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What Would I Know About Mercy? Faith and Optimistic Expectancies Among African Americans

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Abstract

A small body of research has begun to explore the association between faith and optimism among African Americans. However, missing from the extant work is an examination of the extent to which traditional indices of religious commitment work together with beliefs about God to shape optimism. The present study examines the utility of indices of social location, religious commitment (i.e., early and current religious service attendance, subjective religiosity), belief about the quality of one's relationship with God (i.e., a belief that one is connected to a loving God), and beliefs about being the recipient of divine forgiveness for predicting dispositional optimism among a sample of community residing African American adults ($N = 241$). Age, subjective religiosity, and organizational religiosity were positively related to optimism in bivariate analyses. Hierarchical regression analyses demonstrated a significant association between age, subjective religiosity, and optimism; however, those associations were eliminated once relationship with God and belief in one's forgiveness by God were entered into the model. Only belief in God's love predicted optimism in multivariate analyses. Serial mediation analyses revealed that beliefs about the quality of one's relationship with God and belief in divine forgiveness fully mediated the relationship between subjective religiosity and optimism, but that the relationship is driven largely by relationship with God. Implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords

Religiosity; Relationship with God; Divine forgiveness; Unforgiveness; Optimism; African Americans; Positive psychology

Religiosity helps people to endure the vicissitudes of life (Brodsky 2000; Chatters et al. 1992; Hayward and Krause 2015; Krause and Hayward 2014; Kwilecki 2004; Mattis 2002; Pargament 2010; 1997). Religious institutions provide individuals with an array of instrumental, social, and emotional supports in times of need (Chatters et al. 2014; Krause et

al. 2011; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Maton, and Wells 1995; Neighbors et al. 1998; Taylor et al. 2013; Williams et al. 1999). Religion also informs the meanings that people construct about the events that befall them (Mattis 2002; Nelson 1997; Park 2005; Pargament 1997; van Uden and Zondag 2016). Although it is clear that religiosity shapes the ways that individuals respond to and make meaning of the challenges of life, only relatively recently have scholars begun to explore empirically the role that faith plays in shaping the positive (i.e., optimistic) expectations that people have about the outcomes of future events (Koenig et al. 2012; Koenig 2015; Krause and Hayward 2014; Krause 2002; 2003; Mattis et al. 2003, 2004b; Sethi and Seligman, 1993; 1994; Utsey et al. 2008; WHOQOL SRPB Group, 2006). However, the extant empirical research on the link between religion and expectancy outcomes, though fruitful, is hampered by the relative absence of clear, theologically driven conceptual frameworks. This study uses Judeo-Christian theology and African American theology as conceptual frames to examine whether the experience of God as a loving and merciful figure and the belief that one is a beneficiary of grace inspire dispositional optimism.

Dispositional Optimism

Dispositional optimism is a personality orientation in which expectations about the outcomes of future events are generally positive (Lee and Seligman 1997; Peterson 2000; Carver and Scheier 2014). Optimism has captured a particularly salient place in the imagination of scholars interested in positive psychology. That place is well deserved given that optimism has been linked to a range of positive health outcomes including greater subjective well-being, lower incidence of such chronic diseases as cardiovascular disease, lower morbidity, stronger immune responses, and lower mortality from a host of diseases (see Carver and Scheier 2014; Segerstrom 2007 for reviews). Optimism has been shown to buffer against work burnout even among workers engaged in occupations that carry a high risk of burnout (Ojedokun and Idemudia 2014). Dispositional optimism is associated with higher quality of family (Draei and Ramanaiah 2012) and romantic relationships (Assad et al. 2007). Gallagher and colleagues (2013) also have found that optimism was associated with greater positive affect (i.e., laughter, enjoyment, and love), lower levels of negative affect (i.e., worry, anger, boredom, sadness, and depression), greater life satisfaction, more positive perceptions of personal physical health, and an expectation that personal conditions will improve in the future. Despite the importance of optimism as an index of well-being, relatively little research on this outcome has focused on African Americans. This study serves as a corrective to that gap.

Correlates of Dispositional Optimism

Resource-based approaches have been employed in the effort to identify important correlates of optimism. These theories suggest that it is reasonable to anticipate that those who have more material resources and those who have a wider range of options to negotiate life's challenges will be more inclined than their less well-resourced counterparts to expect that events will work out for the best (Gallagher et al. 2013). Although this theoretical assertion has not always been supported (see Chang 1998; Cheng and Hamid 1997; Mattis et al. 2004a, b; Mattis et al. 2003; Schulz et al. 1996), cross-national studies suggest that this

resource–optimism link may have merit. The WHOQOL SRPB Group (2006) in their cross-national studies of quality of life found a link between education and optimism. Further, in a cross-national study of over 150,000 participants from 142 countries, Gallagher and colleagues (2013) found that age, gender, education, and income were all associated with optimism. Indeed, Gallagher et al. (2013) assert: “young, female, highly educated, and affluent individuals are on average the most optimistic individuals worldwide” (p. 432). Given both inconsistencies in findings regarding the relation between demographic factors and optimism, and the relative dearth of information about the link between social location and optimism among African Americans, we examine the extent to which indices of social location (age, gender, combined household income, and educational attainment) are associated with dispositional optimism among African Americans in this study sample.

Religiosity and Optimistic Expectancies

Although social position (and resources that social positions imply) may influence the expectations that we hold about future events, there is evidence that optimistic expectancies also are informed by more deeply rooted structural, ideological, and cultural factors. The cultural system that has been most consistently implicated in the cultivation of optimism is religion (Geertz 1989).

Sociologist Oliver Bennett theorizes that optimism is essential to everyday human functioning and to the integrity of social systems (e.g., the effective functioning of family, political systems). He posits that, as a consequence of its importance, individuals and systems within any society are naturally driven to embrace optimism as an “implicit cultural policy” (Bennett 2011a, b). Importantly, Bennett asserts that because of the importance of optimism, the critical structures that form the bedrock of any society (e.g., religious institutions) inevitably develop complex albeit sometimes tacit mechanisms for cultivating, reifying, and promulgating optimism (Bennett 2011a, b).

Bennett contends that religions, religious institutions, and religious leaders cultivate hope through two key ideological mechanisms: (1) through theories of ultimate destiny (e.g., through their conceptualizations of heaven, hell, an afterlife, reincarnation); and (2) through their models of divine justice (e.g., through conceptualizations of God as loving, compassionate, merciful, or as wrathful and punitive). It is important to note here that conceiving of practices or ideologies as cultural policy does not challenge the veracity of claims about God made by any system of faith. Instead, this concept foregrounds the reality that there are a vast array of non-explicit mechanisms by which systems (secular and religious) articulate, reify, and sustain meanings, and through which they establish the legitimacy of those meanings for any group.

Consistent with Bennett’s assertions regarding the powerful role of religious ideology in promoting optimism, theologians, particularly Christian theologians, point to a link between faith and optimism. In the Christian Bible, God is explicitly described as the “God of hope” (see for example, Romans 15: 13 “May God, the source of hope, fill you with joy and peace through your faith in him. Then you will overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit”, New International Version). This interconnection between optimism and faith in a loving and redemptive God is a foundational and particularly salient theme in African

American theologies including Black liberation theologies (Cone 1986, 1997, 1998; Evans Jr. 1998; Grant 1989; Hopkins 2005). From the perspectives of these multifarious theologies, it is God's love, omnipotence, grace, forgiveness, and justice that are at the core of African American people's sense of purpose, dignity, and the hopeful belief in the positive possibilities of an all too often unjust world.

Empirical work in psychology and sociology provides some support for the claim that religious institutions and various manifestations of identification with those institutions may play important roles in the cultivation of optimism. More specifically, scholars have found a positive association between optimism and religious orientation (e.g., fundamentalism, religious conservatism) (Koenig et al. 2012; Krause and Hayward 2014; Sethi and Seligman 1993, 1994). Research also suggests that those who demonstrate a greater level of religious commitment as measured by service attendance tend to report greater levels of optimism (Mattis et al. 2004a, b). Other studies have found that individuals for whom faith is an important or salient aspect of identity (i.e., those who score higher on subjective religiosity) are more likely to be optimistic (Dember and Brooks 1989; Idler and Kasl 1997; Mattis et al. 2004a, b; Mattis et al. 2003; Sethi and Seligman 1993, 1994).

The incipient empirical literature on the association between religious orientation, religious affiliation, religious identity, and optimism has been enlightening. However, relatively little of that work is explicitly grounded in a theological framework. Existing research provides empirical support for theologically driven models of optimism. For example, consistent with Bennett's assertions about the link between optimism and beliefs about ultimate destiny, empirical studies have found that those who believe in the rewards attendant in an afterlife report greater sense of optimism than those who do not hold such beliefs (see Dember and Brooks 1989; Idler and Kasl 1997; Sethi and Seligman 1993, 1994). Further, consistent with theological arguments, optimism also appears to be associated with the relational dimensions of faith (Ciarrocchi et al. 2008). More specifically, optimism thrives among individuals who endorse a vision of God as loving, just, and supportive (Ciarrocchi et al. 2008; Mattis 2002) and who report daily spiritual experiences with the divine (Ciarrocchi et al. 2008). Individuals who perceive themselves to have a positive relationship with God (i.e., those who feel loved by God, and those who experience their relationship with God as satisfying, uplifting) also report a greater level of optimism (Krause 2002; Mattis et al. 2003; Mattis et al. 2004a, b). In a field of study that has largely ignored African Americans, the present work seeks to expand the literature on the link between religiosity and optimism by examining the extent to which beliefs in divine forgiveness may work together with beliefs of a positive relationship with God to inform optimism among African American adults.

Forgiveness and Optimism

In Judeo-Christian systems of faith, the relationship between religion and optimism hinges both on the recognition of transgression (i.e., sin) and on a belief in the reparative power of divine forgiveness (Beck 1971; Berdyaev 1939; Dember 2001; Houf 1945; Tiger 1999; Worthington and Wade 1999). Sin places humans at odds with God and introduces the need for punishment and correction. However, central in Christianity is the assertion that God is loving, merciful, and forgiving and that divine forgiveness is an act of grace (i.e., unearned

favor) that is granted to all humans because of God's unconditional love. For Christians, Christ's sacrifice, death, and resurrection serve as ultimate, historically transcendent sources of optimism because these events are signifiers of God's love, His forgiveness, and His covenant to protect, redeem, and save those who believe in Him.

The belief that one has received forgiveness from God for one's transgressions may promote optimism in a number of ways. First, forgiveness may alleviate guilt, shame, anger, and fear (Gassin 1998; Thompson et al. 2005; Worthington and Wade 1999), and, in so doing, it may free people to experience the world as a positive place in which to live. Second, forgiveness may serve as a sign of God's love or compassion for the transgressor, and as an indication of the integrity of the relationship (Enright et al. 1989; Gassin 1998). To our knowledge, there are no studies that have examined the relation between optimism and beliefs in divine forgiveness. This study fills that gap.

In this study, we endeavor to create a nuanced picture of the link between religion and optimism by exploring the extent to which these outcomes are associated with social location, traditional indices of religious commitment (e.g., subjective religiosity, organizational religiosity, early religious involvement), and relational ideological aspects of religiosity (i.e., positive relationship with God, and the perception that one has received divine forgiveness). We address two research questions. First, to what extent do social location, religious commitment, and relational indices of faith contribute to optimism? We do not anticipate any gender differences in mean level of reported optimism among men and women. We do expect that age, household income, and educational attainment will be positively associated with optimism. We also anticipate that the indicators of early religious involvement, current organizational involvement, and subjective religiosity will be positively associated with optimism. However, we expect that positive relationship with God and divine forgiveness will be associated with optimism above and beyond what is predicted by traditional indicators of religious commitment. Second, following theological assertions regarding the relation between divine love, divine forgiveness, and optimism, we ask: To what extent do belief in positive relationship with God and belief that one is the beneficiary of forgiveness jointly mediate the relation between subjective religiosity and optimism?

Method

Data Collection

This community-based study was conducted in the five boroughs of New York City. The first author worked with community collaborators (e.g., barbers, business owners) to recruit African American participants. Fliers advertising the study were posted in public spaces in local businesses and on public kiosks throughout the city, and with the support of community collaborators, information about the study was spread to potential participants through word-of-mouth. The first author and a team of research assistants distributed survey instruments to participants in hair salons, barbershops, college campuses, predominately African American churches and social organizations, and local businesses frequented by African Americans. All participants provided written informed consent and were compensated \$10 upon completion of the survey.

Participants and Socio-Demographic Factors

Two-hundred and forty-one African American adults completed the survey. Seventy-eight participants were men, 157 were women (6 participants did not disclose their gender). Participants ranged in age from 16¹ to 75 years ($M = 35.71$, $SD = 12.46$) and had a median annual combined household income range of \$30,000–\$39,999. Approximately 18% of the sample reported a combined household income of \$20,000 or less, and 14% reported a combined household income of \$80,000 or higher. Twenty-three percent of the participants had earned a high school diploma, GED, or less; 37% had completed some college courses; 24% had completed a college degree; and 16% had earned a graduate/professional degree.

Measures

Early Religious Involvement—The level of personal and parental involvement in organized religious activities during childhood was measured as a composite of two items. These items were: “When you were a child, how often did you attend religious services?” and “When you were a child, how often did your parents or caretakers attend religious services?”. Each of these items was measured using a 6-point Likert scale (0 = “Never” to 6 = “Very often”).

Current Organizational Religiosity—A single item was used to assess frequency of religious service attendance. “How often do you attend religious services?” Respondents reported their frequency of service attendance based on a 6-point Likert scale (0 = “Never” to 5 = “Very often”).

Subjective Religiosity—Following from Levin et al. (1995) and Taylor et al. (1999), this construct was measured as a mean of 3 items. Two items assessed the importance of religion in participants’ lives (e.g., “How important is religion in your life today?” “How important was religion to your family when you were growing up?” These two items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “Not at all important,” 3 = “Somewhat important,” 5 = “Very important”). The third item assessed participants’ subjective identification as religious (i.e., “How religious are you?”). This item was scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “Not at all religious,” 3 = “Somewhat religious,” 5 = “Very religious”). The reliability coefficient for this 3-item index was .78.

Positive relationship with God was measured as the mean score of seven items from the 13-item Relationship with God (RWG) Scale (Hatcher-Kay 2001). This subscale assesses the extent to which individuals viewed themselves as having a loving relationship with God. Responses were scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “Never” and 5 = “Always”). Items were: “In my relationship with God...” “I feel God’s presence;” “I feel calmed;” “I feel uplifted;” “I pray/talk openly;” “I feel like I know myself better;” “I feel satisfied;” and “I feel loved.” The reliability coefficient for this scale was .88.

Divine Forgiveness was measured using a single item taken from the Brief Multidimensional Measurement of Religiousness/Spirituality developed by the Fetzer Institute (1999). This

¹Although the focus of this study is on adults—a group traditionally defined as 18 years and older, this younger than usual participant was a college student at the time of data collection, and was retained in the analysis.

item: “I believe that God has forgiven me for the things that I have done wrong” was measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “Not at all true” to 5 = “Very true”).

Optimism was measured as a mean of 4 positively worded items from The Life Orientation Test (Scheier and Carver 1985). Sample optimism items were: “In uncertain times I usually expect the best;” “I always look at the bright side of things;” “I’m always optimistic about the future;” and “I’m a believer in the idea that ‘every cloud has a silver lining’.” Items were scored on a 5-point Likert type measure where 1 = “Strongly disagree” and 5 = “Strongly agree.” The optimism subscale had a reliability coefficient of .71.

Results

Of the 241 African American adults who participated in the study, approximately 42% ($n = 102$) attended religious services at least twice per month. Roughly 10% ($n = 23$) did not attend religious services at all. Participants in this study grew up in homes where religion was important to very important ($M = 3.7852$, $SD = 1.23$) and, in general, they view themselves as somewhat religious ($M = 3.645$, $SD = 1.19$; see Table 1). Overall, women and men experienced their relationship with God, as generally positive ($M = 3.78$, $SD = .89$). Furthermore, participants believed strongly that they have been forgiven by God ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.18$).

Age was significantly related to optimism ($r = .147$, $p = .05$; see Table 1). No statistically significant relation was found between optimism and gender, household income and educational attainment. Early religious involvement ($r = .158$, $p = .05$), current organizational religiosity ($r = .147$; $p = .05$), and subjective religiosity ($r = .233$, $p = .001$) were positively and significantly related to optimism. Similarly, a significant positive relationship emerged between dispositional optimism and positive relationship with God ($r = .377$; $p = .001$) and divine forgiveness ($r = .321$; $p = .001$).

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to assess the incremental contributions of demographic variables, indices of religious commitment, and indices of religious ideology to explained variance in optimism (see Table 2). Demographic variables were entered in the first block of the analysis; religious commitment indicators (i.e., early religious service attendance, current religious service attendance, and subjective religiosity) were entered in the second block. Ideological factors (i.e., positive relationship with God and belief that one is the recipient of divine forgiveness) were entered in the final block. Collinearity metrics yielded no evidence of multicollinearity. Tolerance values ranged from .460 to .970 and variance inflation factor values ranged from 1.031 to 2.173. Further, case analyses revealed no evidence of outliers.

In Step 1 of the analysis, the regression model was not significant; however, age emerged as a positive significant predictor of optimism ($\beta = .184$, $p < .05$). With the introduction of the indices of religious commitment in the second block of the analysis, the effect of age on optimism disappeared. In this step, subjective religiosity was the only positive and significant predictor of optimism ($\beta = .206$, $p < .05$). The introduction of the religious commitment indices resulted in a significant change in F ($F = 2.80$, $p < .05$). In the third

and final block of the model, positive relationship with God and perception of divine forgiveness were introduced. This final block of the regression model was significant ($F(9, 184) = 4.743, p = .001$). The variables collectively explained 19.6% of the variance in optimism scores (see Table 2). Importantly, with the introduction of the religious ideology variables, subjective religiosity was no longer predictive of optimism. In this final step in the analysis, positive relationship with God ($\beta = .334, p = .001$) emerged as a significant positive predictor of optimism. Divine forgiveness ($\beta = .157, p = .066$) was marginally associated with optimism.

In order to address the question of whether positive relationship with God and perception of divine forgiveness serially mediate the relation between subjective religiosity and optimism, multiple mediation analyses were conducted in SPSS. Model 6 of the PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2013) was used to simultaneously assess direct and indirect effects of subjective religiosity and the two mediators (relationship with God and perception of divine forgiveness) on optimism. Given the significant positive association between age and optimism in the bivariate analysis, and the small but significant correlations between gender and religiosity indices, age and gender were entered as covariates in the mediation model.

Analyses revealed that positive relationship with God and divine forgiveness fully mediated the relation between subjective religiosity and optimism (see Fig. 1). All three indirect effects paths were significant (i.e., bias corrected 95% CIs did not include 0). Because of the influence of subjective religiosity on positive relationship with God, on average, each unit increase in subjective religiosity is estimated to be associated with a 0.1109 unit increase in optimism (holding divine forgiveness, age, and gender constant). Because of the influence of subjective religiosity on perception of divine forgiveness, each unit increase in subjective religiosity is associated with an estimated 0.1109 unit increase on optimism (holding positive relationship with God, age, and gender constant). Finally, the effect size for the indirect relation from subjective religiosity to relationship with God, to divine forgiveness to optimism suggests that each unit increase in subjective religiosity is associated with a 0.0326 unit increase in optimism owing to the association between subjective religiosity, positive relationship with God and divine forgiveness (holding age and gender constant). Contrasts of the indirect effects pathways revealed that the effect size for the path from subjective religiosity to positive relationship with God to optimism is significantly greater than the paths from subjective religiosity to perceived divine forgiveness to optimism, and the path from subjective religiosity to positive relationship with God to forgiveness to optimism. The bias corrected 95% confidence intervals of these latter two paths included 0 (see Table 3).

Discussion

Empirical research has demonstrated a link between traditional indicators of religious commitment and optimism. In this study, we sought to extend existing empirical work on the religiosity–optimism link by exploring a theologically informed model of optimism. In particular, we explored assertions by African American theologians that the image of God as a figure who is loving, supportive, and forgiving is the wellspring of optimism for African Americans (c.f. Cone 1986, 1997). We addressed two questions in this study. First, what are the relative contributions of demographic factors, religious commitment, and relational

ideological aspects of faith to African American adults' sense of optimism? Second, to what extent is the relation between personal sense of being religious (subjective religiosity) and optimism serially mediated by a positive relationship with God and one's belief that one has been forgiven by God?

Contrary to findings from The WHOQOL SRPB Group (2006) and Gallagher and colleagues (2013), we found no relation between optimism, gender, education, and income in this sample. Although our findings were inconsistent with findings from these large, cross-national studies, they were consistent with findings from other smaller studies conducted in the USA (Chang 1998; Cheng and Hamid 1997; Mattis et al. 2004a, b; Mattis et al. 2003). Future work may benefit from attending to non-static indicators of social location (e.g., change in socioeconomic status intergenerationally and across the developmental span of individuals) and optimism. Socioeconomic status is subject to change across generations and over the course of the life of a given individual. Although current income may bear no empirical relation to optimism, positive changes in SES, if attributed to God, might contribute to a sense of optimism among individuals. This possibility should be explored empirically.

In contrast with findings from previous research (see Mattis et al. 2004a, b), but in keeping with findings from Gallagher and colleagues 2013, age was significantly related to optimism at the bivariate level in this sample. It is important to note, though, that while our findings were consistent with Gallagher and colleagues's findings in that age and optimism were significantly related, the directions of the relations between age and optimism were in opposing directions across the two studies. Gallagher and colleagues found that younger participants were optimistic. In this study, we found that older participants were more optimistic than their younger counterparts. Whether this finding points to a role for age, experiential, or cohort differences among African American adults is unclear. It may be the case that African American adults who, by virtue of age, have weathered more of life's storms come over time to believe more strongly in the positive possibilities for the future. It is equally plausible that older cohorts of adults are more hopeful about the future.

Interestingly, age did not predict optimism once religiosity was accounted for in the analytic models. These findings suggest that whatever developmental or cohort effects may exist in relation to optimism may become less salient when we account for cultural practices (e.g., involvement in ideological communities) and relational ideologies (e.g., belief in positive relationship with God) that support peoples' positive expectations about the future. This set of findings suggests that age may serve, to some degree, as a proxy for the kinds of institutional involvement and the kinds of ideological leanings that promote optimism. This suggestion is consistent with findings that older African Americans are more likely to be religiously involved and more likely to be religiously committed (Taylor et al. 2014). Longitudinal studies of the link between age, religiosity, and expectancy outcomes are needed to more carefully explore and disentangle these possibilities.

Existing scholarship focusing on predominantly White samples has found a positive association between traditional indices of religious commitment (e.g., service attendance, early religious involvement, and subjective religiosity) and optimism (Dember 2001;

Dember and Brooks 1989; Idler and Kasl 1997; Sethi and Seligman 1993, 1994). However, consistent with previous work with other samples of African American adults (c.f., Mattis et al. 2003, 2004a, b), in this study neither early religious involvement nor frequency of current service attendance predicted optimism. However, correlational and hierarchical regression analyses provided some evidence for the relevance of subjective religiosity as a predictor of dispositional optimism among this sample. Although the formal organizational aspects of faith life continue to be important for African Americans (Taylor et al. 2014), these results suggest that it is the internalization of faith as a core aspect of one's identity rather than public participation in faith communities that may matter most in shaping future expectations. We have no doubts that religious institutions are important conduits for the communication of beliefs and values that are central in the cultivation of hope. However, there is a vast array of mechanisms (e.g., individual consumption of religious readings and music) through which optimism may be nurtured. How optimism evolves as a part of the subjective religious development of African American adults deserves empirical attention.

Our findings with respect to relational indices of religiosity were consistent with our expectations. We anticipated that a perceived positive relationship with God would be positively associated with optimism. The findings of the mediation analyses provide a particularly important set of contributions to existing knowledge about the religiosity–optimism link. Our findings support theological assertions that relational ideologies are the engines that fuel the relation between religiosity and optimism. Importantly, these findings are also consistent with Bennett's assertions regarding the role of religious ideology in supporting optimism as an implicit cultural policy. If optimism is, indeed, necessary for the survival and the thriving of individuals and communities, and if hope is a critical and central theme in the faith of African Americans, then it appears that the sense that one is loved and uplifted by God and the belief that one has received God's forgiveness work in tandem to inform faith. This raises important questions about the ways in which theological messages that represent God as punitive and that position individuals as outside of the boundaries of divine grace and forgiveness may impact the optimism of African American believers. Such individuals may have a more difficult time conjuring optimism and may, by extension, minimize its salutogenic mental health effects. Feeling punished by God may also diminish faith and sever one's ideological ties to the implicit cultural policy that fuels optimism. How individuals who are exposed to these ideologies defend successfully against threats to their sense of optimism is important to explore. Doing so is especially critical before mounting faith-based interventions which could do more psychological harm to individuals who feel that they are outside God's grace and forgiveness.

This study has important limitations. First, the participants in this study report higher levels of educational attainment and higher combined household incomes than the national average for African Americans (U.S. Census Bureau 2013). Accordingly, the sample is not demographically representative of African Americans. The pattern of findings from this study might well have been different in a more economically and educationally diverse sample. Future work should explore this possibility. Second, our findings are based on self-reported data and, as such, the impact of social desirability bias cannot be ignored. In addition, the cross-sectional and correlational nature of our data limits our ability to determine direction or causality between social location, religiosity, forgiveness, and

optimism. As such, we cannot assess whether it is relational ideology that influences optimism or whether it is the person's dispositional tendency toward optimism that drives the beliefs about relationship with God.

Despite its limitations this study makes important contributions to the growing body of scholarship that explores the links between various dimensions of social position, religiosity, and future expectancies among adults. Among the important contributions of this work is that it reveals the particular importance of positive relationship with God in driving the relation between subjective religiosity and optimism. Second, the study highlights the importance of including divine forgiveness in empirical discourse about optimism. Research on psychiatric symptomatology has highlighted the positive mental health effects of believing in a benevolent God and the deleterious mental health effects of believing in a punitive God (Silton et al. 2014). Further, emerging evidence from psychotherapeutic interventions suggest that targeting forgiveness may diminish anger, anxiety, depression, and substance abuse vulnerability (Akhtar and Barlow 2016; Reed and Enright 2006; Wade et al. 2014; Lin et al. 2004). Deploying such interventions among African Americans may be particularly beneficial for improving psychological well-being and diminishing risk of comorbid health disparities (Grayman-Simpson et al. 2016). Finally, this work highlights the value of employing analytic strategies that allow us to explore the ways in which ideological aspects of faith life may jointly mediate and or moderate the relationships between religious identity and optimism.

Our findings may be particularly relevant to service providers (e.g., psychotherapists, religious counselors) who provide faith-based treatment. It is critical that providers understand the relationship between a client and his/her God before pursuing clinical therapeutic treatment focused on reframing clients' perspectives toward greater optimism. Providers may find individuals' evolving relationship with God and their beliefs about being forgiven to be useful starting points for discussion. Clinical therapeutic work focused on instilling or encouraging optimism may be made easier to the extent that people view past "mercies" as evidence of new ones to come and as evidence of the consistency of God's love.

It also may be useful to explore the extent to which individuals' religious relational beliefs are malleable, and the conditions under which they can be changed. There is a need, too, to examine the extent to which the relations identified in this study may obtain in domain-specific aspects of optimism (e.g., health optimism, optimism related to the possibilities of achieving social justice).

Finally, the findings of this study with respect to divine love, forgiveness, and optimism point us to the value of exploring a related construct, "divine favor." Favor may be defined as the individual's perception of the way that God assists, elevates, enhances, saves, protects or blesses those who believe (Dicenso 2015). Acts of divine favor may be viewed as rewards (either unmerited rewards or as earned rewards for being good and faithful believers). Having a record of evidence that one has been favored by God can lead to optimism. Similarly, optimism might be a consequence of individuals' belief in vicarious blessing. The notion that what God has done for others he will do for you, and that "what is past is

prologue” may inspire individuals to expect positive future outcomes. Future empirical work on the link between faith and optimism should build on this study’s findings by exploring the role of perceived favor (both direct and vicarious favor) in promoting optimistic expectancies among African Americans.

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Fig. 1. Final multiple mediation model predicting direct and indirect associations between subjective religiosity, positive relationship with God, divine forgiveness, and optimism

Table 1Means, standard deviations, reliability coefficients, and intercorrelations of independent and dependent variables ($N = 241$)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age	35.71	12.459		–									
2. Gender	–	–		–.025	–								
3. Income				.255***	–.121	–							
4. Education				.150*	–.139*	.457***	–						
5. Service Attend.	2.74	1.671		.255***	.178**	.063	.081	–					
6. Subj. Relig.	3.646	1.119		.184*	.120	.034	–.042	.643***	–				
7. Early Relig. Involvement	3.772	1.243		.190*	.147*	.078	.089	.357***	.354***	–			
8. Positive Rela. with God	3.785	0.891		.218***	.087	.036	.132*	.541***	.642***	.374***	–		
9. Divine forgiveness	4.13	1.176		.155*	.154*	.032	.116	.354***	.474***	.259**	.580***	–	
10. Optimism	3.688	0.796		.147*	.036	.004	.063	.147*	.233***	.158*	.358***	.321***	–

Table 2Heirarchical regression analysis predicting dispositional optimism ($N = 218$)

Variables	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Age	.184 [*]	.005	.138	.005	.089	.004
Gender	.080	.119	.065	.120	.031	.115
Education	.027	.057	.040	.057	-.027	.055
Household income	-.017	.024	-.025	.024	.018	.022
Early religious involvement			.030	.049	-.009	.047
Organizational religiosity			-.005	.044	-.056	.042
Subjective religiosity			.206 [*]	.065	-.006	.068
Divine forgiveness					.157 ⁺	.057
Positive relationship with God					.334 ^{***}	.012
$R^2/\ R^2$	.041/.041		.084/.044 [*]		.196/.112 ^{***}	
F	1.903		2.83 [*]		12.148 ^{***}	

⁺ $p = .066$;^{*} $p < .05$;^{**} $p < .01$;^{***} $p < .001$

Table 3

Indirect effects and contrast estimates for model predicting optimism

	Effect	SE	95% CI
Indirect a (SR*PRWG*OPT)	.1109	.0409	.0358–.1960
Indirect d (SR*PRWG*F*OPT)	.0326	.0190	.0021–.0793
Indirect b (SR*F*OPT)	.0177	.0145	.0001–.0598
Contrast 1 (SR*PRWG*OPT)–(SR*PRWG*F*OPT)	.0784	.0510	–.0218–.1788
Contrast 2 (SR*PRWG*OPT)–(SR*F*OPT)	.0933	.0471	.0030–.1884
Contrast 3 (SR*PRWG*F*OPT)–(SR*F*OPT)	.0149	.0157	–.0044–.0674

SR subjective religiosity, *PRWG* positive relationship with God, *F* divine forgiveness, *OPT* optimism