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Do We Need to Put God into Emotional Support?: A Comparison of Caucasians' and African-Americans' Evaluations of Religious versus Non-Religious Comforting Messages

Wendy Samter, Chris R. Morse, & Bryan B. Whaley

The current study explored whether ethnicity influences young adults' evaluations of two different sets of comforting messages: those in which concepts such as God, prayer, religion, and faith are woven into low, moderate, and high person-centered strategies (called "religious strategies") and those in which such concepts are not embedded (called "non-religious strategies") into the messages. One hundred ninety-seven college students (63% African-American; 37% Caucasian) rated the sensitivity and effectiveness of religious and non-religious comforting messages. Several significant differences were observed between Caucasians and African-Americans in their evaluations of these strategies. Findings are discussed in terms of their practical implications for "real world" comforting efforts as well as the theoretical significance they hold for the concept of person-centeredness.

Keywords: Emotional Support; Ethnicity; Religion; Comforting Message Evaluation

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This study is designed to test the assumption that current conceptualizations of skillful support may be somewhat narrow and culturally dependent and have thus painted an unclear picture of what counts as sensitive and effective comforting efforts among individuals who are not members of the white middle class. More specifically,

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the project explores whether ethnicity influences young adults' evaluations of two different sets of comforting messages: those in which concepts such as God, prayer, religion, and faith are woven into low, moderate, and high person-centered strategies (called "religious strategies") and those in which such concepts are not embedded (called "nonreligious strategies") into the strategies.

The Nature and Effects of Person-Centered Comforting

Throughout the last 30 years, research on emotional support, in general—and comforting, in particular—has blossomed. In the discipline of communication, a good deal of this work has been conducted within the theoretical perspective of constructivism. For constructivists, the skillfulness or sophistication of any functional message strategy—including that aimed at alleviating another's emotional distress—is conceptualized according to its level of person-centeredness. As Burleson and Caplan (1998) argue, person-centeredness is the degree to which messages reflect "an awareness of and adaptation to the subjective, affective, and relational aspects of communicative contexts" (p. 249). Comforting messages low in person-centeredness deny another person's feelings and perspectives; such denial can take the form of directly criticizing the other's feelings, explicitly challenging the legitimacy of those emotions, or telling the other how he/she should act or feel. Comforting messages moderate in person-centeredness implicitly acknowledge and legitimize another's feelings and perspectives; such acknowledgment can occur via attempts to divert the other's attention from the distressful situation and the feelings arising from that situation, through offers of expressions of understanding and sympathy, or via the provision of a non-feeling-centered explanation of the situation intended to reduce the other's distress. Finally, messages high in person-centeredness explicitly acknowledge, elaborate and legitimize the other's feelings and perspectives by helping him/her articulate and explain various emotions, offering elaborated explanations for why the other may be experiencing those emotions, or trying to view the situation and its attendant feelings within a broader context (see Burleson, 1984 for the original comforting hierarchy).

A compelling body of literature suggests not only that comforting is regarded as an important and salient activity within a variety of relationships (e.g., Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002), but also that highly person-centered efforts to reduce another's distress carry with them significant social and emotional benefits. For instance, several message perception studies have found that comforting strategies high in person-centeredness are seen as a more sensitive and effective method of ameliorating emotional hurt and upset than are messages low or moderate in person-centeredness (e.g., Burleson & Samter, 1985a; for a review, see MacGeorge, 2008). Further, work by Jones and her colleagues (Jones & Guerrero, 2001; Jones & Wirtz, 2006) indicates that recipients of person-centered comforting strategies actually experience greater reductions in their emotional distress and report a greater capacity to cope than do recipients of nonperson-centered comforting messages. Given such benefits, it is not surprising that studies also demonstrate that individuals

who comfort others in highly person-centered ways are seen as more sensitive, helpful, and attractive, enjoy greater levels of peer acceptance, and experience less loneliness than do their counterparts who comfort others in less person-centered ways (e.g., Burleson & Samter, 1996; Samter & Burleson, 1990; Samter, Burleson, & Basden-Murphy, 1987).

Interestingly, the positive effects of person-centeredness tend to be relatively stable and consistent across studies. In the case of message production research, for example, perceptions of person-centered comforting strategies vary only slightly according to key variables such as sex and social cognitive ability. For example, several studies (e.g., Burleson et al., 2009; Burleson & Kunkel, 2006; MacGeorge, Graves, Feng, Gillihan, & Burleson, 2004) indicate that women rate highly person-centered strategies slightly more favorably than men, whereas men assign somewhat higher ratings to nonperson-centered strategies than women. Similar results have been observed with respect to the influence of social cognitive skill on evaluations of comforting efforts—that is, individuals with advanced social cognitive abilities assign higher ratings to person-centered messages than do individuals with less advanced cognitive abilities (e.g., Samter et al., 1987; Samter, Burleson, & Basden-Murphy, 1989). Taken together, such findings indicate that while individuals consistently judge person-centered messages to be higher in quality than nonperson-centered messages, there is some variation in the sharpness with which people discriminate among strategies embodying the very highest and lowest levels of the comforting hierarchy.

A notable exception to this pattern of consistency is ethnic group membership. A growing body of evidence suggests that ethnicity exerts a significant effect on people's perceptions of the importance of emotional support within various relational contexts and the communicative behaviors through which it is enacted. For instance, Samter and her colleagues have found that, compared to Caucasians, Asian-Americans and African-Americans not only rate emotional support as a significantly less important skill for same-sex friends to possess (Samter & Burleson, 2005), but also evaluate highly person-centered forms of support as less sensitive and effective (Samter, Whaley, Mortenson, & Burleson, 1997). Interestingly, the largest and most significant differences Samter et al. observed were between African-American and Caucasian women. Thus, in contrast to the findings noted above, ethnicity actually appears to *mute* or *dampen* the extent to which people see comforting as a significant pursuit for relational partners as well as the degree to which they discriminate among messages that are low, moderate, and high in person-centeredness.

Such differences in comforting message evaluations raise an important question: Namely, whether African-Americans place less emphasis on skillful comforting behavior than Caucasians or whether the traditional conceptualization of what constitutes skillful comforting efforts is too narrow and culturally dependent. We suspect it may be the latter and that, if broadened to include notions of God, prayer, faith and religion, comforting messages embodying various levels of person-centeredness might produce more differentiated judgments among

African-Americans (cf. Wilkum & MacGeorge, 2010). The current study is designed to explore this suspicion.

Religion, Communication, and Coping Among African-Americans

Scholars have investigated a variety of topics in which religion and communication intersect. As Fritz (2010) wrote in a recent special issue of the *Journal of Communication and Religion*, "From initial rhetorical focus on sermons and religious discourse to quantitative investigations of the effects of religiosity on communication to the role of mediated messages in religious life to the importance of articulating a faith perspective in a postmodern moment of uncertainty and questioned foundations, scholarship in religious communication has maintained a steadfast interest in questions related to religious discourse" (p. 176). In spite of this rich tradition, however, relatively little work in the area has focused on how religion influences interactions in which emotional support is the primary goal. This is somewhat surprising given that many scholars (e.g., Pargament, 1997) believe religion itself is part of the coping process and can be experienced as a form of social support. As Pecchioni, Edwards, and Grey (2011) argue, "Religion or religious affiliation communicates a worldview, creating schema for how the world works or is supposed to work. . . Religious affiliation or religiosity reflects these ideals which can [then] serve as a potential coping resource for managing distress. . ." (p. 38).

Examining the role religion plays in emotional support is important because, to paraphrase the words of Kleman, Everett, and Egbert (2009), it may present a new perspective on what researchers currently describe as effective support attempts. After all, what constitutes successful support boils down to what the recipient identifies "as meaningfully contributing to his or her coping processes" (p. 160). With regard to the current study, there is some evidence that religion may be perceived as a more important component in the supportive exchanges shared by African-Americans than it is in those shared by Caucasians.

For instance, in a recent investigation (Barna Group, Ltd., 2009) exploring religious beliefs and behaviors among members of the four largest ethnic groups in the United States (Caucasians, African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, and Asian-Americans), African-Americans were found to score highest on such items as "your religious faith is very important in your life" and "the single, most important purpose of your life is to love God with all your heart, mind, strength and soul." Compared to the other three ethnic groups, African-Americans also emerged as the most likely to engage in each of five church-related activities during a typical week (attending church services, participating in a small group, attending a Sunday school class, praying, and reading the Bible), and to have made a "personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their lives." In addition, African-Americans were also found to have the lowest proportion of what are termed "unchurched adults." As noted in the conclusion of the Barna Group study, "From the earliest days of America's history, a deep-rooted spirituality has been one of the hallmarks of the

black population in the country . . . [our study] underscores that the passage of time has not diminished the importance of faith in the lives of African-Americans.”

These findings are consistent with other work indicating that African-Americans exhibit higher levels of religiosity than Caucasians do (Taylor, 1993; Taylor, Chatters, Jayakody, & Levin, 1996). Defined as “the extent or depth of involvement in religious belief and practice” (Koenig, Parkerson, & Meador, 1997; MacGeorge et al., 2007), religiosity has been linked to the frequency of prayer, the extent to which prayer is used to cope with problems (for a review, see Pargament, 1997), and the use of God in messages designed to comfort (Wilkum & MacGeorge, 2010). In light of these trends, it’s not surprising that, compared to Caucasians, African-Americans also report possessing higher levels of spiritual comfort (Fiori, Brown, Cortina, & Antonucci, 2006) and say that religion has more of an influence on health concerns in later life (Krause, 2006a, 2006b) as well as coping, sense making, and perceptions of recovery in patients with cancer (Holt et al., 2009a; Holt et al., 2009b).

Focus of the Current Study

Past studies examining how perceptions of comforting messages vary as a function of ethnicity rarely ask people to evaluate strategies that invoke notions of prayer or faith. Moreover, if such ideas actually are mentioned, they tend to be incorporated into relatively nonperson-centered messages representing the lowest levels of the hierarchy (e.g., “Don’t get so upset. When God closes one window, He opens another.”). Yet, if as Burleson and Caplan (1998, p. 249) argue, person-centeredness truly does reflect an “an awareness of and adaptation to the subjective, affective, and relational aspects of communicative contexts,” then part of such “awareness and adaptation” when attempting to alleviate emotional distress among many African-Americans would involve acknowledgment and legitimization of their deeply held faith and how it figures into the ability to cope. This suggests that, “current methods of coding supportive communication may be insufficient with regard to faith-based statements in Christian communities, such as prayer, faith, connection and scripture” (Kleman et al., 2009, p. 181).

Despite such arguments, to date, only one study has examined how religious content might influence people’s perceptions of comforting messages. In a recent investigation, Wilkum and MacGeorge (2010) utilized a predominantly Caucasian sample and integrated four types of religious coping styles into messages designed to comfort a hypothetical other who was portrayed as having just suffered the loss of a grandparent. Participants’ evaluations indicated that they preferred religious strategies over non-religious strategies, particularly those in which God was described as helping the individual cope with the loss. In some ways, these results are not surprising. One might argue that the specific type of hypothetical scenario utilized by Wilkum and MacGeorge tapped into a domain where reference to religion is the norm. In other words, it is quite possible that when people experience bereavement, they expect some form of religious reference to be offered in condolence. In contrast, we are interested in capturing strategies more typical of everyday support occurrences

among African-Americans—not those necessarily *predisposed* to the invocation of religiosity.

Drawing on these assumptions, the current study explores whether ethnicity influences young adults' evaluations of two different sets of comforting messages designed to alleviate everyday stressors: those in which concepts such as God, prayer, religion, and faith are woven into low, moderate, and high person-centered strategies (called "religious strategies") and those in which such concepts are not embedded (called "non-religious strategies") into the messages. Our first set of hypotheses examines within-group perceptions of religious and non-religious comforting efforts. That is, we wanted to ascertain (a) whether African-American college students would, in fact, perceive religious comforting messages more favorably than they would non-religious comforting strategies; and (b) whether Caucasian college students would judge non-religious comforting efforts as more sensitive and effective than they would religious message strategies. We thus hypothesized:

H1: Caucasian college students will perceive non-religious comforting strategies as more sensitive and effective than religious comforting strategies.

H2: African-American college students will perceive religious comforting strategies as more sensitive and effective than non-religious comforting strategies.

We also wanted to explore between-group comparisons in people's judgments of messages containing religious content versus those that did not. Because African-Americans have been found to exhibit high levels of religiosity especially when coping with stressful situations, we predicted that, compared to Caucasians, they would rate messages embodying notions of God, prayer, faith, and religion as a significantly more sensitive and effective way to manage another's emotional distress. We believed the opposite pattern would hold true for Caucasians. The following hypotheses reflect these assumptions:

H3: Caucasian college students will rate non-religious comforting messages as significantly more sensitive and effective than African-American college students.

H4: African-American college students will rate religious messages as significantly more sensitive and effective than Caucasian college students.

Method

Participants

One hundred ninety-seven participants were recruited from two east coast universities, one of which is traditionally enrolled by African-American students and one of which is traditionally enrolled by Caucasian students; individuals received course credit for their participation. Respondents averaged approximately 20 years of age ($SD = 1.74$). Sixty-one percent of the sample was female ($n = 121$) and 39% was male ($n = 76$). Finally, the majority of participants were African-American (63%), with Whites/non-Hispanics making up the remainder of the sample (37%).

Procedure and Design

Participants were volunteers recruited from undergraduate classes within a variety of social science disciplines. Faculty who agreed to allow their students to participate distributed questionnaires during regularly scheduled class time. Respondents were given a test booklet containing several different questionnaires, only two of which are germane to the current study. The first instrument required participants to assess their level of religiosity. It contained three questions (e.g. "How important is religion in your daily life?") rated along a five-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly disagree," to 5 = "Strongly agree"). The composite measure ($M = 3.25$; $SD = 1.06$) displayed acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .89$).

The second relevant instrument instructed respondents to read several hypothetical scenarios which depicted a close friend who was experiencing some form of emotional distress. Individuals were then presented with a series of comforting messages and asked to evaluate how "sensitive" and "effective" each message would be at making the close friend "feel better."

Comforting Message Evaluation

Participants' evaluations of comforting messages were modeled after procedures used by Samter et al. (1997) as well as Burleson and Samter (1985a, 1985b). Participants were provided with three hypothetical scenarios (randomly ordered) in which they were asked to imagine a close friend experiencing some form of emotional distress. One scenario involved the close friend dealing with parental separation, while another portrayed him/her as being recently (and surprisingly) dumped by a relational partner. The last hypothetical situation depicted the close friend performing poorly on a test for which he/she studied diligently. Each of these situations has been employed in multiple studies, including those assessing message construction (e.g., Samter, 1992) and message perception (e.g., Burleson & Samter, 1985a, 1985b; Samter et al., 1997), and has been found to reflect realistic instances in which comforting efforts would be mandated.

After reading a hypothetical scenario, the participant was then presented with 18 randomly ordered messages. Each message was written to reflect one of the nine levels of person-centeredness defined in Burleson's (1984) original hierarchy for comforting strategies. Nine messages represented "religious" comforting strategies and nine messages represented "non-religious" comforting strategies. Participants were asked to rate each message for its sensitivity and effectiveness using a 9-point Likert type scale (1 = "very insensitive" or "very ineffective," 9 = "very sensitive" or "very effective").

As in previous studies of this sort, prior to our investigation, focus groups were convened to ascertain whether the language contained in the message strategies was perceived as realistic and appropriate by the targeted ethnic groups. Caucasian college students were presented with the non-religious strategies, whereas African-American college students were presented with the religious messages. Initial interviews indicated that young adults who participated in the Caucasian focus

groups saw the strategies as realistic and appropriate and, further, believed they could actually “imagine hearing the non-religious strategies in a naturally-occurring conversation with a close relational partner.” However, African-American students did not perceive the initial phrasing of the religious comforting messages as either realistic or appropriate, nor did they believe the strategies would naturally arise in a conversation designed to alleviate the emotional distress of a close relational partner. Based on this input, the comforting strategies were rewritten to include various suggestions by members of the African-American focus groups and, perhaps most importantly, to weave notions of God, religion, prayer, etc. into the messages in more subtle ways than had been done previously. The revised strategies were then resubmitted to the focus groups who saw them as highly realistic and appropriate. Table 1 contains a list of both the non-religious and religious comforting messages for the failed test situation.

According to procedures employed by Samter et al. (1997) internal consistencies (Cronbach’s alphas) were computed by combining participants’ ratings for (1) the perceived *sensitivity* of *non-religious* comforting messages across the three situations (.79); (2) the perceived *effectiveness* of the *non-religious* comforting messages across the three situations (.79); (3) the perceived *sensitivity* of the *religious* comforting messages across the three situations (.84); and (4) the perceived *effectiveness* of the *religious* comforting messages across the three situations (.88). Given the moderate to high internal consistency scores for each of the message types (i.e., non-religious sensitivity, non-religious effectiveness, religious sensitivity, and religious effectiveness) over the three different hypothetical scenarios, they were collapsed across scenarios to provide an overall rating. Thus, we ended up with nine scores representing perceived sensitivity and nine scores representing perceived effectiveness for the non-religious messages; similarly, we had nine scores representing perceived sensitivity and nine scores representing perceived effectiveness for the religious messages. Finally, in order to simplify data analysis, we collapsed the ratings one more time so that they corresponded to each of the three major divisions within Burleson’s (1984) original hierarchical system. In other words, for non-religious sensitivity ratings, we averaged the three strategies lowest in person-centeredness, the three strategies with moderate levels of person-centeredness, and the three strategies highest in person-centeredness. This process was repeated for each message category—that is, for non-religious effectiveness ratings, religious sensitivity ratings, and religious effectiveness ratings. The final result was three items (low, moderate, and high person-centeredness) for each of the message categories (non-religious sensitivity, non-religious effectiveness, religious sensitivity, and religious effectiveness).

Results

Hypotheses One and Two

The first hypothesis predicted that Caucasian students would perceive non-religious comforting strategies as more sensitive and effective than they would religious

Table 1 Examples of Religious and Non-Religious Comforting Strategies (Failed Test Situation).*Religious Comforting Messages*

1. "Let's be real. God certainly wouldn't want you to get so worked up over failing this one exam. It's stupid. You're not the first person to flunk a test and you won't be the last."
2. "There's no reason for you to get so worked up. I told you that the test would be hard, but you thought you could get away without studying. Besides, He would want you to work harder next time rather than whine about it now."
3. "Be real. Don't sweat the small stuff. It's not the end of the world. Study harder and have faith you'll do better next time."
4. "If you believe in yourself, He won't let you fail. There's still time in the semester for you to pull your grade up."
5. "That sucks. I definitely feel for you. You've just got to have faith."
6. "You just have to trust there's a reason for this. Remember how busy you were the week you had the test? Maybe this is God's way of telling you that you're trying to do too much."
7. "That's messed up. I know you're pissed because you studied hard and didn't do well. Just try to have faith that all of your hard work will eventually pay off."
8. "You're upset and that's alright. I hate feeling like my hard work doesn't pay off. It's really depressing. But when this happens, try to remind yourself that God will help you through things. Believe in yourself and in Him."
9. "It's not cool the exam turned out the way it did—especially if you studied a lot. It makes you feel like, 'Why bother?' It happened to me last semester and I was pretty upset about it. But, remember, it's only one exam and you'll have more chances to bring up your grade. I know you probably don't believe that right now, because you're still mad. But, God made you such a great person who can excel at lots of different things. Just have faith in yourself and let Him guide you."

Non-Religious Comforting Messages

1. "Look, when people fail tests it's usually because they didn't study hard enough. It was a pretty straight-forward exam and if you blew it, that's on you. It's kind of stupid to get so upset about this one test."
2. "Maybe you just didn't put in enough time studying for the test and that's why you failed. So don't trip over this—especially since you know you just need to study harder next time."
3. "It was just a test, so just forget about it. Anyway, there's another test in a few weeks and we'll study for it together. Don't worry about it, 'cause there a lot more important things in this world to think about than some test in some class."
4. "You didn't have the lowest score. So, at least you did better than some other people. If you want, we can go out and do something to get your mind off it."
5. "That sucks. I'm sorry you didn't do well on the test."
6. "I thought that test was really hard and not too many people did well on it. Maybe you just studied the wrong thing. You know, maybe the questions were on material that you didn't have time to cover. It's too hard to study for everything. Just remember your grade doesn't depend on this one score."
7. "That is so weak. I mean, I know how frustrating it is to study for a test and then find out that it didn't matter. But the important thing now is to try to concentrate on the next test. We'll study for it together and kick ass."
8. "I know you're pissed about this. Who wouldn't be? It's really frustrating when you work hard for something that doesn't pay off. It can really discourage you. But you usually do pretty well. Everybody has bad days sometimes. You're human and you probably just had one of those days. I've failed some tests before, too, so I think I understand how you feel."
9. "That's crazy. I'd be totally upset if I studied hard for a test and then screw it up. It's really frustrating, so you think 'Why should I even bother?' It can ruin your self-confidence and make you feel totally discouraged. But it doesn't mean that you aren't smart or anything like that. You wouldn't be here otherwise. This might sound stupid, but maybe you learned what kind of questions the teacher asks or what kind of things she wants you to study. So even though it's probably hard to look at it this way, maybe now you will know what to study so you can do better on the next test."

Table 2 Univariate Effects for Within-Group Evaluations of Religious and Non-Religious Comforting Messages.

	<i>M</i>	<i>t</i>
Caucasians		
Low sensitivity religious	3.59	-0.86
Low sensitivity non-religious	3.68	
Medium sensitivity religious	4.91	-3.46*
Medium sensitivity non-religious	5.34	
High sensitivity religious	5.61	-3.23*
High sensitivity non-religious	6.04	
Low effectiveness religious	3.67	-3.45*
Low effectiveness non-religious	4.02	
Medium effectiveness religious	4.29	-5.72***
Medium effectiveness non-religious	5.12	
High effectiveness religious	5.00	-5.54***
High effectiveness non-religious	5.98	
African-Americans		
Low sensitivity religious	4.10	1.49
Low sensitivity non-religious	3.99	
Medium sensitivity religious	5.68	2.48*
Medium sensitivity non-religious	5.49	
High sensitivity religious	6.33	3.85***
High sensitivity non-religious	5.97	
Low effectiveness religious	4.41	1.63
Low effectiveness non-religious	4.28	
Medium effectiveness religious	5.51	0.98
Medium effectiveness non-religious	5.43	
High effectiveness religious	6.19	1.81
High effectiveness non-religious	6.02	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

comforting messages. This hypothesis was tested using six paired sample *t*-tests (see Table 2); three of *t*-tests compared the sensitivity ratings of religious and nonreligious comforting strategies and three examined the effectiveness ratings. Results indicated that our sample of Caucasians rated the non-religious message strategies as significantly more sensitive and/or effective than they did the religious message strategies. As Table 2 indicates, the lone exception to this pattern was with respect to participants' sensitivity ratings of comforting efforts low in person-centeredness. Here, the paired sample *t*-test showed that Caucasians did not see any differences in the sensitivity of religious versus non-religious comforting messages that denied another's feelings and perspectives on the distressful event. Thus, H1 was largely supported.

The second hypothesis predicted that Africans-American students would perceive religious comforting strategies as more sensitive and effective than they would non-religious comforting messages. Again, six paired sample *t*-tests were employed to

examine this hypothesis. As Table 2 illustrates, African-American college students in our sample viewed religious comforting messages with moderate and high levels of person-centeredness to be significantly more sensitive than they did non-religious comforting strategies that were moderately or highly person-centered. No differences were observed in African-Americans' sensitivity ratings of religious and non-religious messages low in person-centeredness, nor were any significant differences found in their effectiveness ratings of religious and non-religious strategies. Thus Hypothesis 2 was only partially supported.

Hypotheses Three and Four

Based on arguments put forth in the literature (e.g., Koenig et al., 1997; Wilkum & MacGeorge, 2010), an independent samples *t*-test was conducted comparing religiosity levels between Caucasian and African-American students. Ethnicity served as the independent variable and ratings of religiosity were utilized as the dependent variable. Consistent with past research, results indicated significant differences ($t(190) = 4.77, p < .001$), with African-American young adults ($M = 3.51; SD = 1.00$) reporting higher levels of religiosity compared to Caucasian young adults ($M = 2.79; SD = 1.02$). Given these findings, religiosity was used as a covariate in all subsequent analyses.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that Caucasian students would perceive non-religious comforting messages as more sensitive and effective than African-American students. In contrast, we expected African-American students would evaluate religious comforting messages as more sensitive and effective than Caucasian students (H4). Each hypothesis was examined via two one-way MANOVAs (see Table 3) in which ethnicity served as the independent variable and religiosity was used as a covariate. One MANOVA utilized participants' ratings of the sensitivity of religious (or non-religious) messages with low, moderate, and high levels of person-centeredness as the dependent variable, while the second MANOVA utilized ratings of effectiveness for the religious (or non-religious) comforting messages exhibiting low, moderate, and high levels of person-centeredness.

As Table 3 illustrates, individuals' perceptions of non-religious comforting messages did not vary as a function of ethnicity. That is, Caucasians and African-Americans in our sample did not differ either in their sensitivity ratings ($F(3, 187) = .67, p > .10$; Wilks' $\lambda = .99$; partial $\eta^2 = .01$) or their effectiveness ratings ($F(3, 187) = .86, p > .10$; Wilks' $\lambda = .99$; partial $\eta^2 = .01$) of non-religious comforting strategies. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was not confirmed.

In contrast, our fourth hypothesis was supported. Results indicated that participants' judgments of the sensitivity ($F(3, 187) = 3.26, p < .05$; Wilks' $\lambda = .95$; partial $\eta^2 = .05$) and effectiveness ($F(3, 187) = 10.67, p < .001$; Wilks' $\lambda = .85$; partial $\eta^2 = .15$) of religious comforting messages varied as a function of ethnicity. A series of follow-up one-way ANOVAs showed that, in general, African-American young

Table 3 Multivariate Effects for Between-Group Comparisons of Comforting Message Evaluations.

	<i>F</i>	<i>Wilks' λ</i>	<i>Partial η²</i>
Non-Religious Strategies			
Sensitivity	.67	.99	.01
Low person-centered	1.79		.01
Moderate person-centered	.17		.00
High person-centered	.13		.00
Effectiveness	.86	.99	.01
Low person-centered	.83		.00
Moderate person-centered	1.95		.01
High person-centered	.02		.00
Religious Strategies			
Sensitivity	3.26*	.95	.05
Low person-centered	2.56		.01
Moderate person-centered	8.31**		.04
High person-centered	7.22**		.04
Effectiveness	10.67***	.85	.15
Low person-centered	7.00**		.04
Moderate person-centered	31.00***		.14
High person-centered	19.33***		.09

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

adults rated the religious message strategies as significantly more sensitive and/or effective than did Caucasian young adults.

For religious messages low in person-centeredness, the ANOVA yielded a non-significant effect for ratings of sensitivity ($F = 2.56$; $df = 1, 189$; $p > .10$). In contrast, a significant effect was observed for ratings of effectiveness ($F = 7.00$; $df = 1, 189$; $p < .01$). An examination of the means suggested that African-American students reported higher levels of perceived effectiveness ($n = 122$; $M = 4.33$) than did Caucasian students ($n = 70$; $M = 3.79$).

For religious messages with moderate levels of person-centeredness, the ANOVAs for both sensitivity ($F = 8.31$; $df = 1, 189$; $p < .01$) and effectiveness ($F = 31.00$; $df = 1, 189$; $p < .001$) were significant. In each case, the African-Americans in our sample reported higher levels of sensitivity ($n = 122$; $M = 5.59$) and effectiveness ($n = 122$; $M = 5.42$), than did the Caucasians (for sensitivity, $n = 70$; $M = 5.13$; for effectiveness, $n = 70$; $M = 4.52$).

Finally, a similar pattern was found with respect to participants' judgments of highly person-centered religious messages. In terms of sensitivity ratings ($F = 7.22$; $df = 1, 189$; $p < .01$), African-American students reported higher levels ($n = 122$; $M = 6.25$) than did Caucasian students ($n = 70$; $M = 5.75$). The ANOVA for effectiveness ($F = 19.33$; $df = 1, 189$; $p < .001$) suggested that African-Americans ($n = 122$; $M = 6.05$) also viewed highly person-centered religious messages as more effective than did Caucasians ($n = 70$; $M = 5.25$).

Discussion

Past studies have found that African-Americans not only rate person-centered comforting messages less favorably than Caucasians, but that such ratings show little discrimination between what are typically thought of as high- and low-quality comforting efforts. Given literature suggesting that prayer plays a central role in the lives of many African-Americans—particularly during times of emotional distress—we thought these findings might be the result of the conspicuous absence of references to faith in the constructivist hierarchy of comforting messages. We thus developed a set of strategies that paralleled the theoretical ordering of this hierarchy, but that also incorporated notions of God, religion, prayer, etc.

Our first set of hypotheses examined within-group perceptions of religious and non-religious comforting efforts. As expected, we found that Caucasian college students reported more favorable perceptions of the sensitivity of non-religious message strategies, particularly those in the mid- and upper-levels of the constructivist hierarchy. On the other hand, African-American college students perceived religious comforting messages as both more sensitive and effective than non-religious messages, again primarily with respect to strategies that were moderately or highly person-centered. While each of our first two hypotheses thus received some support, two peculiarities in our data are worth noting.

First, differences in perceptions of the sensitivity and effectiveness of comforting messages low in person-centeredness did not emerge regardless of whether those messages embodied religious content or not, and regardless of who was rating them. That is, in our sample Caucasians did not view non-religious comforting messages low in person-centeredness more favorably than they did religious messages of the same level, nor did African-Americans discriminate between religious and non-religious strategies exhibiting low levels of person-centeredness. Perhaps this suggests that messages explicitly denying another person's feelings and perspectives are not viewed favorably irrespective of whether notions of God, prayer, faith, etc. are included in them. Second, while judgments of the effectiveness of religious versus non-religious strategies varied among Caucasians, they did not among African-Americans. In other words, no differences were observed in African-American young adults' ratings of the effectiveness of religious versus non-religious comforting messages. This finding is somewhat unusual in that sensitivity and effectiveness ratings typically function similarly (see Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002, for a review). It may indicate that, for some African-Americans, notions of religion speak more to the sensitivity of messages than they do to their effectiveness. Specifically, individuals may perceive religious comforting messages as sensitive because they make them feel better. However, "feeling better" may not necessarily be tied to the idea of "fixing" the problem implied in the notion of effectiveness. Clearly, this is something that warrants further investigation.

Our second set of hypotheses examined between-group differences in the sensitivity and effectiveness ratings and predicted that Caucasian college students would perceive non-religious strategies as significantly more sensitive and effective

than African-American college students (H3), whereas African-American college students would perceive religious comforting efforts as more sensitive and effective than Caucasian college students (H4). Interestingly, our MANOVA failed to yield a significant main effect for ethnicity on participants' evaluations of non-religious message strategies. In other words, no differences were observed between African-American and Caucasian college students in their judgments of the sensitivity and effectiveness of messages representing the normal constructivist hierarchy; however, Caucasian and African-American students were found to differ markedly in their judgments of the religious comforting efforts. Allow us to speculate, first, about our failure to find support for H3. While this result contradicts our hypothesis—and prior research on message perceptions—it is, in retrospect, perhaps neither terribly surprising nor difficult to explain.

We live in a culture where, for hundreds of years, standards for appropriate speech have been defined largely by members of the white, middle class (see Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fought, 2006). Moreover, studies indicate that African-Americans remain acutely aware of the implications of departing from such mainstream norms. As Rahman (2008) argued:

...The diverse environments in which middle-class African-Americans find themselves may call for a fair amount of linguistic diplomacy and intraspeaker variation. Faced with a cluster of conflicting interests, demands, and expectations, they must chart a course for themselves that allows them to function comfortably and effectively in all environments... [Thus] African-Americans may experience what some have referred to as a “linguistic push-pull” [that]...reflects an ambivalence resulting from a perceived need to adhere to the conflicting norms associated with speakers' diverse societal roles. The dilemma for many African-Americans is that language that serves as a symbol of ethnic identity may also serve as the focus of discrimination in mainstream society... (pp. 141–142)

To investigate this contention, Rahman examined people's perceptions of speakers employing African-American English (AAE) versus those utilizing Standard English (SE). She found that both Caucasians and African-Americans perceived speech “without African-American ethnic association” (p. 167) to be indicative of higher education, higher social class, and higher levels of appropriateness. However, it appears that such judgments—at least for African-Americans—were conscious and pragmatic in nature. As the African-American participants in Rahman's study noted, they did not regard AAE as inferior—but rather saw SE as “appropriate for advancing in mainstream environments” (p. 167).

Thus, one explanation for our results may be that, in the absence of anything else, traditional conceptualizations of sophisticated comforting strategies are accepted by some African-American young adults *because they have made a pragmatic choice* to endorse mainstream standards regarding what constitutes sensitive and effective efforts to alleviate another's distress. However, when presented with alternatives that depart from the classic (i.e., white, middle class) embodiment of “quality” comforting and instead embrace features important to their particular speech community (i.e., religion), African-Americans' judgments differ markedly from those

of Caucasians. This may be especially true for our sample of African-Americans who, by virtue of being middle class, are the most likely to shift from mainstream to ethnic speech (Taylor et al., 1996). As Rahman (2008) argues, because of their education, middle-class African-Americans “often have greater facility than working class people . . . [and thus] may have the option of using language to either minimize or highlight their ethnicity” (p. 143).

Our findings with respect to H4 appear to bear out such an assumption. In line with this hypothesis, African-American students evaluated virtually all levels of religious comforting messages as significantly more sensitive and effective than Caucasian students. In fact, religious comforting messages embodying various levels of person-centeredness produced sharply differentiated judgments of sensitivity and effectiveness among our sample of African-Americans. These findings underscore the argument noted above: Namely, that while African-Americans may accept highly person-centered, non-religious strategies as equally sensitive and effective as Caucasians, when given the choice, they find messages embodying notions of prayer, faith, God and religion to be greater sources of comfort.

Such results are consistent with what we know about religiosity in the African-American community. While religious beliefs and practices are viewed by many people as important in times of distress (Bjorck & Cohen, 1993), the effects of such practices on coping may be especially profound for members of the African-American community. As Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) noted “much of black culture was forged in the heart of black religion and the black church” (p. 10); recent work by the Barna Group (2009) and others indicates that this has not changed with the passage of time. Studies show, for example, that African-Americans are generally more religious than other ethnic groups, that church offers African-Americans a significant source of social support (Taylor, 1993), and that for African-Americans, an “important cultural factor in coping appears to be religion” (Holt et al. 2009, p. 249).

Scholars working within the allied health professions have long recognized the central role that religiosity plays in the life-world of many African-Americans, particularly with respect to coping with illness. Over 25 years ago, for instance, Conway (1985–1986) found that older African-American women used prayer as a method of coping with medical issues more frequently than older Caucasian women. Since then, similar differences in the use of prayer as a coping mechanism have been observed between African-American and Caucasian women with breast cancer, and between African-American and Caucasian men with prostate cancer (Holt et al., 2009). The same pattern appears to hold true for mental illness as well. Cooper, Brown, Thi Vu, Ford, and Powe (2001) observed that African-Americans were 372 times more likely than Caucasians to report prayer as “extremely important” to their care for depression. Given such trends, it’s not surprising that many African-Americans welcome the invocation of prayer and religion from their healthcare providers. In a study of preferred nursing interventions among African-American patients, Conner and Eller (2004) found that “participating in spiritual activities” was the most frequently identified intervention. According to the patients surveyed,

such activities involved (among other things) “sharing in prayer,” “including God in the care,” and “sitting by the bedside and sharing the Good News.” In a review of the literature on how spiritual beliefs and practices influence the treatment preferences of African-Americans, Johnson, Elbert-Avila, and Tulskey (2005, p. 716) thus concluded:

... their spiritual beliefs strongly guide many African-Americans as they cope with illness... In addition to serving as a source of comfort, coping, and support, for some African-Americans, spiritual beliefs and practices provide a foundation for understanding disease, restoring health, and making treatment decisions.

Our study provides preliminary evidence that their religious beliefs and practices may also “strongly guide” at least some African-American college students as they cope with emotional distress.

In his “wish list” of “fertile areas of study at the intersection of religion and communication,” Schultze (2010, p. 199) argued that “scholars have an opportunity to address prescriptively as well as descriptively the many complex intersections of human unity and cultural diversity in heterogeneous societies” (p. 203). In many ways, we see our study as providing a first—albeit small—step in this direction.

The practical implications of such findings are fairly obvious. For some African-Americans, person-centered comforting efforts incorporating notions of God, faith, prayer, and religion may do a better job of alleviating the effects of negatively charged emotional events than person-centered messages that do not incorporate such ideas. Armed with this knowledge, support providers—both lay and professional—may not only be better equipped to facilitate coping among African-Americans, but may also better position themselves to reap the many benefits that we know are associated with engaging in sophisticated comforting behavior (e.g., being seen as a sensitive, attractive, and helpful social companion).

Prescriptively, then, our findings point to specific communicative mechanisms through which multiple aspects of the coping process may be facilitated for African-American young adults. In addition, they caution against the use of a one-size-fits-all approach to the delivery of comfort in times of distress. In short, Kleman et al. (2009) once speculated that “race likely plays a role in the way people communicate support” (p. 181). Our study provides empirical evidence confirming this contention.

There are theoretical implications to our work as well. First, by examining how faith-based notions influence perceptions of comforting messages, our study addresses a significant lacuna in the literature on religion and communication. It has long been recognized that, for many individuals, religious beliefs serve as a guide for behavior, particularly during times of distress. As Pecchioni et al. (2011) explain, “These belief systems provide a meaning to life, a framework for interpreting events that occur and hope during adversity. . . While the search for meaning may be an on-going process, it becomes particularly important during times of distress” (p. 42). However, what has not been widely examined is how religion influences the communicative practice of support. Thus, at a very broad level, our study provides at

least preliminary insight into the ways in which faith-based notions shape perceptions of support strategies among young adults of different racial groups. Future studies might further illuminate the religion-support connection by systematically examining how evaluations of effective support vary among those (a) whose religious beliefs are grounded in very different spiritual codes (e.g., Buddhists versus Muslims), and/or (b) who conceptualize God as benevolent and caring versus those who view God as angry and punishing (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005).

Our work also has more specific ramifications for the constructivist notion of person-centeredness and how this concept informs definitions of skillful communication. Grounded in Bernstein's (1973) distinction between restricted and elaborated speech codes, person-centeredness is thought to reflect the extent to which messages not only demonstrate awareness of, but also adaptation to, various subjective, emotional, and relational aspects of communicative situations (see Burleson, 1984; Burleson & Caplan, 1999). As Burleson (2007, p. 115) explains, highly person-centered messages are "more responsive to the aims and utterances of an interactional partner, are tailored to the characteristics of the partner and situation, attend to the identity-relevant features of communicative contexts, and may encourage reflection about persons and social situations." As such, they are considered more skillful or sophisticated forms of communication.

Constructivists have long maintained that person-centeredness is a "general quality of messages" that manifests itself differently depending on the primary communicative goal that is being pursued. Within persuasive contexts, for instance, highly person-centered messages exhibit greater concern for the goals and desires of the persuasive target than do less person-centered messages. In disciplinary situations, messages high in person-centeredness seek to induce the other's understanding of and compliance with behavioral rules by getting him/her to reflect upon the consequences of the problematic behavior (versus attempting to gain compliance via threats of punishment or statements of power). And, of course, as we know from the current study, highly person-centered comforting strategies acknowledge, elaborate and legitimize the hurt and frustration a distressed other may be experiencing, while non-person-centered comforting strategies deny those feelings.

Thus, while constructivists have clearly acknowledged that person-centeredness takes on slightly different forms according to the particular communicative goal being pursued, they have failed to see that person-centeredness may also vary according to the *specific communicative target* being addressed. Put differently, person-centered messages, as currently conceived, may indeed be more tailored to the characteristics of the partner and attend in greater detail to the identity-relevant features of communicative contexts—but they are largely *Caucasian targets* and *Caucasian identities* to which the messages are being tailored and adapted. That is, the model of sophisticated communication put forth by constructivists may best apply to Caucasians, and thus overlook some of the subjective, affective, and relational features of situations that are important to many African-Americans.

From a theoretical perspective, then, our findings suggest one of two things for constructivist researchers. On the one hand, the results can be seen as presenting a challenge to the notion of universal “goodness” typically associated with person-centered message forms. More likely, however, they suggest that the ways in which key components of person-centeredness have been conceptualized and coded are not only narrow, but racially biased. Future work might address this question by exploring expanded definitions of what constitutes important “subjective, affective, and relational features” in support episodes among individuals whose ethnic group membership is varied and diverse.

Limitations and Conclusion

As with all self-report data, our conclusions should be interpreted with caution. In addition, our sample was restricted to undergraduate students who are perhaps the most knowledgeable of—and comfortable with—mainstream cultural standards. Perhaps even greater differences in individuals’ perceptions of religious versus non-religious comforting messages would emerge if non-student populations were studied. Despite these—and other—limitations, however, we believe this study offers preliminary evidence for the idea that current ideas regarding skillful comforting may be somewhat restrictive. Our findings suggest that broadening the concept of person-centeredness to include notions of God, prayer, faith and religion, may reflect a true “awareness of and adaptation to” the needs of many African-American young adults during times of emotional distress.

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