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## **Identity Formation/Change in African-American Women**

### **Introduction**

An area of particular interest to the writer and one in which Thomas Pugh gave considerable contemplation is the process(es) of identity formation/change in African Americans and more particularly in African-American women. My recent Th.D. dissertation explores and analyzes the relationship of narrative/story shared within a group context, revelation, and identity formation/change in a sampled population of African-American women. A condensed portion of this dissertation is presented, providing the reader a limited vicarious exposure to many of the conversations between Thomas Pugh and myself, as well as my ongoing exploration into identity formation/change in African-American women.

### **The Hypothesis Equation**

This study identifies a relationship between narrative/story, group context and revelation that facilitated identity formation/change in African-American women. Narrative/story functions as a hermeneutic that, when combined within the context of a homogeneous group, creates a conducive environment, whereby revelation is facilitated. Such revelation,

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having both organizing and interpretive functions, facilitates identity formation/growth. An equation of this process would be: **novel + group**  $\rightarrow$  (**revelation**)  $\rightarrow$  (**identity formation/change**). That is, novel plus group (facilitates or leads to) revelation, which, in turn (facilitates or leads to) identity formation/change.

The presence of two variables, novel and group, produces a conducive environment in which the manifestation of revelation is facilitated. This is not to say that the presence of novel and group = revelation, but that the probability of revelation is increased when both variables are present. This is an important clarification since revelation is not purely a cognitive phenomenon of gaining insight about oneself, situation or condition, but rather revelation is a theological phenomenon representing the initiating action of God to humanity to better know oneself through knowledge of and an ongoing relationship with God. Therefore, revelation will not be experienced or created by the presence of novel and group; rather, revelation occurs more frequently in environments containing both novel and group as opposed to environments consisting of either novel or group alone.

The second part of the hypothesis equation suggests a relationship between revelation and identity/formation. This equation, supported by the results of the study, suggests revelation tends to initiate, act as a catalyst, and/or precede identity formation/change.

The theoretical exposition of Na'im Akbar's theory of natural psychology, Heinz Kohut's theory of self-development, Archie Smith, Jr.'s relational self, and H. Richard Niebuhr's revelation provide the framing upon which the hypothesis of this study and the clinical observations and results are perceived and analyzed. Thirty study participants

comprised five groups: four experimental and one control. Reported results were generated by observations and interpretations of the researcher and self-assessment accounts composed by each study participant at the completion. Results support a correlation between narrative shared within a group context, revelation, and identity formation/change in African-American women. Specifically, the study identifies narrative content that is congruent with the reader's internal history is most conducive for the experience of revelation, and the optimal context for the experience of revelation that facilitates identity formation/change for African-American women consists of the discussion of narrative in an all female African-American group. The results also suggest specific potential inhibitors to the experience of revelation such as mixed gender groups, group size, and minimum number of scheduled group meetings.

### **Identity Formation and Archie Smith's Relational Self**

How is identity/self developed? Is it a combination of our genetic composition and the subsequent influence(s) and event(s) of our environment (often referred to as the nature/nurture theory)? The work of Archie Smith, Jr. suggests that this communal concept of identity provides the basic construct for understanding self-development as well as the facilitation of change in existing identity formations. Smith identifies theological, anthropological, and psychological components to his theory of identity formation. He locates the context in which identity formation occurs and develops in the church or the religious community of faith.

Integral to Smith's understanding of the church is the church community consisting of individual families of vari-

ous designs (husband and wife, husband, wife and children, single parent families, blended families, intergenerational families). The assumption is made that all persons are in some manner related to the church and therefore availed to the influence of the church as well as acting as an influence upon the church. Smith views the church as the embodiment and the facilitator of emancipation, reconciliation, and healing with an anticipated goal of empowerment and transformation of oppressed individuals and oppressive social systems.

It is with this community, which he further describes as "the redeemed community," that the individual encounters and incorporates the community's understanding of itself and the role of the specific individual within the community. Smith states, "People are constituted in their relations with other people within a particular context and specific social practice."<sup>1</sup> This process, which he calls "relationality," proposes that individuals are a basic ingredient.

Another basic ingredient is the culture of the community. The community culture encompasses the ideals, customs, skills, specific to the community and its continued existence. Via interpersonal interactions as well as structured education, the individual is availed, in an intentional manner, to the community's perspective of itself, the individual, and the larger society. This interaction of the community, culture, and the individual advocates consciousness raising of the individual and the community, which is also both transforming and creative. The community and the individual as different and separate entities are transformed by the presence and the interaction of the other as well as a new whole is

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<sup>1</sup> Archie Smith, Jr., *The Relational Self: Ethics and Therapy from a Black Church Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), 14.

created by the individual becoming a part of the community.

Consciousness raising and transformation are vital components in Smith's paradigm of identity/self formation. The community, as one of its objectives in identity/self formation of the individual, is to assist in bringing to the individual's consciousness the unconscious. Smith's emphasis on consciousness raising is directly related to his concept of relationality. He states:

The self cannot be grasped or known in its totality, but only in its fragments. The self is always fragmented in its roles, functions, and appearances. In order to be selves people must express or objectify their selves in order to know themselves through others.<sup>2</sup>

Here Smith utilizes the concept of the interrelated mind, self, and society as proposed by George Herbert Mead, suggesting the dialectical nature of the development of mind, self and society. Smith argues that life is fundamentally social or relational in that one cannot know oneself independent of some knowledge of another, neither can one know another without some knowledge of oneself. It is the knowledge of self, cultivated and nurtured within and by the community, which fosters knowledge and thereby empowered identity/self formation of the individual, the community, and the larger society and its institutions.

### **Identity Formation and Na'im Akbar's Natural Psychology**

Na'im Akbar offers a nature-based psychology that

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

addresses the human as a physical, mental, moral, and spiritual being is congruent with Smith's theory of relationality and underscores the communal nature of African American identity formation.

Akbar describes the first stage of his three-level natural psychology developmental process as the "hungering self or soul."<sup>3</sup> The major focus is concerned with satisfying needs, maintaining comfort, and forging the rudiments of physical survival. Akbar identifies this hunger as the "foundation for our connection with the material world and is characterized by its preoccupation with the needs of the body."<sup>4</sup>

The second stage of development is the "self-accusing soul,"<sup>5</sup> characterized by the self being passive in its desire drive but becoming more active in intervening in its experiences. This intervention involves rational, reflective, critical thinking abilities. This is not a simple action-reaction process but is an action-reflection-action. A conscience, developed through interaction of the self with larger community, is developed and functioning. This moral sense assists the self-determining self-accusing self in the formation of responses responsible to the self and to the community. The conscience in its developmental process also includes an understanding of God and the self as a creation by and in the form of God. This knowledge further facilitates the development of the accusing-self and its ability to make less baselevel desire responses.

A part of the self's development is the development of the desires that stem from an initial stage of basic survival

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<sup>3</sup>Na'im Akbar, *Natural Psychology and Human Transformation*, rev. ed. (Tallahassee: Mind Productions & Associates, 1995), 10.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 11.

and physical needs to moral and spiritual needs. Akbar states:

The knowledge that is required at this state [self-accusing] is not just the knowledge of the senses but it must be the higher knowledge of Truth. It is the Divine guidance that comes from religious or spiritual Truth which provides an interpretation of the experiences from the environment. It is the kind of metaphysical knowledge that provides both a rational and a moral understanding of reality.<sup>6</sup>

It is the knowledge derived from this divine guidance that reorients the knowledge of environments and/or societies that locate desire within physical aggrandizement, material amassment, and expertise based solely on the mastery of materially-based knowledge. The transformation of desire accompanying the stage of the accusing self realizes that success is not measured strictly by economic income or the degrees granted by prestigious institutions. Success for the accusing self is elevated towards "advancement relative to the ultimate human destiny, to be all that God would have humanity to be."<sup>7</sup>

The final stage of natural psychology's transformation is "the completed self."<sup>8</sup> The self has evolved from survival desire driven to truth, understanding, and self-mastery driven to a desire to "understand the higher meanings of the symbols of nature."<sup>9</sup> This stage is characterized by an acceptance of the cycle of life, including death and the desire to be

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 14.

a creative and harmonious part of nature. The completed self understands that it is created by God, "influenced by the creation and the events of the world but we are not subject to those influences, because our capacity for choice permits us to rise above their influence."<sup>10</sup>

### **Identity Formation and Heinz Kohut's Self Psychology**

The work of Heinz Kohut, a twentieth-century psychoanalyst, also identifies the context of the process of identity/self formation as communal or interrelational. Kohut identifies two processes, mirroring and idealizing, by which identity/self-development is optimally actualized. In Kohut's model the mirroring and idealizing functions are performed, in most cases, by the mother and the father respectively. Likewise, in this study the group functions as a community, providing a caring and nurturing environment where the participants share their experiences of revelation(s), their interpretation of information, and try out new life strategies and ideas.

Kohut's self-formation theory proposes that every person develops a psychic structure Kohut calls "the self." This self functions as "a center of initiative and a recipient of impressions." The development of the self begins with the infantile stage characterized by the infant's total dependency upon the community to provide every need. Kohut's two processes by which this vicarious perception of the self is accomplished are mirroring and idealizing. Kohut hypothesizes that healthy self-formation is dependent upon persons' core needs, to be mirrored and to be idealized, being met.

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 16.



Mirroring describes the individual's need "to be looked upon with joy and basic approval by a delighted parental self object" in response to the individual displaying growing capabilities. Idealizing describes the individual's need "to form an idealized image of at least one parent, and to experience a sense of merger with an idealized self image." The individual's experiences of mirroring produces a "grandiose, exhibitionist self image" while their experiences of idealizing produces "toned-down images of the self." As the individual continues to mature and to experience relationship with the parents and the larger world, the individual begins to see that the grandiose, exhibitionistic self as well as the toned-down images of self are not accurate representations. Hence the individual's sense of grandiosity is challenged and reassessed. Likewise, as the individual matures, this person realizes that parents, once idealized as all knowing and all powerful, have limitations. This knowledge decreases the individual's idealization of the parent and concurrently assists the individual to identify and accept limitations and weaknesses. This transformation of the self and self objects (mirroring and idealized person) results in a more stable, cohesive and functional identity/self retaining aspects of a person's grandiosity, ideals, and values.

Kohut's theory of self-formation, although helpful, cannot be directly applied to the process of self-formation in African-American women. His theory is not racially universal, primarily because it does not intentionally consider racial minority populations living in a race/gender/age conscious society. The process of mirroring and idealizing for African Americans is often an incongruent experience. The positive mirroring that African-American children often receive within their communities is in most instances not validated or even

counter-stated in and by the larger society. Similarly, the idealizing of African-American parents in the larger society is often not affirmed in the larger society but are often demonized or negatively stereotyped, i.e., welfare mothers, absentee fathers, etc. Often times African-American parents, communities, and institutions intentionally attempt to filter, negate, rationalize and even sometimes apologize for the negative mirroring and demeaning of African Americans by the larger society. The combination of non-validating and often hostile larger American culture and the internal confusion generated by many of the protective efforts of African-American subculture often leaves the developing self of African-American children in a protracted, confused state in which identity/self formation is traumatized and/or arrested.

Because of this protracted stage of self-formation in African Americans, the writer proposes that the group's mirroring and idealizing functions are as significant and time appropriate for the self development/change in African-American women as are the mirroring and idealizing functions that Kohut ascribed to the parents of young children in his self-formation theory. It is this experience of mirroring and idealizing in the group context that facilitates the participants' opportunity to achieve self-growth and/or change.

### **Identity Formation and Narrative/Story**

Narrative/story is identified as a particular structure in African-American internal history through which revelation, interpretation, or meaning making, is facilitated. Niebuhr states, "Interpretation of our meaning with the aid of a story is a well-known pedagogical device."<sup>11</sup> Research sup-

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<sup>11</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York:

ports the usage of story towards the goal of elucidation, a particular point in teaching. The writer proposes that reading a particular type of story, i.e., novels written by African-American women about African-American living, provides the reader an "easy access" into their internal history—the practical, theoretical, and emotional worlds of themselves and others like themselves. "Easy access" means the language of the text, the stories of the lives of the characters, and many of the events in their lives mirror some of the experiences of the reader through direct or indirect history. My selection of story as the modality by which information is presented to the study participants was precipitated by interest in the developmental cognitive patterns of African Americans and the historical usage of story by African Americans as a vehicle for transmitting and maintaining information.

### Story and Life

The structure of story has been identified with the formal structure of human experience, or what we commonly call life. This relatedness allows the interpretation and integration of story into human experience and human experience into story.

A common component of story and human experience is language. Human beings are *Homo loquens*, i.e., we speak. David Buttrick, in *Homiletic Moves and Structures*, refers to a "natural theology of language,"<sup>12</sup> which is observable in the process of children learning language. This is

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Collier MacMillian Publishers, 1941), 34.

<sup>12</sup>David Buttrick, *Homiletic Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 6.

achieved via three different though related processes. First, children hear words which constitute a hermeneutical task. Second, they speak words, a constitutive act. Third, a relationship between speaking and cognition is initiated and continues as they progressively learn to live in language with and among others. Utilization of words initiates naming. "By *naming*, we *think* the world we live. For not only does language constitute the world-in-consciousness, it enables us to conceive of ourselves as selves-in-a-world."<sup>13</sup> Buttrick continues: "Words do not create the world, but language does constitute the world of consciousness."<sup>14</sup>

In this sense, Buttrick states that "language acts as a grid, heightening some perceptions while screening out others."<sup>15</sup> The sanguinity of language to human existence, personal identity, and world perception is reiterated in the statement, "Human beings are possessed of speech and possessed by speech."<sup>16</sup> Buttrick notes that the use of words in arranging events and forming a plot is called story. "Stories arrange past to present and end up with us where we are. Thus, stories conjoin in consciousness to tell us who we are and where we are in the world. Stories give identity. Words may name the world, but narrative consciousness tells us who we are and where in the world."<sup>17</sup>

Constantine Georgiou states that story in context has as its objective the imparting of cultural values and communal truths. She, however, warns that "literature. . . is no sub-

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 9.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>16</sup>Lonnie D. Kliever, *The Shattered Spectrum: A Survey of Contemporary Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 176.

<sup>17</sup>Buttrick, *Homiletic Moves and Structures*, 10.

stitute for living."<sup>18</sup> Georgiou identifies several opportunities story avails the reader. Four of these are significant to exploration in the process of identity/change in African-American women. They are:

1. It affords opportunities to explore one's world - how one sees, thinks and feels.
2. It invites one to experience life from another's perspective: to see what someone else sees, thinks, and feels.
3. It provides experiences by which persons can be self-reflective; persons encounter selves in the story as well as identify with their characteristics or traits. Conversely, persons often identify with actions of a character and are thereby enlightened to the consequences of their own actions.
4. Story provides a linking of persons with other generations, cultures, genders, nationalities, etc. It is community broadening and building.

### **Identity Formation and Revelation**

Story and revelation share a common function, providing for individuals and communities organizing and interpreting functions for meaning making. As stated earlier, story in the African American context functions as the overarching vehicle through which the human story is inextricably con-

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<sup>18</sup>Constantine Georgiou, *Children and Their Literature* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 10.

nected to and interpreted through God and God's unfolding story. Story is the hub or, in the words of the great African-American mystic-theologian, Howard Thurman, the location of the "creative encounter," where the infinite encounters the finite. The connection of the individual's story to God's story accesses the individual to constructs, values, meaning, purpose, self, world, and God-identity that had not been able to be accessed by individual or communal efforts. This connection of God with humanity, of God making God's self known facilitated by story, is revelation. Such revelation acts as an interpreter, giving meaning to the past, present and future while concurrently providing the individual with a sense of wholeness with self, God, and others. This "revelatory moment is one which makes our past intelligible, resurrects our buried past and creates common memory."<sup>19</sup>

H. Richard Niebuhr defines revelation as, "an organizing principle and a transforming power"<sup>20</sup>. . . which illuminates the rest of it and which is itself intelligible . . . [and] which makes all other events intelligible."<sup>21</sup> For Niebuhr, a proclaimed Christian, understood the intelligible event in human history to be "Jesus Christ, in whom we see the righteousness of God, his power and wisdom . . . from that special occasion we also derive the concepts which make possible the elucidation of all the events in our history."<sup>22</sup> Niebuhr states that "revelation must mean a decisive disclosure of God in and through ordinary events that have occurred in

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<sup>19</sup>Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, eds., *Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 114.

<sup>20</sup>Jerry A. Irish, *The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 39.

<sup>21</sup>Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 68.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 69.

our past histories.”<sup>23</sup>

This writer proposes that African-American women encounter information via a specific modality in their internal history which facilitates their experience of revelation. Niebuhr cautions against “substitut[ing] for the revelatory moment of Jesus Christ some other moment in our history and interpret the latter through the former.”<sup>24</sup> It is not the design of this research to perceive God through story but rather the hope and the expectation that God might use story and the group context to reveal God’s self and God’s ongoing participation in human life. Because the story of humanity, and specific to this study, the story of African-American women lies within the context of God’s story, a revelation about the identity and purpose of God is also the context in which African-American women are revealed information about their identity and purpose. In other words, through an experience of knowing God, we not only learn more about God but also more about ourselves.

### **The Quantitative Results of the Study**

The total number of group participants, excluding the writer, was thirty. Of the total number, twenty-seven were African-American women and three were African-American men. Out of the twenty-seven women, fourteen were seminarians, one a college student, one a retired entrepreneur and eleven full-time employees. All of the participants except one had college experience. Twenty-six of the participants (twenty-three female and three male) held the bachelor’s degree. Two of the female participants possessed master-level

<sup>23</sup>Lonnie D. Kliever, *Makers of Modern Theological Mind: H. Richard Niebuhr* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1977), 73.

<sup>24</sup>Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 73.

degrees; one female had an associate degree as did another who had completed three years of college.

All of the participants are active members of a Christian church and express their faith as central to understanding themselves, their actions and relationships with others. The denominational affiliations are as follows:

Group I: three African Methodist Episcopal, two United Methodist, one Baptist, and one Pentecostal.

Group II: one African Methodist Episcopal, two United Methodist, one Baptist, and one Pentecostal.

Group III: three African Methodist Episcopal, two United Methodist, four Baptist, and one Church of God in Christ.

Group IV: two African Methodist Episcopal.

Group V: one African Methodist Episcopal, three Baptist and two non-denominational.

A denominational analysis of the entire study yields ten African Methodist Episcopal, six United Methodist, nine Baptist, two Pentecostal, one Church of God in Christ, and two non-denominational.

Having shared information concerning the educational status and the faith preferences of the participants, the focus is now reporting their self-assessment evaluations. The method of self-assessment for Groups I-IV was a two-page reflection paper. Participants were asked to write about their experience as it related to reading the novel, *Ugly Ways*, and



to participate in a group context. They were to assess whether or not they had experienced revelation—a sense of illumination that gave meaning, not only to their individual self, but also to the way they understood God working in their lives and the larger world. Was this experience of understanding also organizing and unifying to better understand themselves in light of their personal and communal past and present? Did it help to envision not only a personal future, but through an appropriation of a common history, perceive a communal future hope? Did they feel reading the novel had anything to do with that experience, and if so how? Did they think being in a group context, having group discussions, had anything to do with having that experience, and if so how?

From reading the reflection papers generated by the four groups (twenty one were submitted: three participants in Group III did not submit a reflection paper) and the oral interviews with six participants comprising the control group, six tables were generated for reporting the results. Table 1 reports the participants' assessment of experiencing revelation. Table 2 reports participants' assessment of experiencing change or enhancement in self-perception and attributing that to the experience of revelation. (Change or enhancement in self-perception was the phrase identified as synonymous with identity formation/change.) Table 3 reports the participants' assessment of their experience of revelation attributed to the combined effects of the novel and the group. Table 4 reports the participants' assessment of their experience of revelation attributed to the group experience only. Table 5 reports the participants' assessment of their experience of revelation attributed to only reading the novel. Table 6 reports participants' assessment of not having any experience of revelation.

**Table I****Participants Reporting an Experience  
of Revelation**

<b>Groups</b>	<b>Number of Persons Reporting</b>	<b>Total Number of Persons in Group</b>	<b>Percentage of Groups Reporting</b>
Group 1	5	7	71%
Group 2	3	5	60%
Group 3	0	10	0%
Group 4	0	2	0%
Group 5	1	6	16%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>30%</b>

**Table II****Participants Reporting Experiencing Change or  
Enhancement in Self-Perception Attributed or  
Related to Their Experience of Revelation**

<b>Groups</b>	<b>Number of Persons Reporting</b>	<b>Total Number of Persons in Group</b>	<b>Percentage of Groups Reporting</b>
Group 1	5	7	71%
Group 2	3	5	60%
Group 3	0	10	0%
Group 4	0	2	0%
Group 5	1	6	16%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>30%</b>

**Table III**

**Participants Reporting Experiencing Revelation and  
Attributing or Relating It to the Combined Effects of  
Reading the Novel and the Group Experience**

<b>Groups</b>	<b>Number of Persons Reporting</b>	<b>Total Number of Persons in Group</b>	<b>Percentage of Groups Reporting</b>
Group 1	5	7	71%
Group 2	3	5	60%
Group 3	0	10	0%
Group 4	0	2	0%
Group 5	0	6	0%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>26%</b>

**Table IV**

**Participants Reporting Experiencing Revelation and  
Attributing or Relating It to the Group Experience  
Only**

<b>Groups</b>	<b>Number of Persons Reporting</b>	<b>Total Number of Persons in Group</b>	<b>Percentage of Groups Reporting</b>
Group 1	0	7	0%
Group 2	0	5	0%
Group 3	0	10	0%
Group 4	0	2	0%
Group 5	0	6	0%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>0%</b>

**Table V****Participants Reporting Experiencing Revelation and  
Attributing or Relating It to Reading the Novel Only**

<b>Groups</b>	<b>Number of Persons Reporting</b>	<b>Total Number of Persons in Group</b>	<b>Percentage of Groups Reporting</b>
Group 1	0	7	0%
Group 2	0	5	0%
Group 3	0	10	0%
Group 4	0	2	0%
Group 5	1	6	17%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>3%</b>

**Table VI****Participants Reporting No Experience of Revelation**

<b>Groups</b>	<b>Number of Persons Reporting</b>	<b>Total Number of Persons in Group</b>	<b>Percentage of Groups Reporting</b>
Group 1	2	7	29%
Group 2	2	5	40%
Group 3	10	10	100%
Group 4	2	2	100%
Group 5	5	6	83%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>70%</b>

### Interpretation of Results

The analysis of the results compiled from the participants' change self-assessments and the oral interviews begins with a comparison of the results to the hypothetical equation. A comparative analysis of the data of Table 1 (Participants Reporting an Experience of Revelation) with the data of Table II (Participants Reporting Experiencing a Change or Enhancement of Self Perception Attributed to Their Experience of Revelation) shows 100% congruence. That is, participants who reported an experience of revelation also reported experiencing a change or enhancement of self-perception.

These results raise two significant issues for further discussion. First, the 100% congruency strongly supports the relationship proposed in this study and symbolized in the equation, revelation—>identity formation/change. In reporting an experience of revelation there was the correlating account of experiencing enhanced/self-perception/change. Although this raises strong support for the proposed relationship between revelation and identity formation/change, the overall study's numerical results (the combined results of groups I-IV) present only 33% of the total study participants recounting an experience of revelation-identity formation/change.

A closer look at the reportings of the individual groups provides insight regarding the role of novel and the group context in reporting experiences of revelation. Group I presents the highest reporting of the experience of revelation (71%) followed by Group II (60%). The reporting of the experience of revelation by Group V is significantly lower, 16%. This wide disparity between the reportings of the experience of revelation-identity formation/change between

Groups I and II and Group V is the basis for the second issue of significance generated by the results of the comparative analysis of the data of Table I and Table II. Why were the reportings of revelation-identity formation/change significantly higher in Groups I and II than in Group V? What identifiable factors existed in Groups I and II that were not present in Group V? What identifiable factors did not exist in Groups I and II that did exist in Group V?

### **Comparative Analysis of Tables III, IV, and V**

Table III presents the participants' reportings of experiencing a change or an enhancement in self-perception attributed to their experience of revelation in the study. The results of Tables I and II suggest a relationship between revelation and identity formation/change that is further substantiated by the data in Table III. All of the participants of Groups I and II who reported an experience of revelation in Table I, also reported an experience of change or enhancement in self-perception in Table II, and attributed this to the combined effects of reading the novel and the group experience. Group V's reporting on Table III was not consistent with their reportings on Tables I and II. The reporting of Group V is not interpreted as contra-indicative of the relationship of revelation to identity formation/change. Conversely, Group V's reporting of zero in Table III indicates that the participants did not assess their experience of revelation being attributed to the combined effects of reading the novel and the group experience, as the participants were not availed to a group context.

An examination of the individual groups provides pertinent information for a more in-depth interpretation of

these results. Groups I, II, III, and IV met and interacted (on various levels) as a group in which the novel as well as issues of personal interest were discussed. Group V consisted of individual participants who never collectively met as the group and were not exposed to a group context for the discussion of the novel. Considering that Group V's participation did not include group exposure, it could be interpreted that the participant, who in Tables I and II reported experiencing revelation and change or enhancement in self-perception, did not report in Table III because reporting was precipitated by having participated in a group experience.

Table IV and Table V yield consistent reportings of zero by Groups I and II. The results of the reportings of these two groups suggest that the group experience alone or the novel alone, were not assessed by the participant as sufficient for the experience of revelation reported in Tables I and II. This reporting by Groups I and II is also consistent with their reporting in Table III.

Group V reports one assessment of the experience of revelation that is attributed to reading only the novel. This is consistent with participants of Group V only having access to the novel and an interview with the researcher. The participant reporting in Group V was in individual therapy with the researcher during the time of the study.

Consolidating the results of Tables I-V appear to substantiate the equation **novel + group experience—>revelation—> identity formation/change.**

### **An Interpretation of Table VI**

This table presents the assessment of participants reporting no experience of revelation. The reported results

here appear to be a simple inverse of that evidenced in Table I. What the results do not indicate are the participants' assessments that report an experience of increased understanding about self or others that satisfy the organizing, transforming, unifying definition of revelation. Some comments reflective of such understanding were, "I was shocked and comforted to read about persons who seem to get tripped up in life as much as I do, and still are perceived by others as successful." Another participant stated, "I like to re-read parts of the book at home by myself. It reminds me of my relationship with my mother; I loved her but I didn't love her, too."

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study strongly confirm a correlation between novel, group context, revelation, and identity formation/change. Novels, in the context of this study, appear to provide the link that connects the world of the individual to the world of a larger community. This research does not suggest that the particular novel used is the only or the best narrative to facilitate an experience of revelation in the context of a group for African-American women. Narrative working as a hermeneutic makes meaning available in a form that can be recognized, understood, and incorporated by the reader. Further, the content of the narrative, optimal for the individual, is one that evolves out of or is congruent with the reader's internal history. When this identification and interpretation takes place within a context of commonality, care and nurture, where constructive and adequate mirroring and idealizing are available, the writer posits that revelation facilitated identity formation/change is probable. The results of this study further substantiate that the optimal con-



text for the experience of revelation that facilitates identity formation/growth for African-American women consists of the discussion of the novel in an all-female African-American therapeutic group.

The findings also identify specific potential factors that may inhibit the experience of revelation that facilitates identity formation/growth. They are mixed gender groups, groups that are subsumed under class structures, group size (too small - less than five or too large - more than eight), and the scheduled duration of group (no less than sixteen weeks).