicities, religions, political affiliations, sexual orientations, mental or physical conditions, communities, families, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Popescu & Drumm, 2009; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Walters, Chen, & Breiding, 2013). Domestic violence affects more than 25 million women nationally (Black et al., 2011; Breiding et al., 2015). In national studies of domestic violence, 20% to 64% of women of all ages have reported some form of psychological, sexual, or physical assault, abuse, or stalking since the age of 18 (Bent-Goodley, 2013; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Walters et al., 2013). Research suggests an intersection between race and domestic violence (Koverola & Panchanadeswaran, 2004). Research further suggests that African American women are victims of abuse at higher rates than women of any other race (Black et al., 2011; Cho, 2011; Lucea et al., 2013; Sabri et al., 2013). Chapter 1 introduces the problem, prevalence, causes, and consequences of domestic violence, defines important terms, provides the rationale for the study, and includes a discussion of the importance and significance of the study to social work.

Prevalence and Consequences of Domestic Violence

In the United States, approximately 20 people per minute experience physical violence such as hitting, slapping, shoving, and pushing because of being in a domestic violence relationship (Black et al., 2011). Women are more likely to be the victims of domestic violence

than men (Black et al., 2011; Breiding et al., 2015). Research suggests that factors leading to violence against women include race, low self-esteem, class, religion, jealousy, stress, alcohol or other substance abuse, and early childhood experiences of violence or trauma (Fox, 2002; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Young adult women display the greatest occurrence of domestic violence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011; Fox & Zawitz, 2010). Approximately 7.8 million women have been sexually assaulted by an intimate partner, such as a boyfriend or spouse, at some point in their lives (Walters et al., 2013). Studies suggest that males perpetrate 95% of domestic violence incidents against women (Bent-Goodley, 2013; Breiding, Chen, & Black, 2014).

Domestic violence may have long-term effects on survivors (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Walters et al., 2013). For example, victims of domestic violence have reported a range of severe and persistent damaging emotional and somatic health problems (Breiding, Chen, & Black, 2013; Fox & Zawitz, 2010). In addition to impacting victims, the effects of domestic violence are extremely costly to society. The estimated costs related to domestic violence exceeds over $5.8 billion per year due to victims seeking mental health services and suffering from related physical injuries (Gerberding, Binder, Hammond, & Arias, 2003; Ramos et al., 2004). An estimated 37% of domestic violence survivors visit the emergency room due to sustaining injuries from physical violence (Lipskey & Caetano, 2007; Rand, 1997). In addition to the financial impact, approximately 25% to 50% of survivors have reported a loss of employment due to domestic violence (Bond, Thompson, Galinsky, & Prottas, 2002; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1998). Furthermore, approximately 50% of homeless women reported their circumstances occurred because of domestic violence (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2013).

Historically, domestic violence has been viewed as a private matter that is handled within the family unit. Early research suggested that cultural traditions of male superiority and the accepted expression of dominance against women may cause domestic violence (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). However, developments in public policy, social awareness of the issue, changes in the criminal justice system, and education/training have contributed to changes in social norms related domestic violence at both the individual and societal level. Despite changing social norms, survivors of domestic violence continue to endure challenges to their personal care and safety as well as for their children.

Domestic Violence and African American Women

Tjaden and Theonnes (2000) indicated that African American women experience domestic violence at a rate that is 35% higher than the domestic violence rate of White women. Moreover, African American women encompass 8% of the U.S. population but account for 22% of domestic violence-related homicide victims (Fox & Zawitz, 2010). Research suggests that low-income African American communities undergo high levels of domestic violence and that women may not report the violence due to fear, finances, protection of the batterer, hope of maintaining the family unit, lack of access to services, cultural differences, and sociopolitical isolation (Agazie, 2011; Bent-Goodley, 2013; Chhikara, Jakhar, Malik, Singla, & Dhattarwal, 2013; Lucea et al., 2013; Williams, Wyatt, Myers, Green, & Warda, 2008). Research also suggests a greater prevalence of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse within the African American community as compared to other cultural backgrounds (Agazie, 2011; Hamptom & Gelles, 1994; Morrison, 2007; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

Many women may stay in and endure abusive relationships due to fear, family instability, lack of resources to become self-sufficient, and isolation, which often prevents them from

accessing social support (Bell, Goodman, & Dutton, 2007; Hage, 2006). This is particularly true with older African American women who stayed and endured the abuse in hopes of preserving their families and personal wishes to maintain invested years in their intimate relationships (Paranjape et al., 2007). For example, older African American women witnessed their mother and grandmothers become exposed to emotional and physical abuse in their homes to keep their families together. Interestingly, older African American women do not identify with domestic violence due to the isolation within their relationship as well as their strong religious beliefs; therefore, it appears as if domestic violence is normal and accepted (Lichtenstein & Johnson, 2009).

Among African American women, pervasive challenges related to mental and physical health, substance abuse and misuse, unemployment, poverty, racism, and discrimination compound the consequences of domestic violence within the African American community (Koverola & Panchanadeswaran, 2004; Lott-Collins & Moore, 2006; Tjaden & Theonnes, 2000). However, more research is needed to examine the experiences of African American women who have survived domestic violence and the factors related to survivorship among African American women. Therefore, this study is an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of a sample of African American women who can speak to their past experiences with domestic violence and share their perspective as domestic violence survivors.

Statement of the Problem

Pinpointing the factors affecting domestic violence survivorship has been difficult due to issues with reporting, measures, and definitions as well as the silence of some survivors (Breiding et al., 2015; Tjaden & Theonnes, 2000). Furthermore, little attention has been given to the experiences of older women who are domestic violence survivors. In particular, there is no

extant literature related to the experiences of older African American survivors of domestic violence. Therefore, this study explored factors affecting survivorship among African American women aged 55 years and older who have experienced domestic violence during their lifetime in order to better understand their lived experiences. However, no women who were currently experiencing any form of abuse were participants in this study. Instead, participants were asked to reflect retrospectively on their past experiences with domestic violence.

Rationale for the Study and Research Questions

There is a plethora of data, studies, and findings on domestic violence; however, there is a paucity of research that has focused on African American women who have experienced domestic violence from a retrospective lens. Furthermore, there are few studies that include the voices of older African American women. Additionally, there is a need to explore the factors impacting older African American women who experienced domestic violence at some point in their lives (i.e., lifetime domestic violence). The aim of the study is to provide a retrospective lens of the factors impacting African American women's survivorship of domestic violence, which may enable helping professionals to design best practices for culturally-sensitive services and supports for this vulnerable population.

The purpose of this study is to qualitatively explore how African American women create an understanding of their lived experiences with domestic violence from a retrospective lens. An interpretative phenomenological analysis method is the framework which guides the study through in-depth interviews with six American women who are at least 55 years of age and who attend the Potter's House, a church that serves over 35,000 members and is 95% African American. The two overarching research questions guiding this study are the following:

1. What are the lived experiences of African American women who are domestic

violence survivors?

2. From a retrospective lens, what factors affect domestic violence survivorship among African American women?

Significance of this Study

Research on domestic violence generally focuses on young or middle age adult women and children in immediate crisis (Johnson, 2004; Davies, Block, & Campbell, 2007). Other available literature on domestic violence consists of survivors' experiences with service providers such as safe houses, the criminal justice system, and health care practitioners (Johnson, 2004; McMahon & Pence, 2003). While the majority of the literature examines the prevalence, incidence, causes and consequences of domestic violence (Williams, 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Walters et al., 2013), there is limited literature that explores the factors related to domestic violence experiences among older African American women using a retrospective lens. This study filled a gap in the literature by examining the lived experiences of African American women who have experienced domestic violence during their lifetimes. As demographics change and individuals live longer, it is important to better understand the history of trauma tied to domestic violence as well as factors related to domestic violence experiences among diverse populations, including older African American women. Therefore, the study findings provided social work implications to benefit domestic violence survivor advocates, service providers, and helping professionals seeking to alleviate the effects of lifetime domestic violence among African American women.

Definition of Terms

African American is defined as an American with African ancestry, but the designation of *Black* involves reference specifically to race or skin tone (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

Domestic violence is used interchangeably in this study with the terms of intimate partner violence, spousal abuse, battered women, gendered violence, partner violence, and violence against women (Alhabib, Nur, & Jones, 2010; Chhikara, Jakhar, Malik, Singla, & Dhattarwal, 2013). Women may experience several categories of domestic violence that include sexual, emotional, or economic abuse as well as power and control or aggressive behaviors, coercion, and stalking (Bent-Goodley & Williams, 2003; Breiding et al., 2013; Breiding et al., 2015; Dutton, Goodman, Weinfurt, & Vankos, 2005; Johnson, 2008; Postmus, Huang, & Mathisen-Stylianou, 2012). In this study, the target population is older African American women who have endured domestic violence but who are no longer involved in relationships with any forms of abuse.

Economic abuse is denying access to financial internal and external resources to maintain sufficient daily needs. Among African American women, economic abuse perpetuates low socioeconomic status and dependence upon their abusers, often resulting in maintaining the abusive relationship (Bent-Goodley & Williams, 2003; Chhikara, Jakhar, Malik, Singla, & Dhattarwal, 2013). For example, the abuser may take the survivor's paycheck, public assistance resources, or control whatever financial means the woman has for supporting herself and family (Walters et al., 2013). This type of abuse keeps victims of domestic violence from maintaining employment or having access to personal financial resources as the abuser maintains control by requiring the victim to ask for money, by giving only an allowance, or not allowing access to income or knowledge about family finances (Chhikara et al., 2013).

Emotional or psychological abuse is more covert and somewhat difficult to identify as a form of violence. Emotional and psychological abuse often starts with isolating the victim from friends and family to establish power and control (Chhikara et al., 2013). This type of abuse may

occur when the abuser continually tracks the whereabouts of the survivor by constantly calling or texting her. (Chhikara et al., 2013). As the controlling behaviors escalate, the abuser may attempt to humiliate or degrade the survivor at home or in public places (Walters et al., 2013). The perpetrator may even go as far as to call the survivor derogatory names or make demeaning comments (Chhikara et al., 2013). The abuser often inflicts emotional or psychological abuse in order to decrease the victim's self-esteem and create insecurities that may lead the victim to suffer from internal doubts about self-worth (Walters et al., 2013). Statistics reveal that emotional or psychological abuse increases the risk of depression and substance abuse and misuse (Chhikara et al., 2013). Emotional and psychological abuse can also include verbal interactions that threaten and intimidate the survivor, undermine the survivor's self-worth, and control the survivor's independence (Walters et al., 2013).

Lifetime domestic violence occurs when a woman has experienced one or more categories of domestic violence in the past that could have happened as one incident or as an ongoing period of abuse and control; however, the woman is not currently experiencing domestic violence. Lifetime domestic violence includes physical, emotional, sexual, economic, and financial abuse that occurs at any point during a woman's lifetime (Breiding et al., 2015; Postmus et al., 2012; Trevillion, Oram, Feder, & Howard, 2012).

Physical violence is one of the most identified forms of abuse implicating behaviors, actions, or gestures intended to invoke fear, intimidation, injury, or any type of physical harm (Chhikara et al., 2013). It involves striking, smacking, beating, choking, pushing, destroying materials or property, reckless driving, displaying weapons, hitting, or injuring animals and other exchanges where the outcome can result in physical injury to the survivor (Chhikara et al., 2013). Physical abuse also includes denying survivors sleep or other necessities such as food or water.

Physical abuse can become lethal when the survivor engages in drugs or alcohol use against her wishes or as a negative coping strategy (Chhikara et al., 2013). Finally, the effects of physical abuse from domestic violence can range from mild (e.g., minor injuries such as cuts or bruises) to severe (e.g., broken bones, death).

Sexual abuse is about power and control and occurs when the female victim is forced or coerced into any sexual activity that makes her feel uncomfortable and unwanted or happens to her without her having the ability to consent (Walters et al., 2013. For example, men forcing women to engage in oral sex or watch pornography is considered sexual abuse. Coerced activity refers to talking someone into doing something that she does not really want to do.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter provides a summary of the literature related to causes, impact, and consequences of domestic violence and the African American community. More specifically, the literature review examines the nature of domestic violence with considerations for experiences, causes and the factors affecting African American women's survivorship of lifetime domestic violence. These factors include *lack of awareness, social cultural values, social supports, spirituality and religion,* and *accessibility or lack of resources.* I conclude the chapter with an overview of the theoretical framework guiding the study as well as the summary and purpose of the study.

Domestic Violence and African American Women

African American women are at greater risk for economic difficulties, homelessness, unemployment, and health and educational disparities due to domestic violence (Koverola & Panchanadeswaran, 2004; Lott-Collins & Moore, 2006). African American women endure domestic violence at a rate that is 35% higher than the domestic violence rate of White women (Tjaden & Theonnes, 2000). Although African American women encompass 8% of the U.S. population, they account for 22% of domestic violence-related homicide victims (Fox & Zawitz, 2010). Straus et al. (1980) conducted the earliest research on domestic violence in the African American community which indicated a higher incidence of domestic violence in African American homes compared to White family households. Researchers also suggested a higher prevalence of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse in the African American community when compared to other culturally diverse populations (Agazie, 2011; Hamptom & Gelles, 1994; Morrison, 2007; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

Many African American women may not report domestic violence due to fear, low socioeconomic status, protection of the batterer, the hope of keeping the family together, lack of access to services, cultural differences, and sociopolitical isolation (Agazie, 2011; Bent-Goodley, 2013; Chhikara, Jakhar, Malik, Singla, & Dhattarwal, 2013). Culturally, African Americans have been socialized to keep matters private within the family and not to share them with anyone outside of the home in order to preserve and maintain a positive family image to the community (Agazie, 2011; Bent-Goodley, 2013; Chhikara et al.,2013). This behavior can be linked to generationally driven values, beliefs, and experiences African American women carry. Because of these values and beliefs, African American women may not seek formal support and may be more inclined to seek informal support in the aftermath of domestic violence (Bronder, Speight, Witherspoon, & Thomas, 2014; Lucea et al., 2013). Moreover, African American women may be viewed by helping professionals as angry and uncooperative when seeking help (Ahmed & McCaw, 2010) resulting in barriers to accessing critical resources for domestic violence (Bent-Goodley, 2013; Lucea et al., 2013).

Conwill (2010) suggested that the negative societal views of African American women depicted through media images depicting them as poor, helpless, and unworthy of help may contribute to social isolation. Furthermore, African Americans have historically suffered the effects of the injustices of slavery, racism, discrimination, oppression, and abuse. These injustices have not only been perpetuated by women's abusers but also by the sociopolitical institutions of the United States that include the criminal justice systems, healthcare systems, and social service agencies (Hampton, LaTaillade, Dacey, & Marghi, 2008). Therefore, African American women often minimize the abuse inflicted upon them to avoid becoming embroiled with the criminal justice system (Agazie, 2011; Bent-Goodley, 2013; Campbell et al., 2008;

Chhikara, Jakhar, Malik, Singla, & Dhattarwal, 2013; Lucea et al., 2013; Williams, Wyatt, Myers, Green, & Warda, 2008), even though domestic violence affects African American women's physical and emotional health and well-being. Moreover, African American women often face unforeseen financial problems, lack of community support and resources, and lack of access to pertinent services due to domestic violence (Koverola & Panchanadeswaran, 2004; Lott-Collins & Moore, 2006; Tjaden & Theonnes, 2000).

Additionally, women who experience domestic violence by in early adulthood increase the risk of abuse as they age (National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse [NCPEA], 2006). Literature also suggested that women who endure domestic violence later in life experience an increase in the severity of the abuse (NCPEA, 2006). Older African American women are still enduring domestic violence although the types of domestic violence might appear to be different from the types experienced by younger African American women. For example, this difference can be attributed to unforeseen medical conditions, family primary role changes, retirement, or a new relationship (NCPEA, 2006). Although domestic violence is a societal issue, domestic violence in the African American household is often portrayed as a private or personal family issue which may force survivors to endure the aftershock in silence. Domestic violence with African American women remains relatively understudied which may increase their vulnerability to further victimizations. The causes of domestic violence as seen in the literature receive consideration in the following paragraphs.

Causes of Domestic Violence

Researchers explored the etiology of domestic violence within the African American community (Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011; Morrison, 2007). The factors leading to violence against women can include social-cultural values, lack awareness and understanding, lack of

resources, race, class, religion, jealousy, stress, alcohol or other substance abuse, and early childhood experience of violence or trauma (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Flaskerud & Winslow, 1998). In 1979, Dobash and Dobash, and later Fox (2002), argued that cultural traditions and ideology within the African American community caused domestic violence.

Researchers have attempted to explain the causes of domestic violence among diverse U.S. populations. Power and control have been identified as the primary factors related to domestic violence (Arthur & Clark, 2009; Fox, 2002; Hyde-Nolan & Juliao, 2012). For example, controlling behaviors may include abusing partners sexually, physically, emotionally, and financially. Literature to examine the cause of domestic violence with African American women is highlighted in the theoretical perspective of psychoanalytic, social, cognitive behavioral and family systems theories (Arthur & Clark, 2009; Hyde-Nolan & Juliao, 2012). Because no one theoretical model to explain why individuals are abusive in domestic violence relationships has been documented, a multi-systems approach may better explain how cultural, social, and economic factors cause domestic violence and affect survivorship among African American women.

Survivorship

Survivor refers to a woman who endured domestic violence over a long period or during a single incident and who coped and subsisted following the conclusion of the active abuse and violence (Breiding et al., 2015; McFarlane et al., 2005; Ramos, Carlson, & McNutt, 2004; Tjaden & Theonnes, 2000). Morrison (2006) presented a survivor as operating within the context of domestic violence as an individual who endured adversities, challenges, and obstacles while managing to overcome and persevere through the situation (Morrison, 2006). However, researchers suggested that domestic violence has long-term physical, mental, and emotional

effects on survivors (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Walters et al., 2013). Domestic violence survivors often suffer from depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, self-image issues, homelessness, and suicidal thoughts based on the extent of the abuse endured (Chapman & Monk, 2015; Kaslow et al., 2010). Additionally, domestic violence survivors tend to report a range of severe and persistent damaging emotional and somatic health problems (Breiding et al., 2014; Fox & Zawitz, 2010; Ramos et al., 2004). However, limited studies have been conducted to examine the long-term mental health effects of domestic violence on African American women (Hays & Aranda, 2015).

Campbell and Belknap (1997) reported a significant relationship between lifetime domestic violence and depression among survivors in over 76% of the African American women in the sample (Campbell & Belknap, 1997). In a review of 11 studies, Brown (1990) found increased rates of depression among African American domestic violence survivors. Irrespective of the type of abuse (e.g., physical, emotional), specific mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD were found to affect survivors of domestic violence (Bradley et al., 2005; Crane & Constantino, 2003). Wright, Perez, and Johnson (2010) also found a correlation between mental health and substance abuse among survivors of domestic violence. Thus, domestic violence can result in a gamut of challenges for African American women that include anxiety and low self-esteem (Barnett, 2001; Wright et al., 2010).

African American women who experience domestic violence may also face emotional challenges such as PTSD, which may influence their risk of re-victimization. Bradley et al. (2005) conducted a quantitative cross-sectional analysis to examine PTSD in women who sought emergency service at a hospital due to domestic violence. The issues the women presented with included suicide ideation or attempted harm (Bradley et al., 2005). Bradley et al. (2005)

indicated the presence of domestic violence increases the prevalence of PTSD and leads to less religious coping strategies, social support, and personal self-worth. In a related study, Bell et al. (2007) conducted a mixed methods analysis to examine abused women's emotional well-being and the implications of staying in or terminating the relationship. Four hundred and six women were recruited from a local shelter and the criminal justice system, and 206 agreed to participate in the study. Bell et al. (2007) conducted interviews every 3 months for 1 year via telephone with a sample of predominately African American women with low incomes. They concluded that women who stayed together or separated during the study period, compared to those who fled and later returned to their abuser reported minimum re-victimization.

Bell, Goodman, and Dutton (2009) conducted a longitudinal analysis because of the previous study of women in domestic violence relationships to examine the women's emotional well-being and overall experiences during a 1-year period. A total of 206 African American women recruited from a local shelter and the criminal justice system consented to participate in telephone interviews for 1 year. Bell et al. reported 70% of the participants were still in a relationship with the abuser; however, during different stages of the follow-up process, participants reported experiencing periods of separation from their partners. Sixty percent of the participants reported cohabitating with their assailants as opposed to approximately 15% reporting sporadic living arrangements. Also, 79% of the participants reported being stalked by their abusers with 57% being financially dependent upon their abusers and 35% indicating having some emotional attachment to their partners during the 1-year period (Bell et al., 2009). Interestingly, Bell et al. suggested women who stay in their domestic violence relationships have a greater outcome in working it out or decreasing the abuse than those women who leave and come back.

Factors Affecting Domestic Violence Experiences within the African American Community

There are no studies to date that qualitatively examined domestic violence experiences from a retrospective lens, particularly among older African American women. Furthermore, few qualitative studies examined the factors related to survivorship among African American women who have experienced domestic violence. However, in a seminal qualitative study exploring 14 African American women survivors of domestic violence, Bent-Goodley (2004) identified the following four themes: (a) women's understanding of domestic violence, (b) lack of available services, (c) education, and (d) social service assistance. Bent-Goodley's findings indicated that women do not understand what constitutes emotional, psychological, or financial abuse but can identify with physical abuse that includes hitting or slapping. Furthermore, study participants indicated a need for education and awareness about prevention measures for domestic violence, even though they hesitated to disclose domestic violence to their social service caseworkers due to fear of losing their benefits and/or children being removed from their home (Bent-Goodley, 2004). Bent-Goodley (2004) further suggested that sociocultural values contribute to negative perceptions about acknowledging domestic violence in the African American community.

Indeed, many African American women may not report the domestic violence the endure due to social isolation, financial barriers, loyalty to the abuser, lack of health insurance, the stability of the family, lack of access to services, and cultural values (Agazie, 2011; Bent-Goodley, 2007, 2013; Chhikara, et al., 2013). Sociopolitical isolation can also be a negative factor for surviving domestic violence in the African American community because African American women may be viewed as poor and unworthy of help (Conwill, 2010). This remainder of this chapter presents literature addressing the factors of *sociocultural values, social support, spirituality and religion, and accessibility or lack of resources* that impact the domestic violence

experiences of African American women.

Sociocultural Values

Over time, individuals' and society's perceptions of the nature of domestic violence have changed and enabled more openness toward understanding the impact of domestic violence on families and communities (Salazar, Baker, Price, & Carlin, 2003). Traditional sociocultural values may pose a barrier to addressing domestic violence in the African American community (Kapoor, 2000; Ritchie & Eby, 2007). Dixon and Graham-Kevan (2011) indicated that male dominance is embedded within African American cultural traditions and beliefs. Williams et al. (2008) also posited that cultural values and situational experiences contribute to domestic violence in African American communities. African American women lack education about the definition of domestic violence, the warning signs, and how to get help when domestic violence occurs (Thompson & Brazile, 2000). African American women also tend to seek advice and support from members of their social support networks who may lack education related to the nature of domestic violence (Thompson & Brazile, 2000).

Generally, domestic violence tends to be unreported, underreported, accepted as normal, and even encouraged in some cultures based on values and belief systems (Mertus & Flowers, 2008). For example, the media portrays violence against women as normal and even encouraged both on film and television, in music videos and song lyrics, and as part of commercial advertisements in the African American community (Mertus & Flowers, 2008). Arce (2005) argued that the attitudes conveyed in the media set the stage for actual violence against women. Researchers noted that domestic violence in the African American community is often disregarded or viewed as normal in U.S. society, because historically, abuse can be understood as a means of survival throughout an individual's lifetime (Agazie, 2011; Dixon & Graham-Kevan,

2011; Gillum, 2009). For example, African American women discuss the cycle of physical, emotional and sexual abuse endured by their mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers as acceptable behaviors by the men in their lives (Gillum, 2009) even though these women are viewed as strong members of their families and communities (Bent-Goodley & Williams, 2003).

Anderson and Aviles (2006) suggested that one cultural stereotype perpetuating domestic violence involves an African American woman accepting physical abuse in order to support her partners and alleviate his stress. Furthermore, African American women are less likely to seek personal protection orders and press charges on their abusers to avoid perpetuating the stigma attached to African American males being regarded as criminals (Lewis et al., 2006; Pease & Flood, 2008; Powell, 2008). Finally, this behavior among African Americans may be attributed to the historical discriminations of oppression, racism, and abuse (Hampton, LaTaillade, Dacey, & Marghi, 2008). Often, African American women minimize the abuse inflicted upon them to avoid involving the criminal justice system (Campbell et al., 2008).

Social Support

Social support is critical to survivors of domestic violence. In fact, over two thirds of domestic violence survivors in the US sought some form of informal support from family, friends, and neighbors (Sigurvinsdottir, Riger, & Ullman, 2015). African American women need to increase their levels of social support and connections to others in order to gain coping skills for recovering from domestic violence (Blakey, 2016). When survivors of domestic violence disclose the abuse they experience to trusted friends, their friends typically respond in a caring and supportive way and seek resources on their behalf. Perhaps, survivors' acceptance of informal support can be more effective for removing themselves from the abusive relationship than formal assistance because friends and family know the circumstances and the involved

parties.

On the other hand, survivors of domestic violence may not reach out to their social supports because they feel judged and blamed for the abuse they have endured (Lindgren & Renck, 2008). Most often, domestic violence survivors suffer in silence and feel isolated because their social supports with family, friends, colleagues and other social networks have been limited or removed from easy accessibility. Moreover, friends and family may feel the need to intervene, give advice, or can be upset with the survivor because they want the survivor to leave the abusive relationship on their own terms. Lindgren and Renck (2008) conducted a qualitative study exploring 14 survivors who lived with the experience of domestic violence. This research pair discovered the participants felt embarrassment and blame because of their abuse and their abusers' power and control tactics. Consequently, these women did not share their domestic violence experiences with their social supports (Lindgen & Renck, 2008). Of note, survivors of domestic violence are less likely to suffer from depression and PTSD when a social support is present (Goodman & Epstein, 2008; Lindgen & Renck, 2008; Sabina & Tinsdale, 2008).

Sigurvinsdottir et al. (2015) conducted a quantitative study to examine whether domestic violence impacts friends of survivors using factor analysis in which 951 participants were recruited from an online evaluation provider and divided into two samples. Ultimately, only 274 participants' data were used for the analysis of the Impact on Friends Intimate Partner Violence questionnaire to examine psychosomatic indicators in friends of survivors of domestic violence. Sigurvinsdottir et al.'s results indicated a correlation between the experiences of the friends who received disclosures about the domestic violence and the domestic violence survivors who made the disclosures. Interestingly, Sigurvinsdottir et al. concluded the presence of increased depressive symptoms, such as PTSD, among the friends of survivors in one of the samples.

Therefore, it can be inferred that domestic violence may have the same effect on supports, such as friends, as it does on survivors.

African American women rely on their "girlfriends or "sister friends" as social supports in an effort to cope with daily stresses of life. For example, when African American women encounter racial discrimination, they seek their social support networks to cope (Seawell, Cutrona, & Russell, 2012; Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, & Cancelli, 2000). Incidences of racial discrimination could encourage adverse societal perceptions, and stereotypes about African American women reduces emotional health (Seawell et al., 2012). In addition, researchers also suggested social support is associated with additional trauma related to low socioeconomic status and re-victimization (Bender, Cook, & Kaslow, 2003; Budescu, Taylor, & McGill; Davis, Ullman, Tsong, & Gobin, 2011).

Bender et al. (2003) conducted a multiple regression study examining the effects of social support linkage between childhood maltreatment and domestic violence with 362 low-income African American women. The results revealed women with childhood histories of trauma or abuse experienced increased severity in their domestic violence experiences. Bender et al. also suggested the type of childhood trauma may predict similar abuse for domestic violence survivors in adulthood. Further, before seeking community resources, such as medical and mental health treatment or social services, African American women take their burdens to the church (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Bradley, Schwartz, & Kaslow, 2005; Wang, Horne, Levitt, & Klesges, 2009).

Spirituality and Religion

The African American community has a long history of connection to spirituality and religion. Dyer (2010) noted that members of the African American community frequently engage

in religious and spiritual practices, more than other ethnic groups. Churches that serve predominantly African American congregants (i.e., Black churches) are often considered as places of hope, healing, love, and a place of refuge for receiving help in addressing important issues and concerns (Lott-Collins & Moore, 2006). Many individuals and families in the African American community seek support from the church for problems related to mental and physical health, substance abuse and misuse, unemployment, poverty, racism, and discrimination. Bent-Goodley and Fowler (2006) and Nason-Clark (2009) reported that African American women in abusive situations seek help and assistance from faith-based leaders. African American women are also more likely to engage some type of spiritual practice that may include prayer (Nason-Clark, 2009; Bent-Goodley & Williams, 2004).

Given the important functions of spirituality and faith in the African American community, researchers suggested that African American women look to spiritual guides, such as pastors or ministers, for strength, comfort, and healing when enduring domestic violence (Bent-Goodley & Williams, 2004; Lott-Collins & Moore, 2006). Nason-Clark (2009) suggested that the African American woman's level of internal spiritual connection may also aid her healing process as a result of domestic violence. Paranjape and Kaslow (2010) assessed the role of spirituality and social support in 200 African American women exposed to domestic violence who were dealing with negative health outcomes and observed higher levels of spirituality and social supports were associated with improved health outcomes and positive mental function and coping skills.

Watlington and Murphy (2006) examined if social support, religion, and spirituality affected depression and PTSD when coping with domestic violence using a cross-sectional quantitative study design with African American women. Their participants' coping skills and

depression were found to be dependent on their spirituality. For example, participants reported having positive social support and coping skills when religion and spirituality were present in their lives. Watlington and Murphy revealed a correlation between religious and spiritual practices and depression and PTSD. However, Watlington and Murphy did not find that religious practices such as social support mediated the association between spirituality and PTSD.

Although positive outcomes related to spirituality and religion have been found among domestic violence survivors, there is also literature suggesting that the church may not address the needs of survivors. For example, traditional practices and teachings from pastors involve quoting popular bible scripture that promotes men as heads of households and women as submitting to their husbands or partners (Rotunda, Williamson, & Penfold, 2004; Shannon-Levy & Dull, 2005). These traditional practices may hinder women from seeking support from the church. Furthermore, women in the African American church are taught to listen to their husbands, pray to God for help in their relationships, because by doing these things, they are protected (Shannon-Levy & Dull, 2005). Some researchers suggest that domestic violence against women could be perpetuated in the church from faith-based leaders as pastors may use scripture to justify abusive behavior or may simply ignore the problem (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Nelson-Clark, 2009). Furthermore, domestic violence may not be viewed as a serious issue needing to be addressed in public by church leaders and pastors (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Nason-Clark, 2009). Bent-Goodley and Fowler (2006) proposed that the lack of intervention by faith-based leaders may be due to lack of adequate training regarding domestic violence. As a result, pastors and other faith-based leaders may not have the capacity to address domestic violence with congregants or promote social change (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006).

Potter (2007) explored the importance of spirituality and religion among African

American women using a phenomenological analysis and suggested that African American women participants incorporate their faith and spirituality into their repertoire of coping mechanisms for enduring domestic violence. However, only eight of Potter's participants reported seeking assistance from faith-based leaders due to domestic violence. Seven participants indicated they did not receive the assistance they needed from the church (Potter, 2007).

Petersen (2009) explored barriers faced by faith-based leaders of the Anglican church in responding to domestic violence and found that faith-based leaders did not feel comfortable with addressing domestic violence. Similarly, in a mix methods study of 153 faith-based leaders in the African American community, Brade and Bent-Goodley (2009) concluded that domestic violence is a concern that needs to be addressed in the church and reported 73% of their participants described church leaders as not accessible for addressing domestic violence within congregations (Brade & Bent-Goodley, 2009). Moreover, 98.6% of Brade and Bent-Goodley's participants recommended that churches should provide members with resources to educate them about domestic violence. Finally, Brade and Bent-Goodley concluded the following: (a) pastors should incorporate domestic violence education and teaching into preaching strategies; (b) resources and supportive services should be made available to congregants who report domestic violence; (c) domestic violence is not a single incident and does happen inside and outside of the church.

Homiak and Singletary (2007) explored domestic violence incidents reported to faith-based leaders using a mixed method analysis. These researchers noted that pastors want more education and training related to domestic violence for effectively assisting congregants and found the participating pastors' responses varied based on how they addressed domestic violence in their congregations. For example, Homiak and Singeltary noted that some pastors had advised

survivors to flee their domestic violence situations and had discussed safety plans with their congregants, but other pastors assisted both abusers and recipients of domestic violence. Finally, 30% of pastors admitted that members of their congregations reported domestic violence to them and approximately 4% of the pastors had contacted the police (Homiak & Singletary, 2007). Finally, Homiak and Singletary (2007) concluded that faith-based leaders who were not knowledgeable about domestic violence did not inform congregants about domestic violence or provide resources.

Accessibility or Lack of Resources

Research indicated that there are not enough supportive services available to address the unique needs of African American women (NNEDV, 2013). In 2011, 67,399 survivors of intimate partner violence were assisted by agencies specifically designed to provide shelter or resources (NNEDV, 2013). However, approximately 10,581 women who sought emergency shelters or related services were turned away due to lack of financial resources and staffing in the agencies (NNEDV, 2013). NNEV also reported that the needs of African American women went unaddressed due to lack of resources for housing, financial assistance, and counseling.

Only a small percentage of battered women request services from domestic violence shelter programs (Van Horn & Marshall, 2000). According to Campbell et al. (2008), the lack of women using these services may be a result of the stigma, guilt, and shame attached to partner abuse and society-distorted beliefs about domestic partner violence in the African American community, which places the blame on survivors. For African American women entering emergency shelters due to domestic violence, their mental health issues, such as depression or PTSD, may also remain unaddressed, causing them additional stress, frustration, and powerlessness (Wright et al., 2010). Data indicated the majority of domestic violence programs

screen out rather than screen in survivors of abuse due to program coordinators lacking awareness or cultural competence for addressing the trauma African American women endure as domestic violence victims (National Network to End Domestic Violence [NNEDV], 2013). Additionally, NNEDV (2013) suggested that domestic violence agencies face obstacles in providing culturally competent services such as support groups and individual counseling for women of color.

Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in phenomenology and hermeneutics as the theoretical frameworks for exploring the lived experiences of African American women who have experienced domestic violence at some point in their past. These theories provided the foundation for exploring the phenomena of domestic violence among African American women from a retrospective lens. Below is a discussion of the theoretical framework of phenomenology and hermeneutics in support of IPA.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a theoretical method to explore and assess a specific phenomenon. Edmund Husserl, one of the original philosophers rooted in the conventional phenomenological approach is best known for stressing the significance of reflecting back on experiences which can be a difficult and daunting task (Findlay, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Phenomenology is focused on the individual's lived, human experience; therefore, an examination of Husserl and other significant theorists including Heidegger, Merleu-Ponty, and Sartre are explored in subsequent paragraphs (Van Manen, 1990).

Husserl. Publications, lectures, and readings by Husserl (1913, 1927, 1970) have assisted in the understanding of the phenomenology foundation in regard to research methodology.

Husserl posited that if people begin to examine the simple everyday interactions to understand those experiences, they can uncover an underlying phenomenon; as such everyone might experience the same phenomenon in the same way (Husserl, 1970). According to Husserl (1970), the most critical aspects of phenomenology are to examine the underline understanding of how individuals interpret their experiences. For example, he suggests embracing the phenomenological attitude, which consists of refraining from outside distractions and seeking internal personal self-evaluation of the phenomenon (Husserl, 1927). Husserl defined the phenomenological attitude by explaining how the researcher must move independently from their daily involvements and engages in the internal practices of self-perceptions of those daily interactions in an effort at objectivity (Smith et al., 2009). In contrast, Finlay acknowledged that the researcher must engage in and bring a rich, rigorous process of understanding to the study. This method permits researchers to be open and to allow the participants of the research to become the experts in their lives and explain their story from their own lens. In examining this perspective, one must be able to understand the participant's life histories and traditions, "taking seriously our respect of difference and diversity" (Finlay & Evans, 2009, p. 37). It is also important for the researcher to display responsiveness and inquisitiveness in order to understand the experiences of the participant, while at the same time maintaining personal and professional boundaries to remain analytical and logical.

In supporting a narrative method of phenomenology, Husserl's described one major element to the understanding of an individual's experience: the concept of intentionality. This term is defined as the correlation of an individual to their real-life world and the notion of being unaware of that association in the present moment through which understanding is obtained with self-evaluation of that experience. The next behavior of bracketing involves the suspension of an

individual's attitudes concerning his or her own worldview in hopes of expanding his or her understanding of other individuals (Van Manen, 1990). Husserl believed that a requirement of phenomenology is to "describe what is given to us in immediate experience without being obstructed by pre-conceptions" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 184). Husserl also assumed there was value in the real and lived experience of the human creation. He further proposed that phenomenology's purpose is to "bring out the full richness of our subjectivity as ways of discovering the world and its meaning" (Finlay, 2011, p. 45). Finally, Husserl stood firm on the need to pinpoint the core of an individual's lived experience, the importance of the process of self-reflection, and the role the researcher to bracket his or her attitudes in order to be present for the participant (Smith et al., 2009).

Heidegger. In expanding on the concept of phenomenology, Heidegger focused on the concept of being and time. Heidegger's theory of the individual as "being-in-the-world" (Finlay, 2011) highlighted an individuals' involvement in the world all around. Interestingly, one of the significant components of phenomenology is that self-consciousness is not disconnected from everything else. Heidegger proposed that is important to acknowledge that individuals are continuously "in the world" and that these happenings allow people to find the meaning of internal and external objects and identifications in the perspective of our connection with the environment (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 18). Individuals' connecting with time is also a main tenet of Heidegger. For example, he proposed that individuals are physically and mentally cognizant of the particular space in which they are involved in while envisioning moving forward to the end result of the action (Finlay, 2011). Heidegger posited that all individual connections are socially created and how individuals engage with others creates meaning for their experience (Finlay, 2011).

Merleau-Ponty. Building on the assertions of Husserl and Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty proposed that individuals must look outside their own particular focus in the attempt to engage in other worldview perspectives and experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Merleau-Ponty's theory was grounded within the concept of intentionality between the mind and the world (Shinebourne, 2011). Merleau-Ponty (1964) suggested that insight rests simply on the fact that in the human experience individuals can distinguish the process of living through something. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty (1964, 1965) argued that reflecting on the meaning, or the essence, of the experiences individuals undergo is neutral even as experiences can be labeled as internal and external. This description highlights that the significance of an experience, after it has been conveyed, is as reachable to others as it is to the individual (Smith et al., 2009).

Sartre. French philosopher, Sartre, expanded phenomenological theory by exploring how human experience is at its greatest when there is an exchange of interactions within associations in the world and that surround them (Moran & Mooney, 2002; Smith et al., 2009). Sartre suggested that individuals are always attempting to learn who they are and to become their natural selves (Smith et al., 2009). Sartre posited that individuals are constantly changing and adjusting based on what is going on in their lives at that particular time (Smith et al., 2009).

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is another important theoretical foundation of IPA. Hermeneutics is a methodical process that examines the interaction of individuals and their environment (Smith et al., 2009). The hermeneutic model contends that it is beneficial to recognize "our embeddedness in the world of language and social relationships" (Finlay, 2011, p. 11). Various hermeneutic philosophers such as Schleiermacher, Heidegger, and Gadamer suggested that interpretation is a part of examining an individual's lived experience.

Schleiermacher. In his early contributions to hermeneutics, Schleiermacher highlighted psychosomatic and objective interpretations of experiences (Smith et al., 2009). He suggested that through hermeneutics, the individual would gain remarkable transparency on the interpretation of his or her own experience (Smith et al., 2009).

Heidegger. As a protégée of Husserl, Heidegger shifted his focus on the concept *being* (Finlay, 2011). Heidegger concentrated on the idea of *being* thereby changing phenomenology from an expressive viewpoint into a hermeneutic process (Finlay, 2011). Heidegger's thought of the individual life as *Dasein* or *being in the world* highlighted social involvement in culture around them (Finlay, 2011). Finally, Heidegger delineated hermeneutics as a means to interchange problems and answers in order for the investigator to begin with some level of knowledge in the uncovering process (Finlay, 2011). In doing so, the individual can identify a richer experience of a phenomenon.

Gadamer. Expanding upon Heidegger's work, Gadamer stressed that in hermeneutic practice; individuals' interpretations are based on and set in tradition and social environments. Additionally, Gadamer highlighted environmental influences within "human existence such as malnutrition, affection, labor, and power… which, for their part, furnish the space within which our speaking to each other and listening to each other can take place" (Gadamer, 1997, p. 28).

Application of IPA to Research

It is important for researchers to display responsiveness and inquisitiveness in order to understand the experiences of their participants and to maintain personal and professional boundaries in order to remain objective (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl believed that phenomenology requires the researcher to "describe what is given to us in immediate experience without being obstructed by preconceptions" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 184). Finally, Husserl

suggested that the researcher must engage in a process of self-reflection as well as must bracket all other efforts to be present in the moment with the participant and to grasp the core of the participant's experience (Smith et al., 2009). These foundations, therefore, enable a researcher to be present and systematic during an investigation (Finlay, 2011).

Summary and Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the proposed IPA study was to explore the lived experiences of older African American women who have endured domestic violence from a retrospective lens. Additionally, the factors affecting the survivorship of African American women were explored. Currently, much of the research related to domestic violence is focused on young women, and as a result, the voices of older women are rarely heard (Weeks & LeBlanc, 2011). Furthermore, there is a dearth of literature pertaining to the lived experiences of African American women who are survivors of domestic violence. These gaps highlight the significance and importance of this study. Moreover, more research is needed to help inform the development of culturally competent supports and resources for this population. Additionally, the need to engage in research that contributed to designing and implementing culturally sensitive interventions for the empowerment of African American women who have survived domestic violence is critically important. Finally, using an IPA approach and its underpinning theoretical frameworks, the study provides rich data on the lived experiences of African American women who have experienced domestic violence at some point in their lives.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This study explored the lived experiences of older African American women who experienced domestic violence using in-depth interviews and a retrospective lens. The study employed an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework to guide the design and data analysis process (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This chapter outlines IPA as a qualitative methodology to illuminate the study's setting, sample, data collection, analysis, and management. The remainder of this chapter includes the approach used to enhance the quality of the research and trustworthiness of the data as well as information about the quality and standards related to the ethical considerations of the participants and data.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences of a sample of older African American women who have survived domestic violence from a retrospective lens. Furthermore, this study examined the factors that impacted participants' domestic violence survivorship.

Research Design

IPA is a qualitative research methodology grounded in phenomenological and hermeneutic practice. Phenomenology is a qualitative research method used to examine the human experiences and the critical facets that make life meaningful with a small sample of participants and is embedded in hermeneutic and phenomenological principles (Smith et al., 2009). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is one method for conducting qualitative research studies that enables researchers to explore how individuals come to understand significant life changes (Smith et al., 2009). Through IPA, participants can identify, interpret,

and make meaning of their lived experiences, which is shared and interpreted by the researcher (Smith et al., 2009). This therefore provides the researcher a role in the process through developing the in-depth interview questions and being immersed in the data analysis process. By being fully engaged and examining these interactions through the lens of the researcher is recognized through the IPA process called "double hermeneutic" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35). IPA yields a comprehensive examination of individuals' experiences according to how they define those experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, in this study the participants defined in their own words the important aspects of their experiences related to domestic violence survivorship. IPA also uses a holistic approach by acknowledging how an individual's intertwined thoughts, understanding, and reactions allow a person to find meaning (Smith et al., 2009).

Phenomenology is considered a process in which the researcher examines participants' meanings through inclusive and persistent interactions allowing for the cultivation of meaningful patterns and connections (Creswell, 2013). As part of the analysis, this study used the guidelines as instructed by Smith et al., (2009) including reading and re-reading, initial coding, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across emergent themes, moving to the next case, and looking for patterns across cases. The above steps will be discussed further at the end of the chapter.

Reflexive Statement

One of the most valuable tools used throughout the study process was the use of a reflexive journal. This reflexive journal afforded me the opportunity to engage in self-reflection continuously during and after the data collection and analysis process. This self-reflection was not only intended for me to examine my conscious thoughts but also those unconscious attitudes, behaviors, and ideology that contributed to my understanding of the data. I consciously

maintained awareness of how I interpreted the data in order to avoid any biases influencing the results of the study. In IPA, the researcher is not only immersed in the data but also interacts, interprets, and shares the participants' experience through the study. Another way that I avoid bias was to take time to debrief after each interview and journaling process with my co-chairs and peers. This allowed me to re-focus and move through the reflexive process as well as keep me grounded in the interpretations and meaning of my participants' experiences concerning their lived experiences of domestic violence.

With extensive knowledge and skills related to the African American community and domestic violence, I've provided individual and group counseling, advocacy, and transitional housing to survivors in multiple settings for two decades afforded me with the capacity to provide comprehensive and culturally competent services. Because of my professional knowledge and skills, I am very qualified to interview a sample of African American women about their lived experiences as survivors of domestic violence. My interest in domestic violence stems from my first summer employment at the largest shelter located downtown Detroit, Michigan which provided me the opportunity to learn about the diverse experiences of women who have experienced abuse. In my work in the field of social work and domestic violence, I have served in roles that include being a clinician, advocate, and researcher. These interconnecting roles have shaped and developed me into the woman I am today as I'm able to help and support those who experienced trauma by providing options, education, training, resources, and mentorship to women who have endured domestic violence. Although I have never personally witnessed or experienced domestic violence, I have a deep respect for and awareness of the needs of African American women who have.

Setting

The data was collected at The Potter's House (TPH) Center for Counseling and Behavioral Health located in the City of Dallas, Texas. TPH is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization founded in 1996 under the leadership of Bishop Thomas Dexter (T.D.) Jakes. TPH is a multicultural, nondenominational mega church located in the southern region of Dallas, Texas. TPH has grown to more than 30,000 members with African Americans (AA) comprising 80% of the total congregation (TPH, 2017). TPH has a total of 59 ministries/programs such as Women to Women to address all life issues concerning women recovering from domestic violence. The church employs approximately 400 staff members, including full-time counseling staff, finance, human resources, public relations, publications and television production departments. All interviews were conducted in a private room located within the Center for Counseling and Behavioral Health on The Potter's House campus.

Sampling

I interviewed six participants who have experienced domestic violence at some point in their lives for my study. The inclusion criteria included identified African American women between the age of 55 and older who spoke English, were not currently experiencing any form of abuse, and were free from their domestic violence relationships for at least 1 year. The study participant's ages ranged from 55 to 69 at the time of the study. Three of the participants were divorced, two participants were married (not to their abusers), one participant was a widow, and one participant was separated. Interestingly, all participants had at least 1 year of college, and two of the participants had graduate degrees. All participants disclosed experiencing domestic violence at some point in their lives and were not currently (at the time of the interview) involved in any abusive relationships. Table 4-1 provides a summary of participant

demographics.

Sample size. IPA studies benefit from smaller sample sizes as they are focused on in-depth exploration (Smith et al., 2009). According to Smith et al. (2009), a sample size of six participants is considered suitable for a doctoral level study using IPA.

Recruitment strategy. The Center for Counseling and Behavioral Health at the Potter's House provided a list of 28 names of potential study participants from Women to Women Ministry event. Once the researcher received the list of potential participants' names and contact numbers, they were called, and a script was used to screen potential participants based on the inclusion criteria and study purpose. In only one case, the potential participant indicate that the domestic violence had occurred within the last year, and this participant had to be excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria.

For those who met the inclusion criteria, interviews were set up at the time of the initial phone call and before data were collected. At the interview location, participants were given a copy of the informed consent, and they verbally consented to participate in the study before the interviews began. The final sample was six African American women due to attrition that occurred when women did not show up for their interviews or did not return initial screening phone call.

Data Collection

The University of Texas at Arlington Institutional Review Board approved the study before any data collection was conducted. Interviews were conducted from December 2016 through January 2017. A five-question, semi-structured interview guide was used to conduct individual interviews with the six study participants who consented to their interviews. Semi-structured, open-ended questions allowed the participants to share their lived experiences

according to how they view those experiences (Smith et al., 2009). I also asked additional questions (i.e., probes) as a follow up to the participants' responses as needed to ensure that the data was clear and rich data was obtained.

With verbal permission from the participants, I recorded the interviews via digital audio recorder. As an additional source of data, I created hand-written notes to capture observations about interactions, body language, and gestures of the participants. Finally, I maintained a reflexive journal as part of the analysis process because I wanted to be aware of any feelings I had as well as transference of energy that may have influenced my interactions with other participants as I moved from one interview to another. Once the data collection was completed, both the researcher and a professional transcriptionist transcribed the audio files.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process outlined by Smith et al. (2009) includes a six-step guideline to support the IPA's "steps to analysis" (p. 81). These steps consisted of

(1) reading and re-reading

(2) initial noting

(3) developing emergent themes

(4) searching for connection across emergent themes

(5) moving to the next case

(6) looking for patterns across cases.

The six-step process is highlighted in the paragraphs below.

Step 1: Reading and re-reading. This initial step is for the researcher to fully immerse in the data by beginning with the participant transcript who the researcher considers to be the most thorough, explicit, and captivating (Smith et al, 2009). This was done by reviewing the

transcripts as well as listening to the audio recording simultaneously before any coding was started. This process is intended to shift focus to the participant instead of the researcher's own perceptions. To assist with maintaining focus on the participant, reflexive journaling is used to note thoughts, ideas, and insight concerning the interview to temporarily bracket them off and avoid the feeling of being inundated (Smith et al., 2009)

Step 2: Initial coding. This next investigative step was to examine the ways that the participants began to talk about their domestic violence experiences. The goal was to create an exhaustive set of notes, comments and themes on the data (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, each transcript was coded by each line while maintaining openness and note taking of the participant describe the important aspects of their life experiences and how they interpret or added "explicit meaning" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 83). It was important for the researcher to focus as much on "the process of engaging with the transcripts as with the outcome" (Smith et al., p. 83) during the analysis process. The analyst used three stages of the analysis process such as descriptive comments, linguistic comments, and conceptual comments. *Descriptive* comments were used to describe the important information the participant has shared about their experience. *Linguistic* comments examine the distinctive language used, and lastly, *conceptual* comments were used to establish preliminary connections with the research questions. This process afforded the researcher the opportunity to conceptualize "the matter that they [the participants] are discussing" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 88). Therefore, the intention of conceptual comments was not to provide meaning, but rather provide an exchange of interactions with the data within the context of the overarching purpose of the study. This process consists of re-arranging the content into a smaller sentence cluster and then re-reading them in smaller sentences to become aware of the content included in the transcript.

Step 3: Developing emergent themes. During this step, the complete transcript was coded with initial notes and notations to establish emergent themes. The researcher examined comprehensive themes through initial noting as well as during observations of emerging connections within the initial note taking process. The principle undertaking was to create a clear and succinct explanation of the important aspects of the comments within the transcripts (Smith et al., 2009). Finally, the themes incorporated the participant voices as well as the researcher's interpretation of the data (Smith et al., 2009).

Step 4: Searching for connections across emergent themes. At this point in the data analysis, themes are established in chronological order from the interviews during step 3. Step 4 is the process of understanding how all the themes can be integrated into extensive categories of interpretations which are defined in this study as major themes. Major themes draw from the process of abstraction when emergent themes are joined together. As a result, the formation of the participants' conceptualizations of the phenomenon emerged into the major themes. For this study, the themes connected to what participants deemed important to their lived experiences with domestic violence and within the context of the research questions (Smith et al., 2009).

Step 5: Moving to the next case. This next step involves moving to the next participant transcription and repeating steps 1-4. This process included examining each participant transcripts by reading and re-reading as well as taking notes. Emergent themes were established from the initial notes and those themes were connected and grouped into major themes.

Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases. The last step is comparing the major themes to emergent themes in order to establish patterns across cases. A table of themes informed and guided the conceptualization of the lived experiences of participants in the study.

Data Management

Each participant was given a number based on where they placed in the order of participants during interviewing process for de-identifying the data. As mentioned previously, each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service using Microsoft Word. The researcher also transcribed two of the interviews verbatim using Express Scribe Transcription Software. As suggested by Smith et al. (2009), all transcripts were reviewed and compared with the audio recorded interview to check for accuracy. This was part of the reading and re-reading analysis process. The de-identified transcripts were integrated into ATLAS.ti 8.0 software for data analysis.

Ensuring Quality and Trustworthiness

This study employed several approaches for ensuring quality and augmenting trustworthiness of the study and results. Four main principles employed for assessing quality in qualitative research included sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance (Smith et al., 2009). The first strategy was sensitivity to context that included examining the lived experiences of older African American women who experienced domestic violence within the context of the participants' individual situations. This focus provided insight into how each participant made meaning with their experiences of survivorship.

Some of the methods used to heighten rigor in the study included peer debriefing and peer examination of data. I enriched rigor by debriefing several times each week with my dissertation co-chair and a doctoral cohort member. Upon completing the data analysis for each participant, I discussed with my dissertation chair and doctoral cohort member my thoughts and feelings as well as allowed them to provide feedback about the participants' lived experiences of

domestic violence.

The third approach of quality is transparency and coherence. The data were organized after being integrated into ATLAS.ti 8.0 software. The integration of data included audio recordings, diagrams, themes, and specific notes about participants. The final approach used to enhance quality is impact and importance. According to Smith et al. (2009), the IPA researcher should aspire to tell the reader something "interesting, important, or useful" (p. 183). Findings from this study have important implications for education, policy, social work practice and research, as outlined in Chapters 4 and 5.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher must foresee any ethical issues that could arise while conducting a qualitative research study (Creswell, 2009). As a researcher, it was important to protect my research participants by establishing rapport, fostering reliability, protecting participants from wrongdoing, and any irregularity that might reflect on their associations or institutions, and managing any new problems that arise (Creswell, 2009). I had the primary responsibility of respecting the rights, desires, dignity, and autonomy of the participants. The following precautions were used to protect the participant's rights:

1. Participants were advised in writing and provided a copy of the voluntary nature of participation and that they may withdraw from the study at any time during the process.
2. The details about the study were provided in writing on the informed consent materials and discussed with each participant.
3. The participants were able to verbally consent to participate in the study as well as discuss confidentiality with me before beginning the interview.

4. The participants were informed, in writing, of all data collection procedures as well as the activities included in the process.
5. All electronic data were maintained on a password-protected, encrypted computer.
6. All hard copies of the data were kept in a lock filing cabinet at the researcher's co-chair office located at The University of Texas at Arlington School of Social Work.

Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed the approach employed for investigation of the lived experiences of older African American women who have endured domestic violence. Description of my research design, the setting of the research, sample, data collection, data analysis, management, as well as how I established quality and trustworthiness and maintained ethical consideration were explored. In the next chapter, I present my study findings.

Chapter 4

Findings of the Study

This qualitative, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study, focused on the lived experience of older African American women who have experienced domestic violence. To answer the research questions, data were gathered using a semi-structured interview (Appendix A), where themes emerged from the text providing an illumination of the lived experience of study participants, consistent with an IPA study. The underlying tenets of IPA provided the theoretical framework for the evaluation and presentation of the findings. For Research Question 1, the data yielded three major themes and several subthemes derived from the voices of participants related to their lived experiences as survivors of domestic violence. For Research Question 2, the data produced four major themes related to the factors affecting domestic violence survivorship from a retrospective lens. The research questions and the demographic information about the six participants are included in this chapter. Finally, a discussion of the data analysis is provided in this chapter.

Research Questions

Research inquiry, data collection, and analysis were guided by the following overarching research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of African American women who are domestic violence survivors?
2. From a retrospective lens, what factors affect domestic violence survivorship among African American women?

Six semi-structured face-to-face interviews conducted with older African American women sought to understand their lived experiences as survivors of domestic violence. The interview

questions assisted in gaining clarity on answering the research questions from participants' perspectives as they accounted events of their domestic violence experiences from a retrospective lens.

Characteristics of the Sample

The demographic characteristics of the participants included six older women who self-identified as African American and had experienced domestic violence in the past. In this sample, the average age for the six participants was 59.3 years. Three participants were divorced, one had been separated for over 10 years, and another widowed for 19 years. All the women in this study had some type of formal college training or experience. Also, five members of the sample were working full-time. The average years married from the sample were 23.3 years as well as approximately 21.5 years of abuse they experienced prior to leaving. The average number of children the study participants had during her abuse abusive relationship was 3.8, and the six women reported emotional, physical, and financial abuse. The sample averaged 9.6 years being "free" from abusive relationships, and all participants indicated that they witnessed domestic violence during their childhoods. Finally, participants in this study averaged 25 years in attending church. Table 4-1 provides an overview of the women's ages, marital status, level of education, and employment status. Table 4-2 displays the participants' individual characteristics, such as the number of years married and in the abusive relationship, the number of children, and the type of abuse endured.

Table 4-1 Demographics for the Six Participating African American Women

Participant	Age	Marital Status	Level of Education	Employment Status
1	58	Widow	2½ years of college	Full-time: Food Service
2	69	Separated	1 year of college	Part-time: Social Security
3	55	Divorced	Master's degree	Full-time: Licensed Professional Counselor
4	58	Divorced	Master's degree	Full-time: Marketing and Sales
5	59	Divorced	2 years of college	Full-time: Home Health Care
6	57	Married	1 year of college	Full-time: Customer Service

Table 4-2 Individual Characteristics of the Six African American Women

Participant	Years Married	Years of Abuse	Number of Children	Type(s) of Abuse	Years Abuse Free	Abuse History	Years in Current Church
1	23	22	4	Physical, emotional, spiritual, financial	10	Childhood witness	10
2	53	43	9	Physical, emotional, financial	11	Childhood witness, physical abuse	40
3	14	14	4	Physical, emotional, sexual	11	Childhood witness	26
4	20	20	2	emotional	2	Childhood witness, sexual abuse	32
5	17	17	1	Physical, emotional, financial	14	Childhood witness, sexual abuse	43
6	13	13	3	Physical, emotional, sexual	10	Childhood witness, sexual abuse	3

Thematic Findings for Research Question 1

The information that follows provides a detailed account of the participants' responses to the overarching research questions and the emergent major themes and subthemes. The themes were developed from the transcribed interviews through support from the participants' contextual examples. For Research Question 1, the three major themes were: (a) *questioning the past*, (b) *acknowledging the journey*, and (c) *reclaiming and rebuilding life*. The three major themes included several subthemes which are illustrated in Table 4-3. Additionally, Figure 4-1 displays the dynamic relationships between the themes: questioning the past led participants to acknowledge their journey and then move toward reclaiming and rebuilding their lives.

Table 4-3 Summary of Major Themes and Their Subthemes

Theme	Subthemes
Understanding the Past	Faith/Spirituality at the Time of the Abuse
	Family Culture and Tradition
	Role of the Church
	Formal Systems
Acknowledging the Journey	Sustaining Faith
	Social Support
	Role of the Church
	Motherhood and Concern for Children
Reclaiming and Rebuilding	Faith-filled
	Stronger Social Support
	Empowered

Theme 1: Questioning the Past

Participants discussed a thorough account of their lived experiences surviving domestic violence as they reflected on their past experiences. They questioned their naiveté, the warning signs of abuse, the role of the church, their families' traditions and values, their faith, and the various formal systems that they encountered during their domestic violence experiences. Participant 1 explained:

> Because after I got out and looked back in, it was like you can't see in the midst of all the black cloud around me. It's like a smoked-up room. You can't see the smoke until you get on the outside. I said, "How did I ever allow my myself to fall into that predicament?" I vowed to the Lord, if he got me out, I was never going back, and I didn't.

Participant 2 shared that she "did not get the right instructions back then. I think I might just got old, because I was a child long time, and I did not learn what I needed to learn as a child." Finally, Participant 4 explained, "I have to call up my sister and say, 'Do you remember such and such?' Sometimes, I go down memory lane, because I'm trying to wash it, cleanse it, not have nothing in me against it."

Subtheme 1. Faith/spirituality at the time of the abuse. The women's faith/spirituality at the time of the abuse had an impact on them. Participants shared that although they sometimes questioned their beliefs, they indicated that their personal faith was ever-present during their domestic violence experiences. All six participants indicated that at some point in the past, particularly in the beginning of their abusive relationship that their faith was important in dealing with the daily abusive tactics that their partners exerted on them. Faith/spirituality at the time of the abuse affected each participant differently (e.g., some had greater or less beliefs); however,

they all indicated that they attempted to lean on their faith at the time of the abuse. Participant 4 shared:

> Going through all of them horrible experiences, I thank God for saving me and allowing me to keep my faith through it all. I know it was something always on the inside of me giving me strength to get through and as early as I can remember, I decided to let go and let God take the wheel and lead me and my family in the path of the righteous. I've been through some valleys which was a very low place but I remember, I thank God, my faith that is the substance of the things hope for you know the things that you cannot see but you believe… you know.

Participant 1 described how she had gained the awareness to decide what to do:

> I had to take it to my prayer closet and leave it there. I just had to wait on God, just wait and wait for him to change him and the abuse me and my children was going through. All while I was waiting on God, he was waiting on me to get up off the floor and make the decision… I had to get up.

Participant 4 noted the following revelation:

> I was ignoring so many things that were evident, and I called that faith I felt like, if I stay and hold on, if I pray and I fast and I read scripture and walk through my house and anoint his shoes and anoint his clothes and anoint his head and pray over him pray over the car and all those things that that would do it. But again, I was doing those things and ignoring what was fact.

Participant 4 also drew upon her faith by singing old biblical hymns and quoting the scriptures that had been a part of her life ever since her childhood when her mother was experiencing domestic violence. She further discussed how as she reflected on her past, she

realized that her mother's faith allowed her to connect with her own faith which sparked hope and encouragement within her during the abuse. This sense of connectivity to faith/spirituality shared by Participant 4 was central to all the participants' experiences as they questioned the past. Participant 5 described her faith at the time of the abuse as she questioned the events that took place in her life:

> Looking back, I believe because I was so in need to be loved and be with someone, I threw away all of me in order to complete them. But to be honest, they was [sic] not complete either. I think two broken people looking to be healed. What I realize is that you must deal with your issues, be it insecurities, self-esteem, self-worth, abandonment issues, whatever; you must heal them before getting into a relationship. You need to get to know yourself. You need to love yourself through it all. You have to have the faith to know that it will get better. You just have to wait that's what I see.

Several participants also discussed that looking back, when they were unsure about the direction that their relationship with the abuser was heading in, their faith/spirituality guided them forward. Participants shared that although their faith/spirituality sometimes created uncertainty, they still believed in something greater than themselves so they could grow and develop from their experiences with domestic violence. Participants also expressed feelings of regret that, in the past, they did not always trust their faith/spirituality. They questioned why they had not relied on their faith and belief that God has a purpose and plan for their lives. For example, as Participant 6 revealed:

> I regret I let all of this happen to me…the only regret that I have in my life is that I did not rely on my faith and attend church like I should of during those difficult times in my life. I regret not finishing my college education, and that I let those things happen to me.

Participants also discussed how their faith/spirituality was connected to their family culture and tradition, which is explored in the next subtheme.

Subtheme 2: Influence of African American culture and tradition. Participants shared that their cultural and traditional values within the context of the African American community shaped their core values and beliefs about family. Furthermore, participants questioned the influence of culture and tradition on their experiences with domestic violence as they reflected on the past. For example, Participant 1 shared:

> Being in college and young and not really having life experience, my mother taught us the Christian life, but then there is another life outside of the Christian life. What you had not been exposed to is detrimental to you… it will take you mentally to places that you have not even been exposed to, nor don't need to be exposed to. I really did not know him; therefore, I didn't know how he viewed things such as being in a Christian marriage, but he did not understand anything about how to treat a godly woman, which I was and I didn't know that that's what I was living in, one life in my home, because it was a Christian environment. Then, I went outside the home, and then it cost me, I mean, dearly, because I did not take those same values with me.

Five of the six study participants shared that as a part of questioning their pasts, they reflected on growing up watching the men in their lives, including their fathers, cheat on their mothers and how this behavior seemed to be acceptable. Questioning the familial value of remaining loyal to a spouse despite infidelity was a common theme among the participants. Participant 3 explained:

> My mom had been emotionally abused because my dad cheated on her a lot, and my brother and sister knew it, and so one thing that I know about me is that I basically lived

out my mom's life, you know. But I know our understanding of marriage, based on my parents, was married people deal with married people's stuff, and people don't come and stay at your house if they are having issues in their marriage, they stay at home and deal with stuff in their marriage. You don't leave; you stay.

Participants 4 and 5 explained carrying similar traditional cultural values and beliefs into their relationships and marriages. Participant 4 described transferring how she understood her parents in her childhood into her adult relationship choices:

> Oh, my whole family was fighters. My father was an alcoholic and very verbally and physically abusive to my mom and us. So, in turn, I married my daddy. The same qualities displayed from my childhood with my father, I ended up in the type of relationship. That's something we went into with blind eyes when I went into my marriage. Me, really not understanding the impact my childhood had on me. I'm looking back, and I can't believe I married someone just like my daddy. Wow. I guess it just felt comfortable at that time. Because I was used to that culture… I knew what to expect from that relationship because I grew up with dysfunction. My culture, the African American culture says stay when he's beating you, keep your family together; he is stressed; what are you doing? You must be doing something.

Participant 5 emphasized the effect of her mom's choices on her experiences in adulthood:

> I come from a strong line of faith-filled women in my life. My mom, her mom, her mom. They all had to endure conditions or be subjective to all kinds of conditions that hurt them, their families, and it was hard to bounce back, but they did. … Back then we stayed with our partners, even if they cheated or lied, but I think for me, it was the emotional

> abuse. I just felt like he beat me down with his words, the cheating, the lying, you know. I think at some point God gives you an out. Also, back then, we stayed in marriages because, first of all, God does not believe in divorce; the church don't support divorce; your family don't support divorce, so you just stay.

Many of these cultural values and beliefs were also supported in the African American church as discussed in Subtheme 3.

Subtheme 3: Role of the church. Participants reported that the role of the church is critical to the traditions of the African American community, especially for women. The role of the church emerged as a subtheme throughout all six interviews. However, some participants questioned if they received the correct responses about their domestic violence relationships from their pastors and ministry leaders. For example, Participant 2 shared how she was blamed in her childhood as the cause for the adults' problems, which she did not understand. Later, she grew up and attended church, she was blamed for not fulfilling her duties as a wife. Participant 2 internalized this blame as follows:

> I felt it was my fault because of how they told me it was my fault. I always say, once you get a kid, and they believe what you say, you show them. It's your actions. I believed what they said. My fault, my fault. Get into the church, my fault, my fault. I couldn't blame you when you drilled in me 'my fault.' You become humble, submissive, submissive, submissive, submissive, and you stay in a relationship because it's your fault.

Another participant questioned the past as she shared that she went to seek support from her church and attended a counseling session with her pastor in whom she trusted and whose opinion she valued. Participant 1 explained:

So, when I went to meet with my pastor, he was saying that "the only grounds you have for divorce is if he's committed adultery." I was going like, "You mean I have to stay there and get beat," because now I'm trying to live by God's laws, which I know he came to do away with the law, but I'm trying to live by the obedience of God. Then I have this man of God telling me that I've got to stay in this situation. My children, oh God, children should never have to live in a situation like that.

A similar response came from another ministry leader of one participant's church where this participant's "church mother," who was well respected by the participant, told Participant 4 that she needed to make changes in her marriage. Participant 4 reported:

I found a mother in the church that I could talk to. Of course, I liked it. I could kind of reduce my problems. They always say it was my fault that he was the way he was. That was the wrong advice they gave me. They kept making me change myself, turn this way, do this, and do that. I said, "How is it always my fault?" I have nothing to do with the way he [is] treating me. "Well, you ain't praying enough. You ain't fasting enough." I was fasting and praying, half-eating trying to get the situation under control.

Participant 2's experience with disclosing the abuse she was experiencing follows:

I told them about it, and they said, "Nah, you can overlook that." Overlook abuse? Overlook how he talk? Overlook him hitting me? Plus, I got these kids, so what I did, really what I did, I remember doing it, I stopped being a wife, trying to be a wife, and I became a mother. I really left off who I was, my own personality to take on a role of a mother because I want these kids to be as healthy as they could be, because I know I'm not healthy. I didn't know how to get healthy. You had church. You got your friends, but they ain't saying nothing.

Several participants also questioned the past by attempting to make sense of the biblical teachings and scriptures that encouraged them to remain in their abusive relationships. Many of the participants indicated they did not question the teachings at the time of their abuse because they did not want to appear problematic and chose to appear submissive. For example, Participant 2 indicated that she gained the realization that some church leaders in her past used scripture out of context to offer bad advice about marriage:

> I thank God for teachers and the teaching and the learning. I've gotten it from other ministers too, but the truth of the Word, the dissecting the Word to know what it was talking about and what it meant when it was saying, "It's better to get married, than to burn." Its help to teach you the breaking down of the words, and that it meant something about the timing that the Word came and what it meant for who he was talking to. People that use the Word out of context.

All six participants reflected on the importance of attending church and praying for changes to occur in their abusive relationships. Also, some participants were encouraged by church leaders/members to remain in abusive marriages. For example, Participant 4 shared:

> According to the Bible, you need to be submissive to your husband, meaning listen to what he instructs, you know, like not back talking and just doing what is told without asking any questions. So that's how I grew up. I was also taught in the church to pray a lot. So, when things are not going right in your marriage or relationships, you pray about it, and God hears your prayers, and he changes the heart of your husband but also change your heart and mind. So, my church teaching back then was to stay with your husband no matter what, and according to the Bible, nothing should separate you from your partner but death. ... I was accustomed to the old biblical teachings.

In contrast, Participant 5 discussed how the church offered support to her during the time she was experiencing domestic violence in her marriage. She talked about the isolation from her family and that the only outlet she had was the church, although the church was unaware what Participant 5 was enduring in her marriage:

> That's the first thing that your husband, at least my husband, separate you from everyone. That's the first thing you're separated from, so it kills all those relationships that you have nothing to go back to. That's a form of isolation, so you lose that support. So, you just continue to pray and start asking God to help you. I listened to a lot of music to keep me encouraged and I attended church, but no one knew I was going through hell because I did not tell. I go to church, get the word, I pray, and then I go home. That it.

Subtheme 4: Role of formal systems. Participants discussed how, as they reflected back to the past, they had encounters with formal systems including law enforcement and emergency shelters. Several participants reflected that the formal systems that were designed to assist or help or support them did not truly do so. Participant 4 disclosed:

> Back then, shelters were not readily available like they are today. You really didn't know about them or how to access them. They actually used to be called safe houses, and you had to have some kind of connection with someone to get in, like the police or something like that you know… there were cultural differences and barriers back then, like discrimination and oppression…back then, you didn't even go and receive services from the social services because they were all in your business, you know…it was too much to receive services or help.

Participant 5 questioned how staff at emergency shelters understood domestic violence experiences:

> The only thing about the shelters is that I didn't believe they really understood the magnitude of my abuse. I think it looked very different from others in the shelter. My pain was different, the abuse I experienced was a little different. My response was different in how I processed all of those things.

Three of the six participants reflected on their experiences with law enforcement when they were dispatched to their homes due to incidences of domestic violence. These participants were told by the police officers that the violence was their fault by their choices to stay in the abusive relationships. These three participants expressed feeling that their interactions with law enforcement were not helpful and questioned their pasts choices by wondering whether calling the police at the time of the abuse was the right choice. Participant 5 reported:

> The final straw for me was when the police had to intervene once again, and the detective who they assigned to the case said they weren't going to come out anymore. They were going to press charges on not only him, but me for continuing to come back [the relationship], that scared the mess out of me.

Participant 1 indicated that she thought she would receive a supportive response because the officer who responded to her home was a woman and reflected that she was hopeful at the time. However, Participant 1 received a response she was not expecting:

> I had a woman [police officer] that came one time. She said, "Let me tell you something, you call us one more time and don't press no charges, we're going to take you." She said, "You going, because you're playing with the law. You are calling us, and you're not doing anything." …They hurt me more than they helped because they made me believe that it was my fault.

Theme 2: Acknowledging the Journey

Participants offered their feelings about reflecting on the past and being able to acknowledge their journey of enduring and eventually leaving their domestic violence relationship. Participants revealed that during the time of the abuse they were "in thick of it" and just surviving in the moment. Several participants reflected that as a part of their journeys, they found themselves able to process their feelings and attempt to figure out what was next or how they were going to get out of their abusive relationships. Participant 4 shared:

> I was in situations where I could've lost my life. I could've lost my kids. I could've lost everything, you know, and at a certain point, I began to lose everything. I believe god was stripping away the old and making room for the new, you know, the new me, and you know what? My parents began to get tired, get tired of helping me restart me, you know. You can only have so much restart before you have to start looking at yourself. … I'm gonna die, and I wanted to live. As I take a look back, I felt like I was missing something all my life. It was a lot of things I've never experienced in a relationship.

Participant 4 also acknowledged that she needed to make changes in her life as she was always seeking love from others who could not offer what she needed. Similarly, all six participants acknowledged having a need for the love that only God could provide them. This is further discussed in Subtheme 1.

Subtheme 1: Sustaining faith. All six participants acknowledged the role of their faith during their journeys with domestic violence. Participant 3 shared:

> As a woman, I ignored those things I called faith because if I could overlook that stuff and just hold onto God's unchanging hand, I thought that I was being faithful. I called it, "faithing it," but it was really faking it, because it was easy to do that opposed to walking

> away [be]cause I didn't know what this entailed over here. I could function in this mess that I was in. I knew how to function in that. even though I was dying, … so I held onto my faith if you will and stayed for years, almost 20 years of my life I stayed.

Participant 1 acknowledged that her faith sustained her during her experiences with domestic violence. She shared how she was encouraged by her mother's prayers for her. She discussed the influence of her mother's faith on her own life. Participant 1 explained:

> I would say my faith in knowing that God was with me, that I was safe at my mama's home, because she had faith and she prayed for me, I remember when I was about 5 [years old] and my mother impacted me so much so that I knew I deserved better. She taught me how to go to the lord in prayer. My faith kept me going.

Similarly, Participant 2 shared how her mother's faith was influential in her journey and that in turn, she learned relied on her own faith to help her during her domestic violence relationship. She said, "My mom led me to God and showed me how to lean on my faith. My mom told me that's all she had during the times she endured physical emotional and verbal abuse. Her faith … it's strong."

Several participants reflected on the role of faith during their journey toward leaving the domestic violence relationship. For example, Participant 4 shared:

> I believe it was faith that gave me the extra push I needed to leave all those abusive relationships in my life. I believe it was me believing in a higher power other than myself to get over the stuff I experienced.

Subtheme 2. Social support. As a part of acknowledging the journey to leaving the domestic violence relationship, five of the six participants reported the importance of social support including friends, family, and co-workers. Participant 4 shared "my mom and dad had

always been my support, you know…they always came to help and support me. They offered me money, a place to stay, emotional support, guidance, help with the kids." Participant 6 explained in the following how her godmother served as a support for her because her own mother was not emotionally available:

> My godmother talked to me. I think most of it was my godmother…. Look like the words that she used and say, when I got finished talking to her, I just felt like a better, a new person. … It's just the way she expressed herself and explained, and that it just made me understand better, where my mother and my sister were kind of fussy, a little bit. This lady, my godmother, she helped me through a lot. She did. It was like she was my counselor. That was very helpful.

Participant 3 shared the importance of her best friend and how much her best friends' support meant while enduring emotional abuse in her marriage. Participant 3 shared:

> My best friend, who is still my best friend to this day, she knew most of it, but she was my best friend same age; we got married a week apart; you know; so she knew just as much as I did which was nothing; you know; so she would support me let me call; let me cry. Like the day I found out I got the letter from the girl, I called her crying and she talked me off of the cliff. She didn't really know what to do with me in that moment other just to let me talk. … I was trying to be super strong because that was my facade.

An example of the importance of support from co-workers was best said by Participant 2:

> I could have packed my belongings and went back home to my family, but I had a real good job, and I did not want to leave that job, because I had tried so hard to get that job, and I loved and enjoyed that job. Everyone was so kind of me, and my boss knew what I was going through and kept offering me counseling, and I wouldn't accept it. He was

only trying to help me. I felt like, "It's going to get better. Everything is going to work out." It did not.

Subtheme 3: Role of the church. The participants acknowledged the role of church during their journey through their domestic violence relationship. All six participants discussed that they received counseling from their pastor or church leader, which influenced some of their decisions about their abusive relationship. Participant 1 shared:

> I spoke to the pastor. After he told me that I couldn't leave my husband, I shut down from talking to him. It was a little church. … I ended up going to another church. In going through that church, I learned to trust God. … They had classes where you had social needs. I guess it would be where you'd be entering back into society, where you would be able to know how to manage a home, how to budget your finances, how to go out and seek jobs, go out and do things, basically enter back into society.

Participant 4 shared how fear kept her from talking to anyone at church and why she did not want others to know what she was going through:

> Now that I look back, I had support, but I didn't think I had support. I didn't connect with people because I didn't want people to look at us a certain way. … I didn't want people to think that the pastor and the first lady had all of these issues and to leave the church or for them to look at him bad or for them to think that this would happen to them I didn't want that so I didn't connect with people.

Another participant discussed how important the guidance of her church's bishop was during her turbulent marriage. Participant 3 indicated that her bishop gave her permission to divorce her husband, although she was not ready to give up on her marriage:

> You know we had that last meeting with our bishop. … He asked me how long I was going to take that [the abuse]. Even in that meeting, I said that if he were willing to work on our marriage I would. I said that in that meeting still. I think that it took that last shove, it wasn't a shake, it was a shove of me really realizing that this man [my husband] had really manipulated my entire life, and I've allowed him too.

Finally, Participant 5 reflected and shared that as a part of her journey through domestic violence, she sought support from the church, which she felt helped "pull her through":

> About 10 years ago … I started attending the Potter's House; my mind started changing, you know, those old thoughts that were negative. I recall Bishop preaching about domestic violence and talking about it being unacceptable, and no woman should not be subjected to it and how it affects the family and the children and how it strips away at a woman's self esteem. The Potter's House had Women to Women ministry where they would have all kinds of speakers come monthly and just talk to the women and discuss life challenges including domestic violence. I sat and cried, you know. I weeped like a baby, because I didn't know I was carrying all that hurt and pain for over 50 years.

Subtheme 3: Motherhood and concern for children. All six participants shared the importance influence of motherhood and concern for their children as part of acknowledging their journey through domestic violence. Participants shared that they did not want to expose their children to domestic violence any longer and because of them, and that they had to figure out a way to escape the abuse. Participant 1 shared:

> They were different ages, by the time I got them out, my baby was, he was in a crib, so he couldn't have been no more, he wasn't no year. He was still in one of those little arm carriers. The two older boys were probably about 4, 5 [years of age], somewhere like

> that, 4 or 5. I would get them and I would tell them to run. Don't you look back. You run … I would stay there and let him fight me, beat me to get them away. To let them go, I'd take extra licks to get them free because I refused to let them live in that environment. … He started beating my youngest son, a hit so hard until he had a big plug out on his back. He said, "Leave my mama alone." He pushed him and threw him over to the other side of the room. That was it for me. You will not beat me and my children. You will not. I left.

Similarly, Participants 5 and 6 talked about the traumatic experience and because of their daughters, they decided to make decisions based on their fears of something potentially lethal happening. Participant 5 focused on not wanting her daughter to witness the violence:

> I was just tired of the physical abuse. You know the hitting and throwing of things. The jealousy and him tracking my every move and also keeping me isolated. Almost half the time when the police was called, they took him out the house to cool off, but he was back in the home later that night with the same negative energy and horrible spirit. So, I was just tired of the children seeing the abuse like I did in my childhood, I really think I left because of my daughter, in particular, but none of the children deserve to witness the abuse.

Participant 6 noted it was time to leave when her child began defending her with threats to hurt the abuser:

> One day, the three boys' father came in drugged and start beating me and pulled me by my hair down the hallway as he was beating me… before the police could get there, I could hear my daughter saying, "I will kill you if you hit my mother again." Now this is an 8-year-old saying this to a man. I'm thinking: "What if this man would have hurt my daughter [for] taking up for me?" I knew then it was time for me to leave. There are a lot

> of women out here that will let men beat their children. I did not allow that. I knew at that point it was time to go. We did call the police. That was like the third time he had got arrested, and that was the last straw.

Participant 4 discussed at length on the effects of domestic violence on her as well as her children's mental health:

> I went through a depression, a severe depression, and I didn't know I was depressed, and I cried every day, you know, and my kids would always come in there, and say, "Mom, are you okay?" Especially my son, and I think about him a lot, because I put him through so much, and he is the oldest child, and he seen the most and developed anger issues. … I remember he trying to kill himself at 6 years old, and that changed me too.

Theme 3: Reclaiming and Rebuilding

The reclaiming and rebuilding theme represents how participants integrated questioning their past experiences while acknowledging their journeys toward reaching the ability to reclaim and rebuild their lives after domestic violence. Reclaiming and rebuilding is a part of their lived experiences as women who have experienced domestic violence in the past and who look to the future. Several subthemes illustrated various aspects of reclaiming and rebuilding in the lives of the six participants.

Subtheme 1: Faith-filled. The participants discussed the role of their faith in reclaiming and rebuilding their lives after domestic violence. Participant 2 shared:

> Looking back, I feel like you must go through things in your life. The Bible says we will have good and bad days, and the good days out weight the bad, so I won't complain. … Looking back, I feel like, with all I went through, I should have been 6-feet under, but God spared my life. I've come so close to death from this domestic violence relationship,

but thank God, He preserved my life for such a time as this, to finally be able to tell my story.

Participant 3 shared that she has gained a deeper understanding of grace as her faith has evolved over time:

> I understand God's grace way more than I did; just scripture says grace is God's unmerited favor. What else I learned about that is that we tend to limit that as God giving me something and not giving it to you or opening this door for me, but what I really know about God's grace right now is yes those unmerited receive favor of God but the favor of God is so much more than Him giving us stuff the favor of God is God's strength His ability to be and His ability to do whatever it is He desires for you to do. God's grace is His strength like injecting inside of you so that you can live this life according to His plan and His will for you, and I know for certain I am so grateful for the grace of God and I am so grateful for the mercy of God because there's so many things that should have happened that just didn't happen you know. ... I am a much stronger woman now. I am still learning who I am because I was married for almost 20 years.

Participant 4 shared that her faith has sustained her and helped her become the person she is today:

> I thank God for saving me and allowing me to keep my faith through it all. I know it was something always on the inside of me giving me strength to get through, and as early as I can, I decided to let go and let God take the wheel and lead me and my family in the path of the righteous. I've been through some valleys which was a very low place, but God, I thank, remember, my faith that is the substance of the things, hope for, you know, the things that you cannot see but you believe.

Subtheme 2: Stronger support system. The participants discussed the process of rebuilding involved their support systems becoming strengthened and renewed. The participants shared that in the past they were isolated from their support systems. Additionally, they noted that once they left the domestic violence situations, they began to reconnect not only with friends and family but also with their adult children. Participant 1 shared:

> Now, my daughter came home and told me that she was going to live a lavish life, I was trying to like steer her in the right direction; from time to time, I must remind her. She can live like that. She said, "You always kept us in the bliss." I didn't want her to get the big head. She said, "I would never be able to get the big head because you kept us level. You showed me how to be independent and not to depend on a man. You told me to buy the things I desire. You told me to get a good education. I'm just doing what you told me to do." You know what? All my children went to college.

Participant 2 discussed choosing to relocate and leave her support system behind in order to reclaim and rebuild her life as follows:

> When I left Illinois, I left January 20th, 2007. That year of me leaving, I divorced. I called it divorce, everybody in my life back in Illinois. These people was part of my harm. They weren't part of my healing. I needed to heal. I'm on my healing road now… I decided in order to heal myself, on my road of healing, because I felt healing coming through, I said, "I've got to separate all of that." Just like I went from going to a mother, I had went to find Hope. Who is Hope? What she like? What she don't like? Do she like this? She don't like that? I don't know what I don't like. I was told, "You don't like this. You can't have this."

Participant 3 discussed the importance of developing a healthy relationship with her daughters who were watching her throughout her reclaiming and rebuilding process. She shared:

> I am learning to teach my daughters to know who they are so that nobody else defines them. So, when they do get to the point where they are ready to date and marry, that they understand there are just certain things that are not okay. You don't have to settle, and you will not settle, and when you get married, there are certain standards that just have to be in place, and it's okay to say no, if it's not there. It's okay to say no to that because God has that design, that thing that you desire, He has that for you, and it's all right to wait for that.

All six of the participants shared the importance of their girlfriends throughout their domestic violence journey as well as during their reclaiming and rebuilding process. Participant 4 revealed:

> My girlfriends have done for me during those critical times of my life. We are still friends to this day even though we are now in different states. They laugh with me. They cry with me. They come rescue me and protect me. They have let me and my children come stay with them at different points of my life when I was scared to go to my parents or when I just wanted to get away and not be judged. They have also given me money, brought me and the kids food, filled up my gas tank; it's so many things.

Subtheme 3: Empowered. During the reclaiming and rebuilding process, participants talked about the sense of empowerment that they continue to build even in later life. All six participants talked about how for the first time in their lives, they have the control to make decisions, to say "no," to live in peace and joy, to be able to speak up for themselves, and finally, to choose life instead of death. Participant 6 shared:

> Pray. Prayer is the answer. It's hard. It's very hard. It's going to be some crying days, crying nights, crying evenings, crying mornings. If you pray, and keep your mind busy and occupied, and keep going, you'll be okay. You have to find things to do. You can't sit around moping. Do something. Every time you think about it, just ask the Lord to take it off your mind. It's not going to happen in 1 day. It may take 4 or 5 months, but after a while, that thought is going to fade away.

As part of her feelings of empowerment, Participant 5 shared how she encourages and empowers others when she is facing moments of despair:

> If you are having a bad day, speak life into somebody else. If you're not feeling good about yourself, find you somebody and say, "Hi. Oh, you have on a nice shirt. I think you, you look like you're very smart." Speak small things. Small things can be watered and be very meaningful to someone who is going through something. Always let someone know they're more than what they were, you see more in them than they see in their self. Just elevate them. Elevate somebody in their life in your life. If you hold onto something you believe in, don't waiver because something has to keep you grounded, something has to give you hope. If there's no hope, there's no future…anything that can help someone else, because you can't do better unless you help someone else do better.

Participant 1 noted how many women are continuing to endure domestic violence and may not have the courage to share their story; however, she believed sharing facilitated her process of healing and empowerment not only for herself but also for her children and for the greater community. Participant 1 said:

> I may be [helping others] in discussing domestic violence and my experiences. I'm real open with mine. There are older women that still can't talk about it. They still won't

> because it hurts so bad to revisit. I was that woman for years ... [because] domestic violence kills on both ends. Him and me. Everybody affected dies in one way or another. When I say die, you die too…what I learned with a lot of those ladies that were encouraging me, you can't encourage a person with something you haven't been through yourself. You can't bring me out of anything that you have not experienced.

Participant 2 believed her faith enabled her to feel empowerment in the process of reclaiming and rebuilding her life and disclosed the following:

> As I started to study the Word, that was really my biggest resource because God, a holy spirit, taught me, and then they loved on me and allowed me to know that He would never leave me. I felt safe. … For anybody who's going through abuse, it is okay to know that you are okay. You are okay. It's the other person with the issue. You've got your issue, but it ain't that issue. It's okay to be okay. It's okay to think. It's okay what you think. It's okay. It's all right … continue to pray, have faith and love yourself and God. He will make a way for you or send someone to help you. … Today, I'm still finding her. I'm finding her more and more. I love her. I have denied her. Now I'm happy, because I'm free.

Thematic Findings for Research Question 2

The second research question for my study of older African American women who experienced domestic violence considered what factors affect domestic violence survivorship among African American women from a retrospective lens. The four themes that emerged from the data were *social support, church, resources,* and *education*. These four themes spoke to both the positive and negative aspects of the factors that affected domestic violence survivorship according to participants in this sample.

Theme 1: Social Support

Social support was a major theme among all participants as a factor affecting survivorship. Participant 1 shared that a conversation with a co-worker impacted her decision to start thinking about leaving the domestic violence relationship:

> I was working at Baylor Hospital, and there was a lady. She said, "You know what?" I was always a Christian. I would sit there even knowing I was in fear, but if you start talking about Christ, you had my attention. Yeah. I would hold on to grasp that every word she was saying because I was truly looking for a way out. I didn't know that I was just like a piece of glass, and they could see straight through me. I was trying to hide my situation. She said to me, and she was an older lady. She said, "Love don't hurt. Love don't hurt." Ooh, it actually brings tears to my eyes today thinking of her saying that to me.

All six of the participants talked about the positive support they received from a "closest friend." Today, this same close friend stand with each one of the participants and was the person who supported them every step of the way through their journeys. Five of the six participants disclosed that they do not think they could have made it through their domestic violence relationship without their friends. Participant 4 revealed:

> They all have loved me no matter what I been through. They all have fussed at me, cussed at me, talked crazy to me, and was able to tell me the truth, like, you gotta stop this stuff, you gotta cut this out because if you don't you will end up somewhere you do not want to be, and all them have the same persona because they never really have met each other but they all just came together at one point to support me and help. We've

been friends for over 30 years, I think closer to 40. And since I've never had sisters, they have been definitely sisters to me.

Participant 6 discussed how important a friend was during her domestic violence relationship. Although she lived in a different state, her friend provided emotional support. Participant 6 also talked about the things her friend would say to her as well as reflected on some of the things she had wished her friend would have said:

> I did have a friend that lived out of town from where I moved from. We kept in touch. Right now, today, we keep in touch. The time that I was there, she would always try to talk to me. "Don't take this. Don't let him do you like this. Why are you allowing him?" It was like you saying this, but you're not saying I will help you. I think that's what I was needing. If I have a friend, and she's in an abusive relationship, my thought is to talk to her first, and then open arms, let her know I love her: "If you want to live with me for a while, get yourself together, get your life together, let's leave him for a minute," then I think if I would have heard that more, I probably would let her stay with me or find resources for her as I would do the same for her. She was very supportive, somewhat.

Four of six of the participants talked extensively about the lack of support they received from their families. Participant 5 admitted:

> Unfortunately, I never told anyone because I was ashamed and I felt like it was my fault. It came up later that I was raped again, and I ended up with a child. I was blessed to have my child and go on my own, get a house, and an apartment and everything by myself. You see, the secrets in the family will keep you in bondage. All you really want to do is leave the house. No one wants to talk about the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse in the Black families that are passed down from one generation to the next. Healing do not

take place until its addressed. You see, we must kill that spirit. It has destroyed our families for many, many, many generations.

Theme 2: Church

All six of the participants discussed how they survived the domestic violence relationship with the support of their churches and through the preaching, teaching, and support from various ministries. Participant 4 shared:

> Going back to the church, I felt like they was part of my support but in a different way. The church gave me the tools to endure the emotional abuse I was enduring, but I didn't know what to call it back then, because it was accepted, you know, but today, I know it was emotional abuse.

Participant 5 discussed the spiritual encounter she engaged in when she attended church as it was part of her journey from domestic violence:

> I listened to a lot of music to keep me encouraged, and I attended church, but no one knew I was going through hell, because I did not tell. I go to church, get the word, I pray and then I go home. … I started going to The Potter's House, and it was a change, just a change then, which is good. It was a positive change. Bishop Jakes would speak into your life, and I sit under him. The longer I sit, the stronger I felt. I guess I can say my faith brought me up.

There were also negative aspects of the church according to four of the six participants in the study. Several participants shared that the church taught them to be submissive in their marriages and do whatever their spouses told them to do. Furthermore, if something went wrong in the marital relationship, they were taught it was their fault and they needed to change

something. Participant 1 talked about the encounter she had with a "church mother" and how it impacted some of her decisions:

> There was this mother, and I've got a lot of mothers in the Lord. There was this mother, and so she said, "You ask God to cut the soul tie. Cut the soul tie because he loved that soul tie." She said, "He can pull on that, so you ask him to cut the soul tie." I started learning how to pray effectively with them. They prayed over me, meaning deliverances, many, many deliverances. They would call Jesus, and I couldn't see nothing, hear nothing. I was walking around with guilty condemnation.

Participant 4 also spoke to the fact that because of her traditional church's teachings, messages concerning marriage, as well as values and beliefs, she stayed and endured her domestic violence relationship longer than she should have:

> I was also taught in the church to pray a lot. So, when things are not going right in your marriage or relationships, you pray about it, and God hears your prayers, and he changes the heart of your husband but also changes your heart and mind. So, my church teachings back then was [sic] to stay with your husband no matter what and according to the bible nothing should separate you from your partner but death. So, I stayed and prayed and prayed and prayed, hoping things would get better, and they did for a while, but it started back eventually with the emotional abuse, like cheating and lying and cussing and the talking down to me, you know, like saying I wasn't shit or I wouldn't be shit or ain't nobody going to want me you know.

Theme 3: Resources

Resources represented a primary theme among the six participants. Four of the six participants reported on the importance of resources in their decisions to stay or leave their domestic violence relationships. Participant 4 shared the following:

> While I was in the centers, in the women's center, I was educated on some things I didn't even know of. I did not know the extent of domestic violence I endured. Back then, people could only identify with the physical, such as fighting, but it so much more like throwing things, intimidating you, forcing you to do things you do not want to do. It's the spiritual abuse, the sexual abuse. I didn't know different types of abuse. I didn't realize verbal could be abusive. You know hitting. You think someone love you: "Oh, he was just jealous. He just loves me." But that's an abuse. I didn't know different types of abuse. I didn't know that that was a cycle, like a honeymoon stage and then the next stage. I didn't realize that. You can see them coming. If you know them, then you can identify them. I learned a lot in the women's center.

Participant 3 shared:

> Bishop, he helped me identify the unhealthy things in my marriage, family history, and things about me. I also participated in the Potter's House Starting Over program. It was very educational. They had speakers come in and talk about domestic violence, and I started connecting the dots in my own life. I was powerful, because in this women's group I felt safe and I was able to educate other women who did not experience domestic violence but who was [sic] maybe starting over from relocation or employment. I was able to be educated as well. The listening and sharing of stories from other women of faith was healing for me. The church is very different from back then. The did not have

any resources, they maybe lacked education or understanding. It's so much awareness today, but back then maybe, no one, including those who we thought had the answers, did.

Three of the five participants shared negative experiences when they attempted to access resources during their domestic violence relationships. Participant 1 offered a poignant story about attempting to use resources:

> I want to say it was the Trinity Ministries or something like that. It was downtown Dallas. I probably would have been rich, but I had this sick man in my life. The ministry wanted you to go to work and sign your check over to them. I, dear me, I said, "Now you know what? Only name that's going to be on my check is going to be mine. If I can't manage it, I will be the one to blame me. I won't blame you for not managing mine, so I'm not going to be able to do this." I couldn't find any real good support, so I just left there, and in leaving there, I met, most of the time, it was just Christian, strong Christian women that helped me.

Participant 5 talked about being unable to find the resources she needed during her domestic violence relationship, although they were available, such as housing, employment resources, and financial support as follows:

> At that point, they did offer me some assistance such as housing options. I was working. He would come on my job while I was there, and that was a problem. You lose jobs based on a lot of problems. Because of the domestic violence, I lost at least four to five jobs during my marriage. You see jobs back then did not want to deal with any family problems, so they just let you go. You basically had no protection. The shelter did offer

financial me assistance, but I did not get anything from them in the end. I guess the paperwork process took too long.

Participant 2 warned about the financial resources available through government programs based on her experience:

> I didn't. I did get to get any help. I got a Section 8 home. I got food stamps for 1 year. Because I went to work early on, I started cleaning houses because I needed more money, the man turned it into the government and the government penalized me for fraud. I ended up being on probation, because they said that I made $10 more than I was supposed to make.

Theme 4: Education

Finally, education about domestic violence was a major theme throughout five of the six participants' journeys. These five participants discussed their lack of knowledge and understanding of domestic violence. Participant 2 shared:

> If you don't know, you have no power. Power is knowing. If nobody never tells it to you, you wouldn't know it. If you ain't read it, you wouldn't know it. It was not given out in fliers. It was just an accepted norm. Education, yeah. I believe that. I believe if I had somebody to go to who really understood, they would have spoken up and would have taught me how to speak up, but I didn't know. I didn't know anything like that existed. That you could stand up. Wow, you can? They told me to "be quiet and shut up. Go over in that corner and be quiet," mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's what I was taught.

Participants 6 also said:

> I really didn't even know the true, definite meaning of domestic violence. I think a lot of that was lack of teaching me when I was coming up. Sometimes, it can just be that

conversation, and how you talk to your child or your children. A lot of hers was like, "I don't want to hear this. She [was] talking, fussing," and I didn't want to hear it. Now that she's gone, I'm listening to everything she's saying.

Participant 5 said:

There's times you go back. It's a cycle, unfortunately. It's very difficult to let go even though you're trained, even though you've have education, whatever the case may be. It's very difficult to close that door because it's an emotional attachment. I went back six to eight times. It could have been more. I cannot recall them all. I know it was quite a bit during the 12 years of marriage.

Finally, the participants shared the impact of education they received from the church in their decisions to move beyond their domestic violence relationships, and Participant 4 reported:

Not until I came to Texas did I realize being in an abusive relationship or several abusive relationships was not my fault, and I did not choose those abusive men. They chose me because they picked upon my vulnerability. That's what the Potter's house has taught me through the Starting Over program; it was kind of like group counseling you know. ... I really do believe God healed me, but it is always good to talk to someone you know; that's what I learned. Not to hold all that stuff in, [be]cause it can kill you…it kills your spirit and questions your faith.

Chapter 5

Discussion

This IPA study sought to explore the lived experiences of older African American women who survived domestic violence from a retrospective lens. This chapter includes a discussion of the findings presented in Chapter 4 within the context of the original research questions. A discussion of the limitations of the study are provided, followed by implications for education, policy, research, practice, and a closing reflexive statement. Finally, a conclusion is provided at the end of Chapter 5.

Research Question 1

The first research question asked: What are the lived experiences of African American women who are domestic violence survivors? The proposed question elicited three major themes and several subthemes from participants that added depth and understanding to their responses. These themes and subthemes suggest that spirituality and religion, social support, motherhood, and empowerment are important in the lives of African American women who have survived domestic violence. As participants retrospectively explored their experiences with domestic violence, they indicated that survivorship is an on-going process. Older women in this study continue to grapple with the trauma of domestic violence from earlier in life.

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the three major themes. Each major theme represents an aspect of the lived experiences of the women in the study; however, it is important to note that the themes relate to one another in a dynamic way. *Understanding the past* describes how participants question their past, attempt to find meaning in the past, and try to make sense of their past experiences with domestic violence. Participants also *acknowledge their journey* by identifying what they did to survive domestic violence. *Reclaiming and rebuilding* life represents

participants' descriptions of the process of starting over after leaving the domestic violence behind them and the integration of their past experiences with domestic violence into their current and future outlooks on life. Together, the three themes illustrate that although the women in this study are all survivors of domestic violence, they continue to move back and forth between understanding the past, acknowledging their journey, and reclaiming and rebuilding their lives as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 4-1 The relationships between the three major themes.

Understanding the Past

Understanding the past was one of the major themes of this study as the participants reflected on their relationships involving domestic violence and discussed what they endured, the challenges they faced, and what helped move them toward survivorship. Through a retrospective lens, participants questioned the past as though they were talking to their younger selves as an attempt to understand their lived experiences. In understanding the past, participants questioned

their previous experiences with abuse and questioned some of their decisions about staying or leaving their abusers. Participants also questioned the influence of various environmental systems (e.g., financial institutions, law enforcement) on their lived experiences as well as their past adherence to socioculturally dictated gender roles and expectations promoting the traditional values of male dominance within the family household (Agazie,2011; Ritchie & Eby, 2007).

Acknowledging the Journey

The second major theme emerging from the participants' lived experiences of domestic violence was acknowledging the journey. In other words, participants acknowledged what they had endured throughout their abusive relationships as well as acknowledged the strategies for survival that contributed to attaining resilience. Previous researchers suggested that many women develop coping skills to support their survival despite their domestic violence circumstances (Lindsey & Joseph, 2004; Anderson, Renner, & Davis, 2012; Vil, Sabri, Alexander, & Campbell, 2016). Acknowledging the journey for the participants gave them the opportunity to reflect back on their past experiences of abuse and share how they survived domestic violence.

Reclaiming and Rebuilding Life

Reclaiming and rebuilding life was the third and final major theme for the first research question related to the lived experiences of the six participants. As participants engaged in reclaiming and rebuilding life, they made decisions to move forward from their abusive relationships. This theme aligns with Enander and Holmberg (2008) concluding that many women go through three phases before making the decision to leave their domestic violence relationships. These phases are the following: (a) making the decision to leave, (b) leaving, and (c) acceptance as part of a woman's reclamation and rebuild of her life (Enander & Holmberg, 2008). The participants in this study shared through a retrospective lens how they went through

the questioning phase of abuse into acknowledging the journey toward finally reclaiming and rebuilding their lives. Although participants in this study were at the reclaiming and rebuilding phase of their post domestic abuse lives, women tend to be re-victimized if they do not have access to informal and formal support as well as resources when they move forward with their lives and away from the abusive relationships (Banks, 2015). More specifically, women's decisions to break free from domestic violence may yield increases to their stress levels due to uncertainty about finances, housing, and social support (Enander & Holmberg, 2008). Reclaiming and rebuilding life represents the integration of the participants' past experiences with their current and future outlook on life and highlights what promoted survivorship during their individual journeys.

Spirituality and Religion

A significant subtheme across each of the three major themes was the importance of participants' spirituality and religion (i.e., faith) during and after their abusive relationships. Similarly, other research suggests that many women rely on their faith and seek out God as a means of coping when enduring domestic violence relationships (Katerndahl et al., 2015). Additionally, the use of religion and spirituality may contribute to domestic violence survivorship (Vil et al., 2016). However, the current study yields new findings that suggest that older women continue to draw on their faith as an integral aspect of survivorship.

Several participants discussed how their faith was tested, yet they called on their faith to keep them strong and to give them the courage to leave the abusive relationship which aligns with previous research by West (1995) suggesting that African American women often turn to their faith to help them break free from domestic violence. Furthermore, many African American women have been shown to draw upon their religion, faith, and spirituality in order to cope with

domestic violence (Bent-Goodley & Williams, 2004; Lott-Collins & Moore, 2009, Nason-Clark, 2009). My six participants reflected on how they used meditation, prayer, hymn singing, and the use of scripture to remain encouraged. Similarly, Ellison and Taylor (1996) found that many African Americans turn to prayer as a coping resource and derive satisfaction from this form of coping.

As participants acknowledged their journeys with domestic violence, they talked about how their faith gave them the strength to acknowledge and accept where they were in their journey, the ability to consider the options of leaving, acknowledging the process of letting go, and the decision to move on with their lives. Although some study participants questioned the benefits of remaining faithful to their spirituality and religion at the time of the abuse, the women reported participating in some type of spiritual practice to remain grounded in their faith during abuse (Dyer, 2010). The participants also shared as they reflected on and questioned their pasts, and at times, they had little or no faith during the time they lived in abusive relationships. However, similar to the findings by Giesbrecht and Sevcik (2000), my participants shared that in looking back on their lived experiences, they believed that they could not have made it through their domestic violence relationships without their faith. This finding underscored how, among African American women, spirituality might be a significant aspect of a survivor's identity (Gillum, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2006). Utilizing a sample of older women, the current study builds upon Taylor's (2004) research that spiritual well-being sustains women through challenging life transitions as well as Hassouneh-Phillips' (2003) finding that spiritual beliefs promote many women's processes of healing after ending relationships involving domestic violence.

Participants shared what it means to be faith-filled as part of reclaiming and rebuilding their lives following a domestic violence relationship. Being faith-filled for participants of the

study meant drawing on their inner strengths (e.g., spirituality) and seeking ways to formally connect with the church as part of reclaiming and rebuilding their lives after the end of the domestic violence relationship. Gillum et al. (2006) also observed that religious involvement and spirituality may promote greater psychological well-being including greater quality of life among domestic violence survivors.

Finally, the role of the church showed involvement across all three major themes. Participants indicated that seeking out their pastors or ministry leaders in their churches enabled them to gain guidance and understanding when they did not know what to do in their abusive relationships. Participants also reported, as they acknowledged their journeys, that attending church services, reading scriptures, and connecting to their pastors' sermons provided them with the needed strength to leave their domestic violence relationships. All six participants indicated that they found the courage to leave and not return to the domestic violence relationship because of their engagement with their churches and related church activities. These findings also support previous researchers' conclusions that African Americans often seek out their churches to find answers to their problems, including domestic violence relationships (Bent-Goodley & Williams, 2004; Gillum, 2008; Nason-Clark, 2009). However, the current study findings suggest that women who look back retrospectively on their lives indicate that the role of the church has both positive and negative influence on their experience with domestic violence.

Social Support

Another predominant subtheme that emerged was the role of social support (e.g., friend, family, neighbors, co-workers). Blakely (2016) suggested that in order for African American women to move toward in the journey of healing from domestic violence, they must maintain their social support networks as a mechanism for coping and survival. Additionally, social

support has been shown to be necessary for overcoming surviving domestic violence (Sigurvinsdottir et al., 2015).

All study participants discussed how helpful and supportive their girlfriends had been during their domestic violence relationships. They also shared that oftentimes their friends did not know what to do to help but did offer emotional support such as a listening ear. Previous research found that friends provide instrumental support and are willing to provide tangible aid to victims of abuse when they are in need (Morrison, Luchok, Richter, & Parra-Medina, 2006). Fraser et al. (2002) also found that African American women who are victims of domestic violence feel comfortable seeking aid from their friends.

As the six participants acknowledged their journeys, they recalled their families were significant sources of support. The social support theme finding suggests that participants reach out to their family networks for support and assistance, consistent with findings by Yoshioka, Gilbert, El-Bassel, and Baig-Amin (2003). The participants shared that they talked with their mothers about the domestic violence they underwent because the mothers had also experienced domestic violence. Most participants reported that their mothers prayed for them, offered their listening ears, provided them places to stay, and sometimes offered financial support. Several participants discussed how their fathers offered support when they were in their domestic violence relationships by helping them move, providing financial assistance, and even babysitting.

As part of acknowledging the journey, participants indicated that their co-workers provided support and comfort during their domestic violence relationship. Many participants also reported their supervisors showed understanding and caring, sometimes suggesting the women take time off or reduce their hours at work if needed. Study participants who disclosed their

victimization experiences to someone at work were overall satisfied with the reactions and support offered by a co-worker or supervisor, a finding that is similar to Swanberg and Logan, 2005.

Participants did share that they were isolated from friends and family members. They felt disconnected with their children during their domestic violence relationships. Previous literature suggested that abusers may isolate survivors of domestic violence from their friends and families creating awkwardness when the women attempt to rebuild those relationships (Bent-Goodley, 2007; Campbell et al., 2002; Vil et al., 2016). However, the six participants shared that as part of reclaiming and rebuilding their lives, they could restore and rebuild these seemingly lost relationships. These reclaimed relationships were very important after the dissipation of their emotional connections with their abusers. Reclaiming these relationships enabled them to fulfill a need for strengthening their informal support systems while they reclaimed and rebuilt their lives. If their informal support did not accept them as they attempted to rebuild their support networks, the likelihood of returning to the arms of their abusers was found to be greater.

Participants reported their friends and families embraced them with open arms and that their adult children became more open and willing to share their feelings about the past. Many participants reported that an important aspect of reclaiming and rebuilding their lives was that their social support systems were strengthened, particularly with their adult children. It is important to note that these findings differ from McDowell and Raymond's (1998) finding that children who were abused may resent their elderly mothers who failed to protect them from the domestic violence. Previous literature suggests adult children who witnessed domestic violence in their childhood tend not to support their mother later in life (Wolkenstein & Sterman, 1998; Willson, Shuey, & Elder, 2003. However, in my study, adult children were included in

rebuilding and reclaiming of their lives by offering support and understanding their mothers' experiences with domestic violence. This in an interesting insight as the role of adult children in the lives of women who have experienced domestic violence in the past is a largely unexplored topic of research.

Motherhood and Concern for Children

Related to the subtheme of social support, motherhood and concern for children was an integral aspect of the lived experience of the participants. All the participants shared the impact of being a mother on the decision to stay in the relationship in order to keep their family together. The participants did not want their children to grow up without a father. This aligns with current literature that indicates that many African American women endure domestic violence to protect the family unit (Bell, Goodman, & Dutton, 2007; Bent-Goodley, 2013). Many of the study participants justified staying in the domestic violence relationship through statements such as "he's a good father" or "a girl needs her father." However, other participants shared that they could no longer allow their children to be exposed to domestic violence. Many participants described the devastation that they felt when their children attempted to protect them and caused further incidences of abuse.

Participants struggled with the need to protect their children, which led them to explore the safest options for leaving their domestic violence relationship. Research suggests that many women tend to face difficult decisions when leaving abusive relationships due to the need to ensure their children's safety (Scheffer-Lindgren & Renck, 2008). Moreover, Enander and Holmberg (2008) noted that once a woman assesses the lethality of her domestic violence relationship and the potential harm to her children or family members, she gains the courage to leave. However, findings from the current study found that older women continued to struggle

with questions about whether or not they should have left their abusive relationships earlier, for the sake of their children.

Empowerment

Finally, when participants discussed reclaiming and rebuilding their lives, the sub-theme of empowerment emerged. Empowerment is the process by which individuals and groups gain power to access available resources and to gain control of their lives (Adams, 2008). Participants said they became tired of not being in control of their lives, living in isolation and fear, as well as not knowing how their life journeys were going to end because of living in the domestic violence relationship. However, the participants shared that they eventually felt empowered to make the needed changes in their lives that led to them leaving their abusers. Their reports mirrored Mengo's (2016) observation that factors such as social support, resources, and coping were critical for women to reclaim and rebuild their lives following domestic violence. Another defining moment that the participants shared was the power of knowing that their children had depended on them to leave the domestic violence relationship. Participants reflected feeling empowered as mothers who made decisions to remove their children from abusive homes. Participants also shared feeling safe and secure in later life, which contrasted to their feelings of powerlessness during the abusive relationships which were associated with feelings of guilt, shame, and blame for staying in their abusive relationships. Finally, participants felt empowered to complete activities and attain goals unavailable to them during their domestic violence relationships that included attending school, working, and cultivating friendships. These findings are consistent with Taylor's (2004) research conclusion that as survivors of domestic violence engage in healthier ways of living, they view themselves as individuals with goals for the future. These goals include the maintenance or establishment of positive relationships as well as the

attainment of self-improvement that supports a healthy lifestyle (Taylor, 2004). Findings from this study offer new insight that many survivors of domestic violence may continue to seek avenues for empowerment even in later life and may purse life-enriching activities that strengthened their coping skills as they relate to their earlier trauma of abuse.

Research Question 2

The second research asked participants to examine what factors affected their survivorship from a retrospective lens. Five major themes emerged as factors from the analysis. These themes are discussed and listed as the following: (a) social support, (b) church, (c) formal resources, (d) family tradition and sociocultural values, and (e) awareness/ education

Social Support

Participants discussed how social support including family, friends, and co-workers affected their survivorship in both positive and negative ways. Many of the participants in the study relied on their immediate family members such as their mother and/or father to support them through their domestic violence situation. Participants shared that they heavily gravitated toward their mothers and found comfort and support from them. All the participants discussed the importance of their girlfriends who supported them from the beginning to the end of their domestic violence relationships by providing encouragement, a place to stay, and even resources. The participants indicated that their co-workers were also part of their social support network and did offer resources and financial assistance to them. The findings related to social support are in line with previous findings related to African American women needing social support when recovering from domestic violence (Blakely, 2016; Sigurvinsdotti et al., 2015). However, this study's findings also highlight how social support can impact the survivor in a negative way. For example, my participants shared they had difficulty disclosing their domestic violence

relationships to their parents, particularly to their fathers. The participants also shared that their domestic violence situations kept them isolated and not wanting to disclose to their girlfriends all the details of their experiences because when they did not take their friends' advice they felt blamed or stigmatized for remaining in their domestic violence relationships. The reports about feeling blamed in this study support Scheffer Lindgren and Renck's (2008) observation that many domestic violence survivors choose not involve friends and family members in their domestic violence situations due to the fear of being criticized and scrutinized.

Church

Participants in this study indicated their churches affected their survivorship in both positive and negative ways. As far as the positive aspects, participants shared that they had access to counseling from their pastors or ministry leaders, participated in church-related activities, and used scriptures from sermons to build and increase their faith. Participants shared the importance of seeking counsel from pastors and applying knowledge about scripture to gain healing from their domestic violence situations. Many participants shared that being connected to a women's ministry in church provided the extra support they needed to endure their domestic violence relationships. Moreover, participants shared that programs and classes within their churches focused on relationship issues, such as domestic violence, generated opportunities to assess and evaluate their situations and to eventually seek help. This finding adds to the growing evidence for African American women seeking services such as counseling from faith-based leaders in addition to praying (Nason-Clark, 2009).

For the negative aspects, most participants also shared when seeking help and support from their pastors or ministry leaders, those individuals tended to use biblical scriptures to justify male dominance, to blame and shame the survivor, and to dissuade them from their issues or

concerns about domestic violence. For example, several participants shared that when they went to meet with their pastors or church leaders, who used biblical scripture to define the roles of men and women which indicated that the man is the head of the household with primary decision-making ability and that the woman should stay at home and take care of the children. Other studies suggest that clergy may use traditional teachings based on biblical scriptures to justify male dominance and female submissiveness (Petersen, 2009: Potter, 2007). Participants also said some of their church leaders instructed them to make changes in their own lives because of something they were doing wrong (or not doing) to cause the abuse from their male partners.

Finally, the participants shared that many pastors and leaders did not address or take their concerns seriously. Due to the clergy's failure to show compassion or empathy, they left their churches. The literature contains mixed findings concerning pastors and leaders use of traditional biblical scriptures and the impact of using these verses on women's decisions to remain in or leave domestic violence relationships (McAllister & Roberts-Lewis, 2009). The critical finding in the literature suggests many faith-based leaders lack the necessary education and training concerning domestic violence within their congregations as well as within the greater African American community to provide competent services to their church members or parishioners (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Homiak & Singletary, 2007).

Formal Resources

As most participants reflected on their past domestic violence situations, they noted that formal resources were not readily available at the time of their abuse. Participants indicated that they did not know where to get help and when they considered some of the resources that they learned about through a friend or co-worker, they were difficult to access. This finding supports

previous studies, in which the finding involved women relying on external community resources, even though gaining access to these resources represented an unnecessarily inordinate barrier for domestic violence survivors to overcome (Vil et al., 2016).

Several participants questioned their past attempts to access help through social services because of fears to having their children removed from their home. This fear for the children is consistent with Bent-Goodley's (2004) finding that African American women in abusive relationships may be unwilling to provide information about domestic violence to social service providers in an effort to avoid child protective services from getting and involved and to keep their families together. Gillum (2008) represented African American women as often unhappy with the quality of services they receive when seeking assistance from social services as they attempt to escape from domestic violence relationships.

Furthermore, several participants in my study questioned the services they received from emergency shelters as they fled their domestic violence relationships. The participants indicated that they did not receive necessary resources, such as housing or financial assistance, and that shelter workers lacked cultural competence and sensitivity to their difficulties. This finding supports Gillum's (2008) revelations that African American domestic violence survivors experienced discrimination from shelter staff during their shelter stays. This discrimination involved shelter staff withholding the basic supplies and necessities that were provided to other women in the same shelter.

Many study participants questioned their past interactions with law enforcement and explained the police officers did not understand the severity of their domestic violence experiences. Some participants attributed this insensitivity to the gender expectations held by law enforcement officers called to address a domestic violence incident. These reports support the

work of Moss, Pitula, Campbell, and Halstead (1997), whose study participants shared that due to negative responses from law enforcement, they hesitated from seeking aid for or reporting further incidences of abuse. Moreover, Lockwood and Prohaska (2015) suggested that law enforcement responses to domestic violence incidents are often rooted in traditional gender roles within a masculine police culture contending that domestic violence is not a serious crime.

Family Tradition and Sociocultural Values

In a finding similar to Walker's (2017), participants in this study questioned how sociocultural values impacted how much abuse they endured in their domestic violence relationships before they decided to leave. My findings align with previous research suggesting that some sociocultural values are passed down from generation to generation (Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011). Morrison et al. (2006) added that some African American community members view abusive relationships as a private matter between only the man and woman. For example, my participants indicated they were taught to keep family issues within the family.

My findings are consistent with the literature suggesting that domestic violence can be attributed to cultural gender roles and expectations as well as to the social structures in which women live (Hayes, 2013). Rigid family values and beliefs, including gender roles, have been shown to contribute to domestic violence in the lives of African American women (Campbell, Sharps, Gary, Campbell, & Lopez, 2002). Furthermore, African American women are often socialized into sacrificing their individual values for ensuring the survival of the family unit (Billingsley, 1994).

Education and Awareness

Education and awareness about domestic violence emerged as a factor that affects domestic violence survivorship among African American women who examine their prior

relationships from a retrospective lens. Many participants discussed having a lack of education/awareness and understanding about domestic violence during those relationships; this lack of education/awareness prevented them from seeking help. From a retrospective lens, participants suggested that domestic violence is viewed as normal and accepted behavior in the African American community and that more education and awareness is needed in order to assist women experiencing abuse who need to understand that their experiences are not healthy nor appropriate for an intimate partner relationships. Similarly, Lucea et al., 2013 found that education about domestic violence is still needed today in the African American community.

Participants also shared they witnessed domestic violence between the adults during their own childhood. As a result, the participants believed these behaviors were normal and acceptable. Through a retrospective lens, however, participants shared that if they had been educated to identify the signs of abuse or what to look for in abusive relationships, they would have left sooner or possibly avoided engaging in any relationships with the men who abused them. These reports by the participants support previous studies, from which several important factors were found to impact women's abilities for successfully ending domestic violence relationships. These factors include instruction for gaining awareness about what constitutes abuse, awareness of options, access to community and formal resources, and informal support (Enander & Holmberg, 2008; Scheffer Lindgren & Renck, 2008). Although most participants indicated awareness was critical in their decisions to stay or leave their domestic violence relationships, few studies explored this phenomenon. Finally, many participants shared they had to leave their old church and attended another church to receive the needed awareness and education about domestic violence and identify the negative patterns in their own abusive relationships. When exploring current literature about the role of the church in combating social

issues including domestic violence within the African American community, little research has been conducted on intervention strategies with faith-based leaders (Nason-Clark, 2009). However, previous research does indicate that health-related interventions held in partnership with African American churches may be effective for meeting the needs of this population and may offer direction for future interventions related to raising awareness and knowledge of domestic violence.

For example, there are several studies that examine the incorporation of faith-based approach into church interventions to increase knowledge and awareness on key health issues effecting the African American community. Duru et al. (2010) implemented a randomized controlled trial of 62 elder African American women within a church randomization group in walking approximately 30 minutes per day, three times per week at three churches in California to evaluate and increase their sedentary lifestyle (Duru et al., 2010). The intervention group were provided with a combination of materials such as biblical readings, prayer, goals, resources within the community, and competition related to walking. Duru et al. indicated that 85% of study participants attended approximately six out of eight sessions. The intervention participants averaged over 12,000 steps during each week of the study at baseline, when compared to approximately 13,000 steps in the control group. During the 6-month cycle, the intervention group reported an increase in their weekly steps by well over 9,000 as an average when compared by the incline of 2,426 for control group participants. Duru et al. suggested faith-based physical activity programs increase lifestyle changes in older African American women (Duru et al., 2010). They also revealed that older African American women were more likely to participate for the social aspect more so than health related benefits. These findings suggest that future interventions designed for African American women that take place in churches might

include a social component.

Dornelas, Stepnowski, Fisher, and Thompson (2007) evaluated minority women's participation at health clinic or a church as opposed to participation in a 10-week exercise program. Findings indicated that women between the ages of 50 to 70 years participated more than twice as many exercise meetings when compared to women between the ages of 17 to 27 years. Furthermore, women over the age of 40 who attended church and participated in this study were more likely to follow the exercise regime and participate in faith-based exercise programs. These findings suggest that older African American women may be open to interventions held in church settings.

Holt et al. (2012) conducted another faith-based intervention approach to evaluate and increase awareness in early detection, treatment, and prevention of colorectal cancer with African Americans in 16 churches using a faith-based health belief prescreening method. Community health personnel facilitated led two educational meetings on colorectal cancer initial detection. The findings indicated a pre/post increase in awareness, recognizing the importance of screening, and decline in understanding limitations towards screening. Findings from this study concluded that faith-based health education interventions are effective in engaging African American men and women in education.

Although there are limited domestic violence intervention programs within faith-based organizations, we can learn from previous health education interventions held within church settings to inform the design and delivery of interventions for African American women who are survivors of domestic violence. For example, important features of successful health-related interventions in faith-based settings suggest the value of a holistic approach (Danielson, Lucas, Malinowski, & Pittman, 2009) as well as the importance of acknowledging the unique features of

different faith traditions (Houston, Kolnik, & Todd, 2016). Furthermore, to be successful in implementing domestic violence education and awareness in faith-based organizations, the following need must be addressed: (a) education and training/ awareness for both the clergy and congregants, (b) support for survivors of domestic violence, and (c) resources for survivors of domestic violence.

Study Limitations

Although the findings filled a gap in the literature related to older African American women's lived experiences of previous relationships that involved domestic violence, this study had limitations Thus, the findings might not generalize to the study population even though generalization is not a typical goal for a qualitative study. First, the sample included only a small sample of six African American women who were over 55 years of age. Second, no participants fell into the oldest-old category of ages 80 years and over, which is the fastest growing segment of the aging population in the United States (National Institute on Aging, 2017). Obtaining the perspective of women in the oldest-old category may yield age cohort differences. Third, it is also important to acknowledge that my sample consisted of older African American women who earned degrees in higher education at different points of their lives. Several study participants in their mid to late fifties obtained Master Degrees during their abusive relationship and some study participants had at least 1 year of college, while the oldest study participants went to college after their domestic violence relationship ended. These participants may have very different lived experiences because of their level of formal education than survivors who never earned college degrees.

Fourth, this study was limited by including only women who experienced domestic violence in the past and who were not currently enduring any form of violence. For example, one

participant met the inclusion criteria for the study. However, during the informed consent process, I learned that she was actively experiencing emotional abuse from her husband of 50 years. Therefore, she was excluded from the study. An additional limitation is that I did not member check with student participants. Future studies will include member check to enhance rigor.

A final limitation is that I am a member of the church at which I obtained participants. My membership might have influenced the amount of information the participants shared with me. I did ensure confidentiality, build rapport, and create a safe space with each participant to encourage her to disclose fully her experiences with domestic violence. In spite of these limitations, this qualitative study contributes new knowledge to the literature regarding the factors that affect the survivorship of African American women who have experienced domestic violence and their lived experiences from a retrospective lens.

Implications for Policy

Domestic violence indisputably is one of the chief social issues confronting African American women today. Because of this, continued advocacy for policy and law is necessary to assist and educate the criminal justice system about domestic violence and to support victims and survivors specifically African American women. For example, African American women do not have the same access to the protections of the state as women of other races, and in fact, African American women often face injustice at the hands of law enforcement personnel (Ruttenberg, 1994). Therefore, women seeking help and assistance for domestic violence may develop a distrust of the criminal justice system (Congressional Research Services, 2012) Although many enhancements have been made to policies for the programs and services available for victims of domestic violence, there is still a need to develop culturally competent professionals who are

able to administer prevention and intervention policies and services in ways that truly empower and support African American women domestic violence survivors. Based on the study findings, federal, state, and local policies need to be reexamined and increase funding for training volunteers and staff at domestic violence shelters serving survivors and their children. Social workers, law enforcement agencies, and policy makers must continue to examine mandatory arrest policies in each state and challenge those departments not complying with federal, state, and local mandates. Also, mandatory arrest policies should continue to offer survivors the opportunity to seek community support such as counseling, resources, legal assistance, and a safe environment to rest start the healing process while the perpetrator of the domestic violence is behind bars (Dugan et al., 2003).

Based on the study findings, there is a need for teaching cultural competence to agencies providing intervention and prevention services in order to assist African American women and communities effectively. It would be very beneficial for a coordinated community response team to assist in creating focus groups in their respective communities to learn what are the gaps in current policies and laws related to domestic violence and to hold federal, state, and local representatives accountable to bring about change. Finally, new manuals and protocols addressing domestic violence in all its forms are needed for educating law enforcement and the criminal justice system at the federal, state, and local levels. This training may enable officers to shift their beliefs to align with current trends in the understanding of domestic violence. Policy makers must continue to examine as well as reauthorize The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in order to transform mindsets regarding domestic violence, foster consciousness of violence against women, and cultivate and improve services and programs for survivors (Congressional Research Services, 2012).

Implications for Research

Future researchers should expand this line of inquiry to include a larger sample size of older African American women. Future studies might also include participants from a variety of faith backgrounds and church affiliations as well as women who do not attend church. In addition, future researchers could explore the clergy's response to domestic violence in the African American church and community as faith, spirituality, and religion established a major theme identified in this study. Many of the women in this study shared their negative experiences with their traditional churches; however, when they changed their memberships to different churches, they gained positive experiences with the pastors and other ministry leaders who provided the support they needed to heal and grow as empowered women. Future researchers could compare how long-standing traditional churches and more recently founded mega congregations address domestic violence.

Due to one of my participants not meeting the inclusion criteria for my study after I started the interview, I had to eliminate her from my study when I learned she was still in her 50-year marriage. The excluded participant indicated that the physical abuse ended approximately 10 years ago, but the emotional abuse has remained. Future researchers could interview older African American women who currently endure domestic violence and what factors impacted their decisions to stay in those relationships.

Domestic violence in the African American community has multidimensional factors such as homelessness, generational family abuse history, substance abuse, and unemployment. Throughout this study, older African American women acknowledged domestic violence as a problem in their families and communities as well in their churches. Future researcher might investigate how this public health issue is addressed both within churches and by coordinated

community response teams that could include the criminal justice system, mental health professionals, social work practitioners, and allied healthcare professionals.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Education about domestic violence is a key implication for social work practice with African Americans. First, engaging communities in prevention and intervention programs for survivors of domestic violence is needed. Secondly, there is a dire need for culturally tailored education and prevention services within communities of African Americans. Based on the findings in the study, education related to what constitutes domestic violence, particularly for both older and younger generations of African American women is needed. This need may be due to individual survivors embracing cultural traditions, values, and beliefs about domestic violence (Lockhart & Danis, 2010).

More training and education is needed for social work professionals in the field of health, education, criminal justice, social service settings, and faith-based organizations about the unique cultural needs of minority populations experiencing domestic violence. Social workers must also move away from the traditional approaches to working with survivors of domestic toward generating culturally diversified educational opportunities to support, engage, and empower African American women who have survived domestic violence (Lockhart & Danis, 2010). Moreover, education can impact the way in which African American women understand abuse as well how they embrace and receive services when disclosing their lived experiences of domestic violence.

Kennedy et al. (2012) indicated that a lack of resources poses a barrier for women attempting to leave a domestic violence relationship. Because the participants discussed how they lacked external resources that were beneficial, it is imperative for social workers to consider

other social service platforms for serving this population. A predominant theme in this study involved participants seeking out and relying on their faith during and after their experiences with domestic violence. Findings from this study bolster support for providing social services to church congregations especially as the study findings highlighted that some African American women may not find formal support systems accessible or useful.

Because the church is built on the tradition of supporting and empowering African American women, social workers can train faith-based leaders on a model to follow when addressing domestic violence in their communities. Moreover, faith-based leaders need to be trained to respond when congregants disclose abuse. Faith-based leaders must partner and collaborate with social work professionals who can educate, train, and be needed resources to support domestic violence survivors in the African American church and community (Wolff, Burleigh, Tripp, & Gadomski, 2001). It is important for leaders in the African American faith community to view social work practitioners as resources rather than barriers to bridge what the data suggested to be a gap in resources missing between the church and secular social work profession.

Practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and community advocates in the field of social work are encouraged to address the social problems of the understudied population of older African American women who have undergone domestic violence at some point in their lives. By understanding domestic violence within the African American community from the historical perspective, they can provide services and resources that promote healing (Lockhart & Danis, 2010). As mentioned previously, substantial general research is available about violence against women; however, little research has engaged older African American women using a retrospective lens to gain in-depth knowledge about the factors related to their domestic violence

experiences. Nonetheless, the findings of such studies, including this one, can be used by social work professionals to discover the coping strategies that older African women use to survive domestic violence (St. Vil et al., 2016). Further, such findings can inform social workers and other professionals about the implementation of culturally competent services, education and awareness, community accountability, and resources that can be used to assist with promoting health and well-being among domestic violence survivors.

Social workers must challenge stereotypes and bring key stakeholders to the forefront to find solutions to address the issue of domestic violence in the African American community. This effort includes law enforcement, counselors, survivors, community members, and church leaders. This research represented an investment in the African American community to enable all its members to live healthy lives and end the cycle of abuse. Practitioners who address domestic violence in their communities must challenge all ecosystem levels (i.e., micro, mezzo, and macro); examine the theoretical frameworks about diversity; and improve services, research, policy, and practice skills and techniques to foster a holistic approach to empowering African American women who have experienced domestic violence.

Finally, exploring the design and delivery of interventions in conjunction with congregational based social services may be a potential avenue for social workers in practice Social workers can effectively work within faith-based organizations to provide support and resources to the African American community. Congregational based social services are also experienced in examining the type of services needed for congregants and may be able to offer specific skills that will promote effective collaboration to train, educate, and provide awareness as well as resources to women who have endured domestic violence (Chaves & Tsitos, 2014; Houston-Kolnik & Todd, 2016).

Closing Reflexive Statement

One comment made by a participant that I have replayed in my mind over and over throughout the last few months is the following: “It takes a very special person to open up older women to be able to share their stories, because there’s still a lot of pain there.” I used every opportunity to engage the participants in a way that made them comfortable, safe, and willing to share. Over the course of my professional career, I have had the privilege of hearing the stories of thousands of survivors of domestic violence.

However, this experience of interviewing older African American women was quite different. In my previous roles as counselor, advocate, and therapist, I was the one who provided comfort and support. In the role of a researcher, I gained the ability to show some level of vulnerability. I felt like I could feel their hurt and pain. I felt like any of those six participants could have been my mother, grandmother, or sister. I could feel that lump in my throat as the tears started forming when I listened to the details of their lived experiences. I started to hurt for them as they shared all the systems that failed them, such as the police, the shelters, and the child welfare system, during their lengthy domestic violence relationships. I hurt for them when I heard how the church used its power and control to provide them with inappropriate guidance.

I have read about all these factors, but I found having an older African American woman tell me—the researcher—about these experiences and problems in her own words to be heartbreaking. As the participants continued to guide me further into their lived experiences, I began hearing the sense of strength, faith, peace, hope, understanding, and power that shifted the interviews toward positivity because these women journeyed through and away from abuse. It is my sincere hope and prayer that the findings from this study respectfully represented the lived

experiences of the six participants so that the findings shed light on the lifelong process of recovery and healing that occurs in women who lived with domestic violence.

Conclusions

The purpose of this qualitative IPA study was to gain new understanding of the lived experiences of older African American women with domestic violence and explore the factors that impacted their survivorship from a retrospective lens. As cited in the literature review and throughout the study, the six African American women relied on their faith, with the help and guidance of their informal support systems, to carry them through the darkest times of their abusive relationships. The findings of this study support much of the current literature's documentation about African American women's lived experiences with domestic violence, however, the findings generated a unique contribution to the literature with the presentation of the older African women's domestic violence experiences using a retrospective perspective to examine their survivorship.

Finally, the findings suggest there is a need for society to become more aware and sensitive to African American women who may process the emotional pain they feel due to domestic violence differently than women of other ethnic groups, such as their use of faith to sustain them. This concern is particularly valid for older women who could have endured many years of abuse. The participants interviewed for this study acknowledged the need to better understand the definitions as well the dynamics of domestic violence, which might explain how they stayed so long in their abusive relationships. They thought that the domestic violence was normal and expected within intimate partner relationships. They shared how when they were younger women, domestic violence was not discussed publicly, and they believed they had to

endure it. These findings underscore that education about domestic violence in all its forms is key not only for a survivor of domestic violence but also for the community in which they live.

Finally, my findings point toward a need to further educate faith-based leaders and organizations about domestic violence. Nason-Clark (2009) suggested that African American women seek out their church leaders and clergy for support when dealing with personal issues such as domestic violence; thus, pastors and church leaders could benefit from training and education about domestic violence and the needs of women in these relationships in order to assist their congregants competently. The findings may also be used to develop intervention curriculum that can be incorporated into special church activities, sermons, and/or other aspects of churches regular weekly services. The findings may also be used to develop training curriculum for pastors and leaders in the church who serve their church members and parishioners as pastoral counselors. Overall, the findings point toward the need for more culturally-sensitive and culturally-tailored programs and services that incorporate spirituality in order to ameliorate the effects of domestic violence in the African American community. Finally, the findings suggest that the African American church may be an important platform for delivering domestic violence education, training, and prevention programs that can meet the unique cultural needs of African American women.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

To get us started, I'd like to ask you a few background questions:

a. What is your age?

b. What is your highest level of education?

c. What is your marital status?

d. Are you currently employed? If yes, what type of work (i.e., health care, retail, restaurant)?

e. What is your primary source of income?

1. Please tell me about your experience/s with domestic violence.

    Potential probes:

    - Can you tell me more about when (time) the abuse occurred
    - Can you tell me what type/s of domestic violence you experienced (physical, emotional, verbal, psychological)
    - Can you tell me if you had any previous history of domestic violence
    - Can you tell me how and when, if you left your domestic violence relationship
    - Can you tell me if you returned to the relationship, what were the factors you considered
    - Can you tell me if your domestic violence had any effect on your interpersonal relationships with family and friends

2. Looking back, how did you feel about your experiences with domestic violence?

3. Looking back, what were your experiences as a survivor of domestic violence?

    Potential probes:

-How would you define a survivor or survivorship?

4. How did you get from how you used to be (in an abusive relationship) to how you are now (as a survivors)?

Potential probes:

- Can you tell me if your religion/ spirituality impacted your decision to stay or leave your domestic violence relationship
- Can you tell me what resources you sought out during your domestic violence relationship
- Can you tell me if education or lack of education concerning domestic violence contributed to you staying or leaving
- Cn you tell me how or if your cultural values contributed to you staying or leaving
- Can you tell me about your social support or lack of social support during your domestic violence relationship

5. Looking back, if you were to use two or three words to describe yourself being a survivor of domestic violence what would they be?