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Domains of religious coping behavior among African Christians in NSW Australia: An exploratory qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the domains of religious coping strategies among African Christians in New South Wales, Australia, and the role they play in negotiating quality of life and life stressors. Study themes were drawn from interview transcripts that showed positive and negative aspects of religious coping, involving multiple domains including personal, social, and environmental attributes. Of particular interest were the correlations that respondents drew between their personal biographies, environmental stressors, human-based coping, and religious coping behavior. These results position religious coping as a social cognitive model which may arise from relationship problems, while serving the need for autonomy. Implications are discussed.

Introduction

Several studies point to the role of religious coping behavior in the understanding of life stressors and existential experiences, suggesting that religious-related resources may provide meaning to hurting individuals in an otherwise stressful place or life event (e.g., Breland-Noble et al., 2015; Matthews & Marwit, 2006). This view of religious coping conceptualizes how individuals could reframe their previously held assumptions about self, others, and the broader environment, to one that aligns with their religious and theological beliefs. Religious coping is an important attribute seen among both religious and nonreligious individuals and often experienced in the context of a perceived relationship with God, or to some extent, based on the individual's spiritual awareness and beliefs. This may require some degree of self-transcendence and the use of available religious resources to deal with stressful life situations (Pargament, 1997).

According to Pargament, Smith, Koenig, and Perez (1998), religious adherents develop meaningful religious strategies for coping with life stressors, creating meaning and comfort while also enabling them to grow both spiritually and mentally in their faith and experience with the sacred. The

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Table 1. Profile of respondents.

Name (pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Relationship status	Country of origin	Length of stay	Education	QoL level	Date	Duration (minutes)
Ollia	40	F	Married	Zimbabwe	10	Master's degree	Above average	11/01/2018	40
Kwata	69	M	Married	Ghana	44	Bachelor's degree	Above average	10/01/2018	35
Henry	30	M	Married	Nigeria	3	Master's degree	Average	10/01/2018	58
Thambe	22	F	Single	Zimbabwe	14	Bachelor's degree	Above average	12/01/2018	39
Martin	32	M	Married	Ghana	26	Master's degree	Above average	19/01/2018	79
Cosmas	38	M	Married	Zimbabwe	10	Master's degree	below average	19/01/2018	34
Anna	18	F	Single	Ghana	4	High school	Above average	24/01/2018	45
Cika	42	F	Married	Zimbabwe	5	Bachelor's degree	Average	23/01/2018	38
Esther	20	F	Single	Zimbabwe	9	Master's degree	Average	18/01/2018	29
Mary	26	F	Single	Ghana	2	Bachelor's degree	Average	17/01/2018	46
Rebecca	N/A	F	Single	Ghana	20	High school	Below average	20/01/2018	56
Winner	42	M	Married	Zimbabwe	14	Bachelor's degree	Below average	09/01/2018	34
Abeta	27	F	Married	Ghana	12	Master's degree	Below average	13/01/2018	38
Ernest	30	M	Married	Zimbabwe	7	Master's degree	Below average	22/01/2018	42
Monica	48	F	Divorced	Zimbabwe	11	Bachelor's degree	Average	14/01/2018	33

effort to deal with life stressors in ways related to the sacred can be understood as religious coping. The term "sacred" in the context of religious coping theory does not only refer to the traditional understanding of God, the divine or the supernatural but can also be conceptualized in terms of other aspects of life which involve divine experience and self-transcendence. The latter can assume different forms including "improvement of oneself, deepening relations with others, building [a] sense of unity with nature or attachment to and trust in the Divine Being" (Charzynska, 2015, p. 1631). As situational expressions of the individual's spirituality, religious coping strategies are formed during the individual's search for meaning in the context of life stressors (Pargament, 1997).

Psychology offers two main perspectives on religious coping: positive religious coping and negative religious coping (Pargament, 1997). The former is associated with improvements in psychological wellbeing and quality of life based on commitment to one's religion or perceived relationship with God. For example, studies (e.g., Cicirelli, 2004; Counted, 2016) show that perceiving God as "caring" or "loving" or as an "ultimate attachment figure" is related to better health outcomes. The latter is related to declines in psychological wellbeing and quality of life due to one's spiritual struggles and trouble maintaining a relationship with God. These negative spiritual experiences are likely to affect the individual's view of their broader environment, perceiving it as threatening (Pargament et al., 1998). Studies (e.g., Pargament, 1997; McConnell et al. 2006) suggest that negative religious coping strategies such as "perceiving God as punishing" are related to negative moods and "pessimistic assessments of the outcomes of adverse events" (Greenway, Phelan, Turnbull, & Milne, 2007, p. 326).

Religious coping strategies are not just about life stressors but also about relating to a place to which individual experiences and perception of the world are formed. Counted and Watts (2017), for example, described a place as an important locus for the human experience—one which informs understanding of and relation to the sacred among dispersed populations, having its own health and cultural benefits or detriments. As such, place and migration experiences become important tapestries for understanding religious coping strategies in general.

Despite the rich theoretical insights into religious coping behavior as discussed previously, little research has been done into what constitutes the religious coping strategies of the African Christian diaspora. Given that coping strategies can vary, depending on several factors, findings from other population groups cannot be generalized for this sample.

The current study aims to gain a deeper understanding of religious coping strategies and their psychological and health-related impact by using semistructured interviews with a sample of 15 male and female African Christians living in New South Wales, Australia. Discussing the

religious coping strategies of the African Christian diaspora in a host community is deemed a relevant research scope due to the dearth of literature in this area. Hence, this study adopts a phenomenological qualitative methodology and an interpretivist paradigm to inform the study design and data analysis respectively (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). It is hoped that this analytical approach will help in enriching the understanding and dynamics of religious coping strategies from the perspective and reflections of those who belong to the African Christian diaspora in New South Wales, Australia.

Method

Design

The goal of the study was to understand the religious coping strategies used by the African Christian diaspora for negotiating quality of life. As such, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999) was employed to interpret the respondents' own description of their religious coping experiences in relation to the researcher's own understanding and reflexivity. As a philosophical paradigm, IPA draws on Husserl's (1983) epoché or "bracketing" phenomenology: suspending judgment about the lived experience of a contemplated entity and setting aside questions about its very objective nature. The aim of bracketing or epoché is to achieve objectivity (Baillie, 1996). By bracketing the existence of a contemplated entity, there is a systematic phenomenological activity aimed towards peeling away the symbolic meanings until only the entity or phenomenon itself, as meant and experienced, remains. In contrast, Benner (1985) has adopted Martin Heidegger's existentialist phenomenology, arguing that bracketing does not necessarily lead to objectivity since the human knower is a being-in-the-world that approaches a thing with "fore-knowledge" and not separated from the contemplated phenomena. Drawing on these two perspectives, Pembroke (2011) has argued that the IPA methodological process of bracketing should consider the presuppositions of the researcher while peeling away the objective nature of the contemplated phenomena.

A holistic approach to IPA would allow the phenomena to be examined and studied in its purity in relation to a contextual (cultural and linguistic) history, thus establishing its transcendental attitude and lived experience (Pembroke, 2011). The researcher adopts a holistic IPA approach, which naively accepts the world as existing while engaging the entity with the attitude as one who is immersed in the world of the researcher. This methodological paradigm aims to approach a contemplated entity or

phenomenon on its own terms, while also considering the values and perspectives of the author. This creates a research that is both a "fusion of the perspectives of the researcher(s) and of the participants," given that "presuppositions cannot therefore be bracketed out; they constitute the condition of the possibility of meaning" (Pembroke 2011, p. 158). This holistic approach to IPA produces a deep understanding of the contemplated phenomena or entity under investigation.

Given that the IPA methodological approach gives deeper meaning and insights into the human experience, it is appropriate for describing the complex religious coping strategies of African Christians in Australia who are confronted by a range of socio-cultural challenges in relation to the researcher's own reflexivity (e.g., Bansel, Denson, Keltie, Moody, & Theakstone, 2016; Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2017). The proposed IPA analysis will offer insights into how these individuals, within a diaspora context, make sense of their daily experiences, negotiate their day-to-day quality of life, and cope with the challenges of a multicultural society.

In accordance with the IPA recommendations (see Brocki & Wearden, 2006), semistructured interviews were used to guide the data collection process. Interview sessions were consisted of open-ended questions and probes (see Appendix), which aimed at providing additional insights into the experiences of the respondents in the event that they might give short or direct responses. Open-ended questions also served as warm-up conversations designed to make the respondents feel at ease, especially in cases where they were responding to a sensitive question about their experience in Australia or their religious coping strategy.

Sample and procedure

Respondents were African Christians in local Christian communities or churches in New South Wales, Australia. Selected respondents had participated in an earlier study with a sample of 261 African church goers in New South Wales and completed a self-report survey on their religious attachment representations (Sim & Loh, 2003) and health-related quality of life outcomes (WHOQOL Group, 1995). Their mean age was 36.9 + 11.7 years. On a scale of 1–6, participants (n = 261) had an above average mean score (M = 5.60, SD = 0.46) on their religiosity, showing a strong level of religious attachment representation. The health-related quality of life outcome for the total sample was also above average with a mean score of 3.94, on a scale of 1–5.

For the present study, a purposeful sampling method (Patton, 1990) was used to identify and select African Christians, recruited from a quantitative sample (n = 261), who could articulate their lived experiences in their host-communities in New South Wales, Australia. Respondents had completed the *World Health Organization Quality of Life-BREF Scale*, which was used to

assess their health-related quality of life. Survey participants for the quantitative study demonstrated various levels of quality of life scores, which may be related to their religious coping strategies.

For this present study, a total of 15 respondents (age range of 18–69 years old, 60% [$n = 9$] female) were recruited. Among the fifteen 15 ($n = 15$), five had a below average score of quality of life, the second round of five respondents had an average mean score of quality of life, and the remaining five respondents had an above average mean score of quality of life. All the respondents were contacted via telephone or email and invited to participate in follow-up interviews in order to elicit their positive or negative religious coping strategies. The interview sessions lasted between 29 and 79 minutes, and were conducted one-to-one by telephone ($n = 7$), Skype ($n = 2$), or face-to-face ($n = 6$). Respondents chose their preferred medium of communication and their interview sessions were planned accordingly. All interview sessions were recorded using a phone app and transcribed verbatim prior to data analysis.

Research questions

(1) What are the lived and existential experiences of African Christians in New South Wales, Australia?
(2) What religious coping strategies are helpful for coping with life stressors and negotiating identity and quality of life among African Christians?

Background and potential bias on the part of the researcher

The author is an Australian-based African researcher on the borderline between psychology and theology. He is a member of the clergy with over 10 years of ministry experience as an ordained minister. The author is also known for his scholarly works on the role of relational spirituality in migration and health contexts. As an African Christian scholar living in Australia, the author is familiar with the challenges faced by members of the African diaspora in Australia through personal and professional interactions.

In terms of preconception, the author believed that the respondents would have a wide range of positive and negative experiences living in Australia due to their ethnicity (Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2017). He expected that the respondents would deal with such experiences through their faith and personal relationship with God.

Data analysis

By using the IPA approach, interview transcripts were transcribed and analyzed in order to generate an in-depth understanding and insight into

the lived experiences and religious coping strategies of African Christians in Australia. The aim of data analysis in an IPA design approach is to articulate respondents' phenomenology while also offering an interpretivist perspective on their lived experience (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). Aside from identifying emerging themes from interview transcripts, Smith and colleagues recommend that researchers should analyze interview scripts, one at a time, in order to adequately conceptualize the interrelations and hierarchies of themes informing respondents' lived experiences.

Coding and selection of the overarching themes were done via an in-depth, line-by-line scrutiny of each interview script. Glaser and Strauss (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 101–116) described this process as the "constant comparison method," whereby interview transcripts are reviewed to ensure that the overarching study themes are well articulated while the poorly described themes are dropped. This procedure was repeated for every transcript, as themes of all transcripts were reviewed and joined with relevant theme hierarchies.

Since the IPA design approach aims at interpreting each individual's phenomenology, this idiographic model of analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) helps in understanding more about the lived experiences and religious coping strategies of this group of African Christians in Australia. As such, study findings are presented based on emergent themes in the data. These themes will be explored and examined in this study using narratives of the respondents, while juxtaposing contrasting views where appropriate.

Results

Respondents noted a range of lived experiences and socio-cultural challenges that were, in part, dealt with by drawing on coping strategies that embody religious attributes.

Lived experiences of African Christians in Australia

Respondents saw Australia as "a nice country" and "a livable place" that receives "people with an open heart." Some noted that Australia was "safe" for them and their family and emphasized the freedom and security they had experienced living in Australia. From the response of one of the respondents it would appear that by "safe" they mean the "multicultural" nature of the country and that the financial security they experience here (through having a good paying job) is better than their experiences in their home countries. However, further inquiries suggest that respondents were mostly excited about their dreams of a better life in Australia and how their new abode could help them in achieving these dreams through the career and employment opportunities it offers them. The respondents saw Australia as a land of

opportunity, prosperity, freedom, and as a place that fosters life continuity. They consider Australia as a place essential for their existence over an extended period time (i.e., life continuity), partly due to the Australian healthcare system, which makes it easier for them to access the best medical attention when needed. Interestingly, this view was largely common among older respondents while younger ones did not appear to consider Australia as a place to stay long-term or spend their retirement. However, one of the older respondents reasoned, "there are [more] opportunities for the younger migrant generations than the older ones due to the age differences and the migration policy that favors young people." Despite these perceptions, all the respondents seem to indicate their intention of going back to Africa someday to contribute to the development there, while also emphasizing the health and financial benefits of living in Australia as shown previously.

While respondents conceptualize Australia in positive terms, they also express mixed feelings about their experience as a minority group in Australia. Some cited cases of perceived racism and implicit biases in the form of stereotypes or labeling as among the negative experiences they have encountered in Australia, pointing to this particularly occurring in urban rather than rural communities. Their narratives reflect the burden of *otherness*: a feeling of being "the odd one in the box." The problem here is not so much that of invisibility but rather the burden of visibility due to stares from strangers who are of a different ethnicity and therefore look differently from them. One respondent stated, "Sometimes, when you walk around people stare at you but I think it is because of the culture here and what you do," adding that "some think that Africa is some country … and that we eat grass in Africa." When asked what she meant by this the respondent noted that many White Australians are not used to seeing people of color in their country and often stare when they see one, making the individual feel as though they are intruding in their area with their "non-White" self. Issues such as these clearly affected the sense of well-being and self-esteem of the respondents and led to their "not feeling accepted" and having a sense of "isolation in the workplace." What the respondents experienced may not have been explicit racism but rather a reaction by the locals who have preconceived ideas about Africans and their way of life. Nonetheless, respondents recounted:

I didn't have any negative experience although when you walk around people will be staring at you … some will ask some "funny" questions … they think that Africa is just a country … they think that we eat grass. … If I take a photo of where I lived in Alice Springs and show it to people in Africa they will not want to come … there are better things in Africa.
Now so long as you have dark skin, there are ignorant people within the community that would group you all together. You hear the term like "you Africans." Africa has become a country—it has always been for the ignorant.

> Before, it was where are you from… now you meet certain people that are not open-minded [and] they guess your country for you and then you hear comments like "you are not like them." When you hear comments like that then you realize that that is where the problem lies: because "you are not like them" meaning "them" is the problem. If you are not like "them" then you are not part of the problem.
>
> There was a peak in police issue where they started grouping people and would stop African people—it doesn't matter which part of Africa that you [come] from —they would treat you the same [by profiling you]. Whether you are light or dark, as long as you are African [have African features], you are troublemakers.

The respondents seemed to believe that the general stereotypical perception about them was some sort of identity politics coming from the interests of the Australian political class. Identity politics is the tendency by a particular group of people in which they form exclusive social and political alliances, largely shaped by aspects of their identity such as race, social background, or religion (Wiarda, 2016). Some fear that this identity politics has gone deep into the Australian fabric, such that an average White Australian lacks awareness of and interest in the diversity of the African community in Australia and of the African continent. According to the respondents, the identity politics of stereotyping that lumps all Africans together as one fails to take account of the diverse backgrounds of African migrants (skilled and unskilled) and what they contribute to the Australian society. The majority of the respondents assumed that such identity politics and stereotypes about Africa have led to changes in migration reforms, making it difficult to gain employment, access their local African food staple, and secure permanent residence status. Some respondents noted the following:

> I had an experience some time ago when I applied for a job. I spoke on the phone with the manager about the job and they liked me. When I was invited to their office the next week to see the manager, they were surprised that I was Black. They asked me if I was the one they had spoken with over the phone … I didn't get that job after that.
>
> We have our particular food which we are accustomed to. So when we initially came it was nowhere to be found. But I am glad that an effort has been made. Now we receive our meal regularly but we still do have other food items which we would like to have that are not allowed by immigration. We only eat that when we travel home to Zimbabwe.
>
> As a migrant, my biggest challenge is how to get permanent residency. How to write the English test and get a good score. They just increased the points required from 65 to 75. I don't know how I am going to get [pass]. That is the biggest challenge I have now.

Respondents spoke of other challenges and experiences they were facing in Australia, blaming the poor understanding of and stereotypical prejudices toward the Australian-African community as part of the problem. Overall, they seemed to speak with one voice about the negative public perception of

the African community in Australia, one which seems to affect their self-identity, self-confidence, perceived quality of life, and opinions about Australia (also see Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2017).

Attachment separation, surrogates, and avoidance behavior

Most of the respondents had a healthy close relationship with their primary caregivers (e.g., father, mother), close others (e.g., friends, romantic partner), and church community. However, few (n = 5) had negative relationship experiences with important people in their lives, pointing to the demands and busyness of their pursuing the "Australian Dream" (believing that settling in Australia can lead to a better life because of the perceived freedom, security, and possibility of success it offers) as the root cause of their relationship breakdown with important people in their lives. This meant that the routines and demands of place change (having migrated) meant working long hours away from home or studying to secure a better future for the family. These demands affected the "chemistry" or relationship between parents and children, husband and wife, and family within the African community. For example, one respondent noted that he "never bonded with dad due to his work and study." A 22-year-old female respondent stated that her parents divorced due to the demands of life in Australia, which affected her relationship with her father who no longer lives in Australia. Another female respondent, 40, felt that the demands her ex-husband and she placed upon themselves for a better life in Australia might have contributed towards their divorce. There were contrasting views as to what might have caused these emotional separations. One respondent, however, believes that they are likely to be as a result of other factors such as the culture and family upbringing. To take seriously, the respondent explained that:

> Relationship [with my parents] mirrors the typical African relationship. Like back in the days when dad was working and mum was the boss at home. Due to the nature of the relationship, and my dad being stubborn, I never developed that western type of relationship a lot of kids have with their dads. There was not a lot of bonding and there was no time to play at the park because daddy was always at work. At that time, I thought it was normal but as I got older I realized that it wasn't normal.

Another interesting observation from the interviews was to see the respondents turning to other sources for relationships. For example, they mentioned looking up to their older siblings, making friends with people within their own social class, participating in a church community, and seeking spiritual attachment and relationship with God. These channels of relationships seem to play some sort of compensatory roles, in that they were

substitute mediums that filled the void of an absentee caregiver or family member. While some of the respondents compensated for an unavailable relationship by turning to attachment surrogates, others developed a self-coping strategy which was expressed through developing tendencies and traits that sometimes position them as "introverts," "independent," "not trusting of others," and "self-reliant." The latter group developed an avoidant attachment as a way of protecting themselves from emotional hurts and betrayals, as experienced from their primary caregivers and romantic partners. Ainsworth and colleagues (1978) referred to this as an insecure preoccupied attachment style that is both dismissive and fearful of others. These tendencies (i.e., forming compensatory attachment affiliation and avoidance attachment style) seem to be developed to cope with the experience of attachment separation from parents and partners. These tendencies may have negatively affected the respondents, leading to "lack of self-confidence," such that they sought to rely on other people for acceptance and rely on themselves against external betrayal, providing them with some closure. The avoidance disposition and compensatory relationships also served as defensive mechanisms upon which to explore the broader environment, forge future relationships, and negotiate identity and quality of life in Australia.

Responses from the respondents suggest that their experience of avoidance self-coping is basically reinforced by an underlying religious identity or compensatory relationship with a divine attachment figure (e.g., God). In other words, there was a correlation between respondents' avoidance coping strategy and their religious experience. Religion appears to play a role in their avoidance coping as most of them seem to replace their attachment figures, especially by substituting for an attachment affiliation with God. When asked how such affiliation may be related to their self-reliant avoidance tendency, some of the respondents recited how their faith in God has kept them strong, secure, courageous, and safe. They conceptualized God as some sort of attachment figure and companion who guides them, and one to whom they find a safe haven, completeness, and can confide and rely on as a secure base in their decision-making process. One of the respondents even noted that he "cannot make a decision without committing it to God." He offers encouragement to other respondents to "count it all joy in whatever you face [in Australia]," a biblical reflection drawn from the book of James 1: 2. This sense of confidence in their relationship with God seems to reassure respondents' self-confidence, in a way that reframed their negative experiences and attachment separation as "trials of faith." It appears that this avoidance coping strategy, though related to their religious life, makes the respondents content with their life while being independent of their human others.

Self-transcendence and religious coping

Next, it appears that respondents drew on their religious identity and theological beliefs as a way of responding and reframing their everyday life challenges and stressors. Respondents' theological beliefs and spiritual resources played a vital role in this meaning-making process as it helped them overcome the limits of the individual self in order to attain self-transcendence. This religious coping experience was expressed in two distinct ways: positive and negative. The former shows how the majority of the respondents ($n = 12$) engage their Christian theological beliefs to reframe their lived experiences. This aspect of religious coping mainly involves cognitive and behavioral efforts aimed at seeking spiritual support and meaning. The latter simply shows how the respondents ($n = 3$) expressed their conflict and doubt regarding issues of faith in dealing with their life challenges. Such negative spiritual coping made it difficult for them to draw strength from the relationship with God or their spiritual awareness. Both the positive and negative religious coping experiences manifested themselves among the respondents in various forms, as will be discussed next.

Positive religious coping

Personal domain. Respondents shared how their search for meaning and spiritual connection in their own personal life in their pursuit for a better life in Australia, helped them overcome their challenges in life. This was demonstrated through their personal and spiritual awareness, as they sought internal harmony and also with those around them. This aspect of their religious coping did not involve any external religious influence such as participating with a church community, though it may have been influenced by their spiritual awareness—a form of self-transcendence involving overcoming the limits of the individual self and seeing oneself as an integral part of the universe. The respondents reported that they took up the challenge that they "will survive in Australia no matter what happens." Despite the challenges experienced by the respondents, they found the need to speak positively about their future in Australia and refused to abandon their Australian Dream, even if it meant improvising. When asked how their spirituality was helping them to deal with their lack of access to their staple food, one of the respondents noted, "because I was not getting what I was used to … when it came to the matter of food I still trusted in God because I have to be accustomed to what they have here." The respondent reasoned that her "trust in God" during her spiritual contemplation made her to be creative about her food choice by making use of what she found in the Australian food market. She substituted the porridge recipes she found in the stores and used them for her maize meal.

Some other respondents recounted the personal domain of positive religious coping and how their spiritual awareness helped them to cope with whatever challenges came their way:

> I looked in the mirror and saw a child of God that has potential … I realized that I could do all things through Christ who strengthens me. That means I took my studies seriously and believed that I could do whatever I wanted to do.
> I have the spirit … and know that whatever I face I must survive and count it all joy because God cannot give to me more than I can bear. When I got to this country I know that it was definitely not going to be all rosy. But one thing I know was that whatever I faced the bible says I should count it all joy because hopefully there is always a light at the end of the tunnel.
> We have verses in the Bible that say in all things, give glory to God. So in all difficulties and challenges I still believe that there is God who can meet all my challenges.

Social domain. The personal dimension of religious coping seems to correlate with the social dimension as respondents tapped into the sinews of divine relationality. Contrary to the personal domain, most of the respondents shared another variation of religious coping, this time emphasizing the need for a meaningful relationship with God and engagement with their religious others. In this scenario, respondents conceptualized their God representation as a loving, protective father figure, one to whom they can turn when in danger and from whom they can explore the Australian space as "newcomers." This social domain was more salient among respondents because of the perceived presence of God in their lives as a loving and caring "father," one upon whom to cast the burdens of life. This social domain was often activated through the medium of prayer, fasting, and searching the scriptures for answers:

> I cannot make a decision without committing it to God in prayer. … What myself and my wife do is every first day of the month we do prayer and fasting. We seek the face of God … and commit our plan to God to help us.
> My relationship with God plays, at least, more than 90% role in my life. I cannot see myself making any concrete decision without committing it to God first in prayer. My relationship with God really helped me to survive in this country … getting to this country was very challenging.
> We fellowship together in Church in Sydney. Every Sunday we drive about 98–120 km to the place of worship … we drive from the Central Coast to Sydney to commune with our God … this really helps me.
> Once you have a relationship with God it affects every aspect of your life. Once I realized that I have an amazing and loving savior and accepted God I began to change and my attitude began to change … I started building positive relationships.

This reliance on religion for coping extended to treating others kindly, in response to the biblical injunction to "love your neighbor." This was mostly evident in the respondents' compassionate attitude towards the

locals, the Australian community, and the place (Australia), which they had at first perceived negatively. When asked what made them adopt this positive attitude, most of them cited the religious teachings to "love others" and be the "light of the world" which helped them show empathy, love, and compassion towards those who had labeled them as "troublemakers."

Environmental domain. Another aspect of positive religious coping by the respondents was in terms of how they embraced their environment and achieved harmony and order in it. This was done through their active involvement with the local church community and meaningful relations with their religious others at places of worship. Contrary to the social domain, respondents seem to have dealt with their life challenges by strengthening their sense of spirituality through their place of worship—a sacred space that not only strengthens their faith but also forges their perception and attitudes toward their environment. This environmental aspect appears to be the function of previous domains of religious coping, in that respondents reinforced their personal and social religious commitments and awareness in a local church setting. They recount of this experience:

> It wasn't very easy studying and working and finding a church that will deploy what you have to the service of God. But I thank God for helping me to locate a good place [church] where I can add one or two things to his house.
> I am a big believer in things happening for a reason. I noticed a shift in the quality of my life [when I began to attend a local church] … not in terms of materialistic things but compared to when I was on my own and I was working and hanging around with my friends. But there were still things missing … until I started going to church and started hanging around with people of my own kind … not just people in the church but people in my community.
> All the respondents reported an association between a better quality of life with their environmental connection, particularly through their religious meetings and church involvement. This positions religious coping as an experience that involves physical involvement in a place of worship; an environmental setting that is both sacred and communal for the respondents' religious and cultural expressions.

Negative religious versus human-based coping

While the majority of the respondents (*n* = 13) displayed positive religious coping in dealing with life challenges in Australia, there was a small minority (*n* = 3) who had doubts about the role of their religious identity and theological beliefs in helping them deal with life stressors. Respondents within this category found it difficult to draw strength from spiritual resources or their religious others, as they often elevated their own weaknesses and limitations above religion often due to their feelings of doubt and guilt in their relationship with God.

At the *personal domain* level, respondents found it difficult to go beyond their material limitations, adopting a realist approach to resolving their life stressors. Although aware of their lack of ability for self-transcendence, the respondents still spoke of themselves, demonstrating courage and hope in their Australian dream in spite of their lack of faith in their personal abilities. Two of the respondents felt that problems they faced adapting to life in a new environment could be met through "self-motivation," "self-education," "self-evaluation," "pushing through the fear," and not feeling any need to resort to religion. (In other words, they felt they were able to cope without it.) One could reason that the respondents were pragmatic in their practical approach to problem solving. When asked how they were able to achieve their goals they note "learning through social media" as a main resource for their human-based coping, in that the contents they read online reinforced their negative religious coping and doubts about the salutary effects of religion in coping with life stressors. In other words, there was a connection between their human-based coping and their negative religious coping. The human-based coping served as a springboard for their spiritual discontent, inter-personal religious discontent, and reappraisal of God's powers.

In terms of the social domain of negative religious coping, respondents also gave contrasting views about the effectiveness of their relationship with God and discontentment with close others in resolving their immediate life challenges. In this instance, respondents expressed their feelings of abandonment and anger towards God, leaning towards their own human dignity and capacity for self-fulfillment. Interestingly, those that fell within this category had experiences of attachment separation with their care-givers or parents and as a result developed an avoidant attachment style in terms of their "dismissive" relationship with God. A 22-year-old whose parents divorced when she was 8 years old stated: "I hardly trust anyone." In commenting on the complexity of negative religious coping, another respondent noted:

> I know my spirituality is wavering but I don't think it really does anything for anyone. I know my faith and relationship with God is not strong but I am [strong] if faith in him is the solution to my problems. I have to work this out. I am happy my elder brother is always there for me … but I don't trust people.

Other respondents noted that their friends are able to help them find employment and therefore they have no reason to turn to religion, or have God do that for them (even though it is possible that God may have sent their friend to them unknown to them). One of the respondents recounts, "I have this friend … she is so good at finding jobs for others. If you are looking for employment she helps you prepare your resume and apply for the job for you herself. She is good." When asked about the role God plays in their life, one respondent said, "He [God] will not come down to do the work for you."

It appears that the respondents are aware that "faith without works is dead" (cf. James 2:14–26) and perhaps recognized that God cannot do for them what they can do for themselves. However, there seems to be a link between their avoidant attachment tendencies and their humanistic coping behavior, as those with attachment problems often were dismissive and reappraisal of God's powers.

Discussion

The result of this study is similar to those of previous studies on avoidance coping behavior (Ng, Shao, & Liu, 2016) and religious coping strategies (Charzynska, 2015; Hebert, Zdaniuk, Schulz, & Scheier, 2009; Pargament, 1997). The first key finding of this study is the correlation between avoidance coping behavior and religious coping, in that respondents who were avoiding their human others were seeking new relationship experiences with God individually, or collectively, through their church community. The second key finding is that the respondents reporting evidence of negative religious coping behavior in the form of showing spiritual discontent and reappraisal of God's powers in their lives had negative experiences of attachment separation and relationship problems with their close others. These two findings thus suggest attachment insecurity in human relationships as the motivation for developing religious coping behavior both in the positive and negative domains.

The aforementioned findings are well-documented in attachment literature and discussed as the compensatory and correspondence models of individual differences in attachment processes (e.g., Counted, 2016; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). The compensatory experience positions God as an attachment surrogate for believers who turn to him for secure attachment, relying on him as a secure base and safe for their religious coping. In other words, the relationship with God serves as a coping mechanism or substitute for "insensitive" attachment figures and attachment insecurity with close others. This relationship also helps in coping with life stressors, which involve a range of issues such as stereotypes, labeling, implicit bias, cost of living, tough immigration reforms, and migration-related family crises. The correspondence model shows how the attachment working models of individuals with negative relationship experiences with their primary caregivers are transferred to their future relationships. In other words, if an individual develops an insecure working model of attachment during the early years of life, they may likely exhibit a similar tendency in their relationship with God and close others (Counted, 2016a, b). Respondents' attachment affiliation with God were used as a conservational force in their coping process to "a search for significance in times of stress" (Pargament, 1997, p. 90). This religious

coping process helped them to forge meaning, gain control of their situation, acquire comfort through maintaining spiritual connection, and explore the broader environment during life crisis. Nonetheless, this coping process was often challenged and threatened by the lingering effects of negative emotions and individual biographies in the face of place change and migration, thus leading to adopting other coping behavioral aspects that were both avoidant and humanistic in nature.

Study findings show that respondents demonstrated two aspects of religious coping: positive and negative. Firstly, the positive religious coping showed how they used religious resources available to them to "understand and deal with life stressors in ways related to the sacred" (Charzynska, 2015b, p. 1631). Pargament (1997) conceptualized this aspect of religious coping based on Lazarus and Folkman's (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) transactional model of stress, in that the respondents played an active role in making sense of and evaluating their life stressors and challenges by searching for significance through spiritual resources. This is done by adopting cognitive and behavioral strategies aimed at meaning-making and problem-solving. It is argued that such cognitive and behavioral skills involve reflecting on the theological knowledge of God in the bible, seeing one's self above and beyond the limits of material experience, and committing to a local church community.

Respondents' positive religious coping strategies are manifested in variant domains: personal, social, and environmental. The personal domain emphasizes the transcendence of self in relation to the broader environment, allowing the individual to be in tune with the self and more spiritually aware of their challenges. The personal domain emphasizes respondents' spiritual awareness and the social domain shows to what extent they are in tune with others in their spiritual awareness. This aspect affects the way they treat their close others, in regard to their treating them with kindness and being nonjudgmental. The environmental domain shows the degree to which the respondents are in tune with the environment or place as an important locus of their spiritual awareness. This may involve participation within a religious community in the environment and dealing with life stressors from the perspective of their involvement in a local church. This aspect of religious coping sheds light on how activities and events within a religious place of worship helps the individual in problem-solving and improving the quality of the environment. These positive domains are consistent with other studies on religious coping (e.g., Charzynska, 2015; Miller & Thoresen, 2003; Pargament, Feuille, & Burdzy, 2011). Secondly, while most of the respondents generally showed positive religious coping, a few took a negative turn in their religious coping trajectory—partly due to their attachment insecurity. This negative religious coping was influenced by their insecure attachment tendencies which lead to their humanistic coping behavior signaled through

their dismissiveness of and discontentment with God's powers in dealing with life's issues. Charzynska (2015) refered to the negative religious coping as a cognitive effort in problem-solving that does not involve the use of religious-related resources. This is also defined by expression of spiritual discontent, interpersonal religious discontent, and reappraisal of God's powers (Hebert et al., 2009). Only two domains (i.e., personal and social) were observed among respondents. The personal domain of negative religious coping, just as the positive aspect, emphasizes how respondents are in tune with themselves as embodied entities through their humanistic coping behavior without assuming any self-transcendence power, unlike in the positive aspect. Respondents were self-motivated humanistic realists, often taking practical approaches to achieving their goals and dealing with their challenges while exhibiting spiritual discontent and reappraisals of God's powers. Much of this discontent and reappraisals were stirred by their insecure internal working models of attachment which were negative cognitive frameworks developed during their close relationship experiences. Similar emphasis was found in the social domain as the respondents appeared to be self-sufficient in relation to dealing with their life stressors, such that their avoidant attachment became important in dealing with their relationship problems and in developing self-reliant humanistic coping tendencies. This social aspect suggests some sort of antinomy of self-autonomy and transcendence, one which may have consequences for health outcomes, showing how respondents' knowledge acquisition in religious coping was associated with their context of interactions, experiences, and external influences (Charzynska, 2015; Hebert et al., 2009).

Overall, findings from the religious coping behavior of the respondents seem to suggest a prevailing social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1999, 2000). In other words, respondents' understanding of their world and their religious coping behavior seem to be directly correlated with their personal attributes and biographies (attachment separation), external influences and social interactions. Such reciprocal interaction between one's personal attributes, environment, and behavior is central to, and well-documented in, social cognitive theory.

Study findings have implications for how religious coping is theorized for African diaspora since they suggest that it is related to their attachment separation and life stressors in a host community. As well as considering religious coping in relation to attachment and life stressors in Australia, a redefinition of religious coping may also need to take into account the meaning-making coping and perceived quality of life which are attained in the process of such cognitive and behavioral transactions. This study corroborates previous findings, which suggest that religious coping may be correlated with better health outcomes (Charzynska, 2015; Pargament et al., 2011), and may be helpful only in a migrant and place contexts (Nakonz & Shik, 2008). Despite these relevant findings, some limitations were

encountered during the course of this study, such as the lack of generalization to other migrant groups due to the qualitative nature of the study, heavy dependency on the author's research skills, and the possibility that study findings may have been influenced by the author's personal biases and idiosyncrasies.

In conclusion, the present study suggests that religious coping has a multidimensional meaning to the African diaspora, most of whom are facing various life and family challenges and are geographically separated from their loved ones and home countries. These meanings must be taken into consideration in order to articulate effective ways to reach out and alleviate the life stressors affecting this population group in their new abodes.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

1. Tell me about yourself.

Prompts:

(a) Past experiences
(b) Family background/history of relationship with parents
(c) Tell me about your experiences in close relationships
(d) Has being in Australia affected your relationship with your parents?
(e) How?

2. Tell me about your experience living in Australia as an African.

Prompts:

(a) Why?
(b) Past experiences
(c) Perceptions
(d) Did [X] affect that decision?
(e) How?

3. Tell me about the difficulties you face as an African living in Australia.

Prompts:

(a) How do you cope with these difficulties/what is your coping mechanism?
(b) Why?
(c) Past experiences
(d) Did [X] affect that decision?
(e) How?

4. Does your relationship with God help you deal with the challenges you face in Australia?

Prompts:

(a) If yes, how?
(b) If no, why?
(c) Give examples
(d) How?

5. Is there anything else you would like to tell me before we end the interview?

Prompts:

(a) Positive or negative experiences
(b) Emotions or feelings