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Nineteenth Century Enslaved African Americans' Coping Strategies for the Stresses of Enslavement in Virginia

Allison Michelle Campo
College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

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Nineteenth Century Enslaved African Americans’ Coping Strategies for the Stresses of Enslavement in Virginia

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Arts

Department of Anthropology

The College of William and Mary
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This Thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Allison Michelle Campo

Approved by the Committee, April, 2015

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ABSTRACT

Agency theory has become a popular tool among anthropologists seeking to understand personhood and identity of past persons better. The application of a psychological approach in tandem with agency theory consequently identifies intentionality of agentive behavior and how cultural forms are internalized then practiced. Building upon Ortner’s (2001) proposal to distinguish between the two dominant forms of agency, agency of power and agency of intention, I propose to include coping within “agency of power” since coping constitutes an act of control carried out to manage stress. Applying Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) coping theory, I seek to identify the shared coping strategies employed by enslaved individuals to handle the physical, social, psychological, and physiological stresses of enslavement. Attention will also be paid to the emotions brought on by the stresses and coping methods using Rosenwein’s (2002; 2006) concept of “emotional communities.” Analyzing 19th century slave narratives, I argue the enslaved African Americans of Virginia in the last decade of the 18th century through the 19th century utilized the agentive activities of religion, community involvement, appropriation of food, avoidance, defiance, and ownership to cope with the stresses of enslavement. The adaptiveness of African American culture emerges through examinations of the types of coping strategies found along with a clearer understanding of the struggles they faced in accessibility and consequences to dealing with stress.
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This Master’s thesis is dedicated to my parents without whose lifelong emotional, physical, and financial support I never would have succeeded in my academic career and in life. Also, to my sister, Jess, who was my inspiration to return for graduate school and has provided me with constant encouragement in all my endeavors.
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INTRODUCTION

Despite the harsh, limiting conditions of slavery in North America during the early 19th century, enslaved African Americans found ways to persevere through the oppression and stress brought on by the institution. African traditions, shared circumstances, and exchange with white culture resulted in the creation of an African American culture, distinctly different than just an adapted African or Euro-American culture (Berlin 1998; Genovese 1974; Kulikoff 1986). I define culture as “the total shared, learned behavior of a society or a subgroup” (Mead 1953:22). The race based application of slavery in America held social, political, and ideological implications unseen in slavery in Africa (Du Bois 1915; Equiano 1789; Thornton 1998), and other regions that partook in the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Especially in Virginia, a dynamic African American culture emerged from the state’s long and transformative institution of slavery from 1619 to 1865. Negotiation of social status based on skin color, importation versus natural growth of slaves, and the transition from patriarchal to paternalist slavery ideology represent only a few of the numerous influences shaping the institution. Throughout the slavery era in Virginia, the agentive activities of enslaved people posed a method of escaping the confines of slavery’s stress and oppression even in small or temporary ways.

Prior research on agentive behavior of enslaved populations has turned up a wide variety of activities such as religion, dissidence, skills, resistance and stealing (Dustinberre 2009, 2011; Yancy 2004; Young 1997). However, little anthropological attention has been paid to the cultural stresses and coping strategies of historical
populations. Rocque (2008) offers one of the few investigations into the stresses and responsive coping behaviors of enslaved African Americans. He utilizes General Strain Theory, a theory that sets a criterion for coping mechanisms based on strains on an individual due to failure to achieve one’s positively valued goals, revocation of positively valued stimuli, and negative stimuli (Agnew 2001). Social support/cultural traditions, religion/spiritual coping; skills, ownership, and education; and overt resistance compose the dominant types of coping identified in Rocque’s research (Rocque 2008). Although this is an approach that focuses on individual behavior, it is relevant to an understanding of agentive action among enslaved African Americans (e.g. Dusinberre 2009).

Individualized analyses of these coping strategies and the responsible stressors can reveal new aspects about the adaptation of African American culture throughout slavery to minimize stress. First, an investigation can serve to debunk claims that the culture of the enslaved was static and derivative. Secondly, discussing the interworking of, and complexity in, stresses and coping methods reveal how the relationship between stress and coping was by no means straightforward for the enslaved community, often resulting in conflicting results and feedback loops both physically and emotionally. Lastly, looking at the actions of enslaved people in terms of coping offers an alternative perspective to the dichotomy of accommodation versus resistance and brings out the driving sociality of enslaved life and the complicated relationship with white society.

Expanding on research by Rocque, but through a different theoretical perspective by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) that emphasizes the social and cultural components of stress and coping, I focus specifically on the cultural stresses and the reactive coping
strategies utilized by enslaved Virginians. Attention to the cultural emotions tied to the stressors and coping mechanisms, through Rosenwein’s (2002, 2006) concept of “emotional communities,” will accompany the discussion. Analyzing 19th century slave narratives, I argue the enslaved African Americans of Virginia from the last decade of the 18th century through the 19th century utilized the agentive activities of religion, community involvement, ownership, appropriation of food, avoidance, and defiance to cope with the stresses of enslavement. In order to best value this psychological approach to agency theory, I provide a brief overview of how psychology and anthropology may explore the relationship between culture and the individual.
METHODOLOGY

Agency theory has become a popular tool among anthropologists seeking to understand personhood and identity of past persons better. Recognizing individuals as agents engaging in the exercise of power to bring about change in his or her world (Karp 1986:137), forms the basis for this theory. Additionally, an individual’s agency has an effect on the social structure of society and culture while simultaneously being shaped by them (Giddens 1979), often leaving the question of intentionality of agentive behavior.

The definition of agency I adopt is: the socioculturally mediated capacity to act (Ahearn 2001; Ahearn 2011; Archer 2000). Inability to reconcile how individuals learn, internalize, and then practice their knowledge of cultural forms remains a definitive issue plaguing studies of agency, especially in relationships of power (Mahoney and Yngvesson 1992; Strauss and Quinn 1997). Regardless how far removed from the liberal subject agency claims itself to be, the concept always relies upon a psychological foundation whether mentioned or not (Frank 2006:284). Therefore, psychological anthropology rises to the occasion of working to resolve the inherent lack of meaning in practice and agentive activities (Seymour 2006).

Since agency manifests differently across contexts, the meaning of agentive behavior plays a critical role in the larger discussion of a culture. Ortner (2001) proposes distinguishing between the two dominant forms of agency, agency of power and agency of intention, and within their subtypes as a means of attempting to single out the meaning of action; although she acknowledges often this cannot be done since meanings may be entangled. I offer an extension of this proposal to include coping within “agency of
power” since coping constitutes an act of control carried out to lessen the physiological or psychological stress on an individual and constrained by the coping resources available, and/or accepted, within his or her society and culture (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Psychological anthropology and ethnographic research already discuss topics of coping (e.g. Clark 2003; Dressler 1980; Hay 2010; Howard 1974; Oka 2014; Sosis 2011; Touval 2005), but few have elaborated on the concept of coping as it relates to agency. Recognizing coping as a form of agency could resolve a key issue in African Diaspora studies where work under the guise of “agency” conflates the inherent differences between humanity, agency, and resistance (Johnson 2003). Additionally, since resistance as a label for agentive behavior holds certain anthropological status as a political tool to fight hegemony and often differs in conceptual use (e.g. Brown 1996; Gottlieb 1983; McGary 1989; Seymour 2006; Weik 2012), investigations of coping strategies withholds any use of the term. Coping studies problematize the term “resistance” by describing actions in relation to the individual’s application of coping rather than the act’s effect on the political structure. Looking at coping shows how African Americans constantly took control of their physical, mental, and emotional situation in activities beyond just those considered resistance in anthropological terms. Additionally, it reveals the complexity of choices made by these people that discussions of accommodation versus resistance sometimes oversimplify.

Scholarly concerns of using psychological theory within anthropology consistently point out the inherent difference between the two social sciences. Psychological approaches have received limited application in anthropology from those
claiming the discipline reduces human behavior to the rational, individual, internal, and innate (del Rio 1994). Lev Vygotsky (1978, 1979, 1983) and Jerome Bruner (1986) contribute vital scholarship to alleviate these concerns through recognizing the interplay between society, culture, and the individual. Both scholars research the relationships and requirements to foster individuals’ learning, both in cultural practices and education. Vygotsky’s most influential contribution to the fields of psychology and education was his Zone of Proximal Development theory (1978), which argues that through the assistance of those with a higher knowledge skill set, those with less can grow. Therefore, intelligence is not as much about one’s current ability and skill set, but rather about being self-competent in problem solving alone and with help from a more skilled individual.

Bruner’s work further builds upon Vygotsky’s research to distinguish an individual’s origin of, and interaction among, cognition, emotions, and action. Scholarship on learning, thought processing, and emotions prove highly relevant to research on stress and coping methods. According to Bruner’s work emotions have biological, psychological and cultural factors. Primary emotions emerge from underlying biological needs humans have for subsistence, sleep, sexual arousal and so forth. In relation to these and beyond, exist psychological emotions brought on through conditioned situational stimuli determined and learned through cultural interaction (Bruner 1986:116-117). Further explanation on determining these emotions in historic populations will be addressed in the discussion of narratives.
Throughout Vygotsky and Bruner’s research they reason that the socio-cultural aspect of consciousness is most important because mental functioning in an individual originates from learning and internalizing social and cultural forms. Drawing from their work, and following suggestions made by anthropologists influenced by them, I interlace psychological and anthropological theory in my own research by recognizing the relationship between the individual and the population, emotion and directivity in determining behavior, and the interplay among society, culture, and the individual (del Rio 1994; Mattingly 2008).

Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) coping theory, and subsequently problem-focused coping versus emotion-focused coping, provides a strong complement to agency theory for identifying motivations of behaviors. Coping is defined as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding resources of the person” (Lazarus and Folkman 1984:141). Problem-focused coping works to manage or change the situation causing distress using tools such as information gathering and cost-benefit analysis while emotion-focused coping aims to regulate emotional responses to the problem. Under this theory, only agentive actions are considered coping strategies therefore differentiating themselves from automized adaptive behaviors. Culture not only influences individuals’ emotional responses to the environment and how people choose to cope based on common practices and available resources, but coping strategies shape the culture of a group in return (Lazarus and Folkman 1984:165, 228-230). This same definition is used to identify what enslaved African Americans considered stresses of enslavement since the
narratives clearly reflect taxing or excessive internal and external demands to the individuals and larger enslaved community.

The narratives will also help reveal the types of emotions within the enslaved African American community brought on by the stresses and coping they experienced through looking at the authors’ own word choice and language used. This will serve an important purpose since the anthropological scholarship on American slavery lacks explicit discussion of the emotions embedded within enslaved life. To establish the parameters of shared emotions within the enslaved community, this paper utilizes Barbara Rosenwein’s (2002; 2006) concept of “emotional communities.” Rosenwein defines emotional communities as “groups in which people adhere to the same norms of emotional expression and value—or devalue—the same or related emotions,” with the ability to coexist and overlap within a group (2006:2). Investigating Virginia’s enslaved African Americans in terms of emotional communities will clarify “what these communities (and the individuals within them) define and assess as valuable or harmful to them; the evaluations that they make about others’ emotions; the nature of the affective bonds between people that they recognize; and the modes of emotional expression that they expect, encourage, tolerate, and deplore” (Rosenwein 2002:842).

In evaluating individual consciousness Bruner argues, “narrative deals with the vicissitudes of human intentions” (1986:16), and resultantly narratives are central to cultural interpretation. For this reason, I selected slave narratives to analyze the decision making behind agentive activities of enslaved African Americans to determine which constitute coping strategies and the stress being responded to. Since each individual’s
account unveils an insider’s perspective of life under the oppression of slavery, emotions and intentionality are recognizable. Unlike plantation records or slaveholder records that emphasize the economic and political aspects of the institution, the narratives reflect the lives of individuals who experienced the negative physical and mental repercussions of slavery. Such sources as the former along with runaway advertisements, inventories, plantation owner letters, and archaeological findings will be used to add additional context and highlight the extent of stresses upon enslaved workers in light of their testimonies.

Among scholars there exists a long-standing debate over the objectivity and beneficial uses of narratives (Banner 2013; Duke 1995; Finseith 2013; Genovese 1974; Wylie 2000). Slave narratives pose the most complicated form because they inevitably involve a highly politicized and controversial topic of discussion. Early sources often served as a form of abolitionist propaganda with their main objective to invoke sympathy and humanity in the reader. Additionally, some slave narratives promoted conversion practices, hence the large emphasis on Christianity within the text. Often ex-slaves who took part in creating a narrative relied on white abolitionists to write down their story because they were illiterate. This reliance commonly forms the objection to using slave narratives as historical documents since the written word did not belong to the person whose story gets told, therefore introducing another’s motives for recording the experiences. Later narratives from the Work Progress Administration (WPA) interviews in the 1930s possess their own issues. Individuals interviewed during this period were not only being asked to recall events from over 70 years prior, but most interviewed had
been young children at the time of emancipation. The extensive passage of time, romanticized recollection, and presence of white interviewers may argue against the objectivity of these records as a historical document. For these reasons I exclude the WPA interviews from my research and work strictly with early slave narratives.
THE NARRATIVES AND THEIR AUTHORS

My primary data set includes seven slave narratives from Virginia dating to the 19th century. I use these records to identify shared stresses and coping strategies as a representation of the state’s enslaved population. These early slave narratives demonstrate similar slave experiences and thoughts, language used, and individual motivation for recording his or her story. The formerly enslaved African Americans wrote six of the seven narratives themselves, with only one being recorded by an amanuensis. Literacy among enslaved populations was uncommon, therefore it is worth noting that although these individuals may not be representative of a typical enslaved Virginian, their experiences and emotions are. To exclude such narratives due to their exceptional authors would be to pass up on strong autobiographies that show the reality of the era with insight and transparency (Osofsky, cited in Blassingame 1977:xlii). The slave narratives compose the stories of African American individuals from different counties, labor types, and family structures in Virginian slavery (Table 1). Since slavery varied significantly across America and throughout time, a narrowed focus of both allows for seeing the subtleties, uniqueness, and interplay between relevant social, political, and environmental factors. Therefore, slavery in Virginia from the last decade of the 18th century through the end of the Civil War defines the scope of this study geographically and temporally, respectively.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the Author</th>
<th>Peter Randolph</th>
<th>Henry “Box” Brown</th>
<th>James L. Smith</th>
<th>Bethany Veney</th>
<th>Francis Fedric</th>
<th>Austin Steward</th>
<th>William Grimes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date of Birth</td>
<td>c.1825</td>
<td>1816</td>
<td>c.1816</td>
<td>c.1813</td>
<td>1809</td>
<td>c.1793</td>
<td>1784</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of Narrative</td>
<td>1855</td>
<td>1849</td>
<td>1881</td>
<td>1889</td>
<td>1863</td>
<td>1857</td>
<td>1855</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source of Narrative</td>
<td>Written by himself</td>
<td>Written by amanuensis</td>
<td>Written by herself</td>
<td>Written by herself</td>
<td>Written by himself</td>
<td>Written by himself</td>
<td>Written by himself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia County or city</td>
<td>Prince George County</td>
<td>Louisa County; Richmond</td>
<td>Northumberl and County</td>
<td>Page County</td>
<td>Fauquier County</td>
<td>Prince William County</td>
<td>King George County; Culpeper County; Port Royal; Richmond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Field worker</td>
<td>Field worker; factory worker</td>
<td>House worker; mariner’s cook; shoemaker</td>
<td>Field worker; laundress; maid</td>
<td>Field worker</td>
<td>House worker</td>
<td>House worker; field worker; doctor’s assistant; stable boy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family structure</td>
<td>Mom present only</td>
<td>Mom and dad present</td>
<td>Mom and dad present</td>
<td>Mom present only</td>
<td>Mom and dad present</td>
<td>Mom and dad present</td>
<td>Mom and dad absent; sold at age 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
William Grimes’ autobiography constitutes the first of the seven slave narratives. Born in 1784 in King George County, Grimes was the son of a planter and an enslaved mother. Since, by law, he followed the status of his mother as a slave, his family’s owner, Dr. Steward, sold him away from his mother at the age of ten to Colonel William Thornton of Culpeper County. During his time in Virginia, Grimes moved between four owners and performed multiple jobs such as house servant, field laborer, doctor’s assistant, and stable boy. Grimes’ owner eventually sold him farther south to Savannah, Georgia and in 1814 he escaped to New York then Connecticut. Grimes used the first edition of his narrative in 1825 to raise money to purchase his freedom after being discovered as a runaway and required to either buy his freedom or be brought back down South into slavery.

Austin Steward was born in 1793 in Prince William County and by 1800 he and his family were purchased by William Helm. At the age of 18, Helm hired out Steward to do work in Lyons, New York. The controversy over hired out slaves and the period of their enslavement motivated Steward to claim his own freedom by running away at the age of 22. During his later life after creating a grocery business and teaching at a Sabbath school in Rochester, New York, he headed an independent free African American settlement in Wilberforce, Ontario, Canada. He authored his narrative as a contribution to the abolitionist movement of the mid-19th century.

Francis Fedric was born in Fauquier County in 1809. His earliest recollections stemmed from the dehumanizing treatment he faced in Virginia till he turned fourteen when Fedric’s owner sold his plantation in Virginia and moved to Kentucky bringing his
enslaved work force with him. His first attempt to run away resulted in living out of a
cavern for nine weeks and eventually returning back to the plantation due to starvation.
Finally with the help of an abolitionist, Fedric escaped slavery by way of the
Underground Railroad to Canada. Later he married and moved to England where he
authored the first edition of his narrative.

Bethany Veney was born circa 1813 in the town of Luray within Page County,
Virginia. As the autobiography of a black female, Veney’s story constitutes a unique
perspective only offered in less than 12% of slave narratives (Blassingame 1997:xii). She
lived with her mother, not knowing anything of her father, till age nine when the former
passed away. Her Christian faith started at a young age and largely influenced her
upbringing and morals. As a woman of many skills Veney performed fieldwork, laundry,
and housekeeping to earn wages enough to pay her owner a yearly sum then use the
remainder for personal housing and items. After having four Virginia masters, Mr.
Adams of Providence, Rhode Island purchased Veney and her son relocating them to the
North. She stayed first in Providence then moved to Worchester, Massachusetts
returning to Virginia only after the Civil War to reunite with her daughter and friends and
cordially meet with past owners.

Circa 1816, in Northern Neck, Virginia, James Lindsay Smith was born and lived
with his parents and eleven siblings. An accident while young left him with a permanent
limp resulting in mostly being assigned to non-fieldwork jobs. After the death of his
parents Smith’s owner hired him out as mariner cook then later to apprentice and work as
a shoemaker. In his early twenties Smith, along with his two friends escaped to the North
by boat and on foot where he eventually settled in Massachusetts. Upon gaining his freedom Smith earned his preacher’s license and married Emeline Minerva Platt, with whom he had four children.

Henry “Box” Brown was born in Louisa County in 1816 and owned by John Barret, who upon passing willed Brown to his son, William Barret. During his 33 years in slavery, Brown worked as a field hand then later relocated to Richmond to work in a tobacco factory for William Barret. He describes his time enslaved as mild in comparison to slavery elsewhere having never been whipped nor denied basic amenities. The separation from his wife and children ultimately led him to flee slavery for Philadelphia by means of being shipped in a three foot by two foot box, which resulted in his nickname. Brown retold his life story to the amanuensis Charles Stern for publication the same year as an effort for the abolitionist cause.

Peter Randolph was born in Prince George County circa 1825. His mother played an active role in raising him while his father served as a black overseer on a neighboring plantation whom he did not see often. Throughout his time enslaved on the Brandon Plantation he fell under the supervision of eight different overseers. Randolph’s owner, C.H. Edloe, in his will emancipated his eighty slaves upon his death in 1844, but a contestation by his former owner’s relatives resulted in delaying his freedom for over three additional years and being shorted his allotted fifty dollar inheritance. Upon freedom he moved around the North, then returned to Richmond briefly serving as a Christian pastor and anti-slavery activist.
COPING STRATEGIES

Religion

When discussing American slavery, the concept of religion holds a key point of interest. African Americans speak frequently of their owners and themselves practicing Christianity, although this does not provide a clear understanding of its practice or application by both groups. Even in Virginia, where the evangelical movement enjoyed its greatest popularity, less than 10% of the over 300,000 enslaved African Americans officially converted to Christianity by the end of the 18th century (Jackson 1931:180; Raboteau 1978:131). The form of religion, even those referred to as Christianity, had significant African traditional influences still in use such as house burials (Heath and Bennett 2000), ancestral shines (McFaden et al. 1999), African blue beads (Stine et al. 1996), and dancing and songs (Raboteau 2004:35). One reason why religion acted as a preferred choice for coping may be because the method had been in practice since its ancestral ties to the Igbo community in Africa; a group that was three times larger than any other African ethnic group brought to Virginia in the early and mid-18th century (Chambers 1996:310). The Igbo have generally viewed religion as a way to deal with anxiety and uncertainties and also as a method to achieve aspirations (Uchendu 1976:288). Similar uses have been determined in other West African groups as well (Offiong 1991:18).

Slave owners, abolitionists, and the enslaved community promoted Christianity, but its practices and effects varied by location, intention, and manifestations. Denominations may have reinforced social divisions, apparent in formerly enslaved Peter
Randolph’s evaluation of his local area of Prince George’s County when he observed, “I did not know of any other denomination where I lived in Virginia, than the Baptists and Presbyterians. Most of the colored people, and many of the poorer class of whites, are Baptists” (1855:33). Despite the presence of organized, national denominations, there existed an overt dissidence between the religion of the enslaved African Americans and the slave owning society. Henry Brown, a self-proclaimed Christian and once enslaved man, attested to this differentiation declaring,

“One word concerning the religion of the South. I regard it as all delusion, and that there is not a particle of religion in their slaveholding churches. The great end to which religion is there made to minister, is to keep the slaves in a docile and submissive frame of mind, by instilling into them the idea that if they do not obey their masters, they will infallibly ‘go to hell’; and yet some of the miserable wretches who teach this doctrine, do not themselves believe it” (1849:47).

Albert Bledsoe, an influential Southern Episcopal minister who resided in Virginia on multiple occasions throughout his life, used Christianity to defend slavery on racial inferiority following his re-exposure to it in Virginia after living in the North for a period of time. He reasoned since enslaved people were not competent to self-government, slavery was less harmful than abolition under the guise that God wants white ‘men to love thy neighbor as themselves’ (Bledsoe 1856). Randolph’s slaveholder used the Bible as a fear tactic and assurer of obedience as shown in his retelling, “He often used the common text: ‘Servants, obey your masters.’ He would try to make it appear that he knew what the slaves were thinking of,--telling them they thought they had a right to be free, but he could tell them better,--referring them to some passages of Scripture” (1855:32). As exemplified, the Southern slave owning society drew on the Bible to
support the institution of slavery while the enslaved community used the book to
discredit it.

The different interpretations of the Bible lead to an ideological warfare using the
same weapon, between those arguing in favor of, and those arguing for abolition of the
institution of slavery. The formerly enslaved Austin Steward, utilized the scripture to
defend the abolition of the institution arguing,

“Does not the Bible inform us that ‘God hath created of one blood all the
nations of the earth?’ And certainly in stature and physical force the
colored man is quite equal to his white brother; and in many instance his
superior; but were it otherwise, I can not see why the more favored class
should enslave the other” (2002:7-8).

The resounding theological disagreement led enslaved African Americans to find favor
and more credibility in black preachers than white preachers (Levine 1977:47). This
deriffering perception of religion and Christianity, as practiced by slavery supporters and
the enslaved, reinforces the argument that enslaved African Americans formed their own
culture based on the merging of their ancestors’ African culture with new cultures they
encountered in America and shaped by their environmental and social circumstances

In the earliest period of slavery in Virginia, conversion to Christianity posed the
opportunity of freedom from enslavement. Although, in 1667 Charles II passed a law
stating that baptism did not change the legal status of enslaved blacks (Henning
1823:260). No longer could Christianity serve as a clear problem-focused coping
 mechanism, therefore the other coping benefits of religion had to be viable enough to
maintain its functionality to the enslaved community. This functionality came in the
form of the spiritual dimension of religion as an emotion-focused coping strategy. The enslaved population saw spirituality as a way to alleviate and reevaluate the way stress impacted their emotional state. Too often African Americans faced an inability to tangibly fight back against the pervasive dehumanization and oppression heaped upon them. Many Southern whites held no quarrel with publicly announcing their belief in the subhuman status of black people. Frederick Douglass, in a speech defending the humanity of African Americans, responded to an article from the Richmond Examiner that “boldly asserts the Negro has no such right [to his liberty and the pursuit of his own happiness]—BECAUSE HE IS NOT A MAN!” (1999:283; uppercase original).

Formerly enslaved Francis Fedric recounted the claim his master incessantly preached to the enslaved community, “Look, you niggers! you have no souls, you are just like those cattle, when you die there is an end of you; there is nothing more for you to think about than living. White people only have souls” (1863:5). Arguing the inferiority of Africans and African Americans by denying their humanity composed an ideological challenge these people faced from the white Virginia slave owning society daily to which religion could offer relief.

Religion represented a method of coping that was both personal and community based. While prayer occurred in the context of a religious ceremony, individuals utilized it to fit their personal needs as well. To solve an immediate averse problem, often of physical punishment or familial separation, people exercised prayer as a problem-focused coping strategy. Faced with her master’s denial to allow her to attend church, Veney sought help through prayer telling, “One night, I started out, and, as I came to a
persimmon-tree, I felt moved to go down on my knees and ask the Lord to help me, and make Master David willing. In a few minutes, I felt very happy” (1889:17). A comparable circumstance occurred to the once enslaved James Smith and his friends; they demonstrated this coping method when confronted by a patrol during their religious gathering. As the patrol surrounded the house he retold, “The captain of the company came in, and as soon as we saw him we fell on our knees and prayed that God might deliver us. While we prayed he stood there in the middle of the floor, without saying a word. Pretty soon we saw that his knees began to tremble, for it was too hot for him, so he turned and went out” (1881:34). William Grimes, a former enslaved man, utilized prayer as well upon being sentenced by his owner to a whipping, recalling, “I did not make a feeble attempt to induce my master not to flog me; but put my trust, and offered my prayers to my heavenly Father, who heard and answered them” (1971:74). The end result did not always play out in preferable circumstances, such as the examples above, but the intended use of their prayer demonstrated itself as a common problem-focused coping method.

When sharing the religious experience together, singing and praise became coping strategies as well. On discussing services, Randolph explained, “Most of the songs used in worship are composed by the slaves themselves, and describe their own suffering” (1855:31). Music provided the means of venting the shared feelings of the enslaved community about slavery within a safe environment. Smith elaborated on the occasion of gathering in worship and song, revealing, “The way in which we worshiped is almost indescribable. The singing was accompanied by a certain ecstasy of motion, clapping of
hands, tossing of heads, which would continue without cessation about half an hour; one
would lead off in a kind of recitative style, others joining in the chorus” (1881:27).
Music created by the enslaved demonstrated the tenacity of African American cultural
expression and the ability to buffer the psychological assault of the institution of slavery
(Levine 1977:30). Religious experience also produced a state of “flow,” which has been
seen in other activities such as ritual (Turner 1979). Flow refers to a state of being
achieved through a participant’s full attention focused on an activity that balances his or
her perceived action opportunities and perceived skills. The activity must be an
intrinsically rewarding experience that causes the participant to lose reflective self-
consciousness (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2009). The experience of flow functions
to decrease psychological stress in those participating through their feeling of total
control and ability to complete challenges (Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

Additionally, religious rituals often played an integral part of funeral proceedings.
By Virginia law, the enslaved community had to request permission from their owner to
have a funeral or otherwise risk punishment for holding an unauthorized gathering.
Then, “the slaves go to the woods, and make seats to sit upon, (this is done Saturday
night.) When the seats are prepared, they are left till the slaves take their seats upon
them, and sit until about ten o'clock, when the slaveholding minister comes, and preaches
about one hour and a half. Then he gives the negroes liberty to sing and pray, and he
stands by them” (Randolph 1855:14). Performing the burials of enslaved people by the
black community in the manner they chose, African Americans reaffirmed two values
that slavery intended to obliterate—their humanity and sense of community (Davis
Religion provided closure to the family and friends who felt their loved one had passed onto a better life, now removed from the stresses and horrors of enslavement. At the funeral of a friend, Steward repeated the preacher’s words retelling, “…he addressed the slaves of the shortness of human life and the certainty of death, and more than once hinted at the hardness of their lot, assuring, however, his fellow-slaves, that if they were good and faithful, all would be right hereafter” (2002:15-16). In addition to providing closure, funerals evoked an emotion of hope to enslaved African Americans that one day, whether in life or in death, justice would be served and better times awaited them.

The diversity of coping methods and positive emotional affect which religion offered enslaved African Americans to handle enslavement, supports their conscious choice of turning to Christianity as an emotion-focused coping. Throughout life many used religion as the medium to learn new skills and increase knowledge. Randolph demonstrated this initiative with reading, explaining, “I used to go to the church to hear the white preacher. When I heard him read his text, I would read mine when I got home. This is the way, my readers, I learned to read the Word of God when I was a slave” (1855:26). Commonly enslaved individuals’ early childhood involved attending services with parents or community members and learning about religion’s benefits for oppressed people. Recalling his youth Randolph stated, “When I was a child, my mother used to tell me to look to Jesus, and that he who protected the widow and fatherless would take care of me also” (1855:25). Fedric as well learned about religion from his family, confessing, “My mother, when I was a boy, had no notion of what religion is, and to my
good grandmother alone I am indebted for any instruction I at this time received” (1863:5). Bethany Veney, a former enslaved woman, learned about Christianity when she attended a church service while a young girl with another woman and started practicing it at that time (1889:15-16). Conversion at a young age with the encouragement of the adult Christian population helped perpetuated the popularity of turning to religion for coping.

Performing the rituals of religion, such as group gatherings, singing hymns, and prayer, aimed to temporarily and positively alter the almost always present negative emotions in the community. Consistently across the narratives, the emotions of dread and strife resound throughout the enslaved community in relation to everyday life. Brown revealed the communal sense of stress, declaring, “To this terrible apprehension we are all constantly subject. To-day, master may smile lovingly upon us, and the sound of the cracking whip may be hushed, but the dread uncertainty of our future fate still hangs over us, and to-morrow may witness a return of all the elements of fearful strife, as we emphatically ‘know not what a day may bring forth” (1849:20). Religion had the ability to alter these states to ones of happiness and comfort through offering hope and reappraisal of the horrid circumstances under which enslaved blacks lived in the institution. At times it seems as though the emotional states of the enslaved and their slave owners were inverse. When confronted with Veney’s happiness from religious practice, her master became angered and sent her away until she overcame her “religious fever” (Veney 1889: 16-17). The capability of enslaved African Americans to
temporarily overcome the psychological stress they faced, offered a means to undermine the totalitarian motives of owners to control all aspects of their lives.

Spirituality and religious practices were effective in temporarily alleviating the stress of daily life for enslaved people. Smith when attending a religious meeting claimed, “While there I found peace in believing, and in this happy state of mind I went home rejoicing and praising the Lord for what he had done for me” (1881:26). Fedric remembered the positive effect Christianity had on his African grandmother proclaiming, “This seemed to be her greatest, indeed her sole comfort, in the hour of trial. This would be a source of joy, when seated, on a Sabbath evening, under the shade of the peach trees, she talked to her fellow-slaves, or to those who came from the neighbouring plantations to see her” (1863:10). Consistently, enslaved individuals turned to spirituality to reappraise their enslavement, effectively altering the meaning of the condition without changing the objective circumstances. An example of changing the perception of enslavement from a burden to a test of character, Randolph proclaimed, “The slaves talk much of the sufferings of Christ; and oftentimes, when they are called to suffer at the hands of their cruel overseers, they think of what he endured, and derive patience and consolation from his example” (1855:34). Using religion as a filter, enslaved people effectively altered an emotional state of dread and sadness into a state of personal growth and comfort.

Despite the positive emotional, psychological, and social influence religion had on the enslaved community, its use as coping often did not receive an approving or consistent response from slaveholders across Virginia. Some slave owners encouraged
the participation of their enslaved community in religious practices believing it would
instill in them obedience and submission. Others feared the strong effect religion might
have upon the enslaved population or the alternative purposes for the practices of it, such
as plotting conspiracies. Smith remembered the instance when a neighboring plantation
owner heard the gathering he attended and came to investigate, noting, “His object in
interrupting us was to find out whether we were plotting some scheme to raise an
insurrection among the people” (1881:31). In certain circumstances the slave owning
community was justified in their fears, as in the case of Gabriel’s Rebellion in Richmond
and Nat Turner’s Rebellion in Southampton County. In the former, religious gatherings,
also referred to as “preachings,” provided opportunities to enlist fellow enslaved blacks
in the cause and plan details of Gabriel and his followers’ insurrection (Raboteau
2004:147). Those involved drew on the denominational and societal divides to determine
who would be spared, including Methodists, Quakers, Frenchmen, and poor whites
(Aptheker 1943:224). In Turner’s Rebellion, Nat Turner claimed that the Holy Spirit had
instructed him to rise up and slay his enemies (Turner 1831:11). Situations such as the
aforementioned perpetuated the fear in white slave owning society over the relationship
between religion and the enslaved population and created a sense of unease around its
presence within the community.

Randolph reflected on Virginian slave owners’ reactions to religion, exposing, “In
some places, if the slaves are caught praying to God, they are whipped more than if they
had committed a great crime. The slaveholders will allow the slaves to dance, but do not
want them to pray to God. Sometimes, when a slave, on being whipped, calls upon God,
he is forbidden to do so, under threat of having his throat cut, or brains blown out” (1855:31-32). Fedric, who had an intolerant slave owner, accounted, “Consequently, my grandmother having committed the crime of attending a prayer-meeting, was ordered to be flogged by her own son [the overseer]” (1863:6). Threats and punishments for practicing religion often did not deter group or individual participation, instead the acts just became private and secretive. In forbidden areas, when enslaved African Americans wished to hold a religious meeting they absconded to concealed areas of safety, such as the woods. Randolph explained the cooperation needed to coordinate hidden gatherings, revealing, “They have an understanding among themselves as to the time and place of getting together. This is often done by the first one arriving breaking boughs from the trees, and bending them in the direction of the selected spot (1855:30). These gatherings, often referred to as “hush harbors” (Levine 1977:41), allowed the community to speak freely of their hopes and aspirations, while educating and sharing knowledge among the confidence of friends (Smith 2011:725). Other times, they gathered privately in someone’s quarters as Randolph described, “Sometimes the slaves meet in an old log-cabin, when they find it necessary to keep a watch. If discovered, they escape, if possible; but those who are caught often get whipped” (1855:32). The state restrictions placed on public religious meetings unintentionally fostered a stronger bond and trust among the enslaved blacks since it required them to come together privately where they could then act and speak without reservations. Enslaved African Americans’ commitment to the spirituality and rituals of religion in spite of severe punishments if discovered, only highlights the importance of religion as a coping method. Even on
plantations where slave owners allowed these practices, the viability of the coping method to handle social and psychological stress proved just as meaningful, but the social dynamic with white society had one less contention.

Community Involvement

The significance of the black community cannot be overemphasized in examining the role of coping in the lives of the enslaved African Americans of Virginia during the 19th century. Little, if any, remained of the type of social coping by early enslaved Africans, common in the 18th century and earlier, who would seek out common speech-communities and people from their same ‘nation’ to bond with while developing and transmitting their culture (Chambers 1996:309). This move away from coping within smaller divided groups occurred because, unlike earlier slavery in Virginia and slavery across the Lowcountry, the enslaved population by the end of the 18th century represented a relatively homogeneous community due to the sharp decline in importation of enslaved Africans, increased plantation sizes, dominance of a native-born population, and decreased division among enslaved blacks (Kulikoff 1986:319). Brown efficiently sums up the trials and tribulations faced by enslaved people, yet the hope offered by the community, declaring, “He cannot read, he has no property, he cannot be a teacher of truth, or a politician; he cannot be very religious, and all that remains to him, aside from the hope of freedom, that ever present deity, forever inspiring him in his most terrible hours of despair, is the society of his friends” (1849:34).

Incidents of emotional support and cheering up by friends and family incessantly
crop up in accounts of enslavement. Randolph comments that at a funeral gathering, “Even if their hearts are sad, they are happy to see their friends, and they all go to some place, and their friends receive such entertainment as they are able to give” (1855:15). On the occasion of dances and community feasts, Steward elaborated on the shared emotions asserting, “Suffering and toil was forgotten, and they all seemed with one accord to give themselves up to the intoxication of pleasurable amusement” (2002:12).

Shared language, circumstance, and mentality form the basis of the black community along with practices of religion, African cultural traditions, and reciprocity. Not just emotional, but physical support too came from interactions with the community, most commonly in the form of food, health care, protection, and socialization. The community cooperated to form a system of childcare for working age mothers that Smith described when stating, “Early in the morning the mothers went off to the fields in companies, while some women too old to do anything but wield a stick were left in charge of the strangely silent and quiet babies” (1881:8). Steward also described other types of support as seen after an individual was badly whipped, explicating,

“Perhaps some of his fellow slaves might come and bath his wounds in warm water, to prevent his clothing from tearing open his flesh anew, and thus make the second suffering well night equal the first; or they might from their scanty store bring him such food as they can spare, to keep him from suffering hunger, and offer their sympathy, and then drag their own weary bodies to their place of rest, after their daily task was finished” (2002:5).

Additionally, the emotion-focused coping methods of venting and releasing emotions resulted from interactions, for when enslaved people gathered “they first ask each other how they feel, the state of their minds, &c.” (Randolph 1855:30). Hush harbors proved
the ideal environment for conducting these discussions because they could speak freely about their masters without the fear of being overheard by anyone outside the community. Having a safe setting to speak was crucial since discussions often settled around their slaveholders. After witnessing a particularly gruesome flogging by their mistress, Smith described the community’s discussion, sharing, “We slaves often talked the matter over amongst ourselves, and wondered why God suffered such a cruel woman to live” (1881:12). Positive reciprocity such as those shown, attest to the successfulness of enslaved African Americans turning to the black community for coping with the stresses of enslavement.

Information gathering presented another form of problem-focused coping that community involvement afforded. Sharing accounts about activities on the plantation and expanding one’s social network across plantations allowed enslaved people the opportunity to learn more about their current circumstances. Enslaved communities built and maintained relationships with other enslaved groups through familial connections from family members sold away, religious gatherings through a mutual church, and skilled jobs that required mobility around the county or state. Traveling with his brother to deliver grain to a plantation twenty miles away, Brown acquainted himself with the enslaved people there, reasoning, “Especially desirous were we, of learning the conditions of slaves around us, for we knew not how long we would remain in as favorable hands as we were then” (1849:21). The intra-plantation community often had its own means of sharing information through hush harbors and other more informal gatherings. Acquiring knowledge provided a sense of power and control over the
situation, a feeling typically beyond reach within the enslaved population.

Increasing inter-plantation relations presented an additional benefit to enslaved African Americans who wanted to marry or stay connected with separated family members. By the start of the 19th century enslaved parents, with or without the slave owner’s permission, approved marriages among young men and women, oversaw wedding ceremonies, and blessed the new couple (Berlin 1998:271-272). Unfortunately, enslaved men and women entered marriages aware that their relationship hung in the balance of their slave owner’s economic circumstance and financial decisions. Revealing her thoughts during her first marriage ceremony to an enslaved man named Jerry who resided on a neighboring plantation, Veney admitted, “I did not want him [the minister] to make us promise that we would always be true to each other, forsaking all others, as the white people do in their marriage service, because I knew that at any time our masters could compel us to break such a promise” (1889:18). Her fear proved to be her reality when Jerry’s owner sold him further South.

When confronted with the choice to be bought and move farther south with Jerry or stay in Virginia, Veney reflected, “Then came the consciousness that this inducement was only a sham, and that, once exposed for sale in a Southern market, the bidder with the largest sum of money would be our purchaser singly quite as surely together; and if separated what would I do in a strange land? No: I would not go. It was far better for me to stay where, for miles and miles, I knew every one, and every one knew me” (1889:20-21). Her situation exemplifies enslaved African Americans’ incessant stress due to
uncertainty, the mistrust of white society, the hard decisions required, and the strength their local black community provided them.

The significance of Bethany Veney’s choice to stay with her community over the opportunity of being with her husband is telling because of the importance of family to enslaved African Americans. Descriptions about one’s family characterized one of the most emotionally charged topics. Residing amongst family and having them near for emotional support, especially once parents with children, allowed enslaved people to effectively cope with the daily hardships of enslavement. Emotions of happiness and joy, despite the terrible situation, could be achieved through close contact with family. Brown acknowledged even with the circumstances of his enslavement: “…as I imprinted a parting kiss upon the lips of my faithful wife, and pressed to my bosom the little darling cherubs, who followed me saying, in their childish accents, ‘Father, come back soon,’ I felt that life was not all a blank to me; that there were some pure joys yet my portion” (1849:51).

Unfortunately, sales of family members and separation from loved ones constituted a real threat to the enslaved population of Virginia. Veney described the first time she was sold upon her master’s death, detailing, “Master's children consisted of five daughters and two sons. As usual in such cases, an inventory was taken of his property (all of which nearly was in slaves), and, being apportioned in shares, lots were drawn, and, as might chance, we fell to our several masters and mistresses” (1889:10). The dehumanizing treatment of people as objects arises in this example by having the enslaved African Americans form ‘lots’ and drawn from a hat as a means of determining
the affairs of their lives. Brown expounded upon why slave owners practice this type of division of enslaved people for sales, explaining,

“It is a difficult matter to satisfactorily divide the slaves on a plantation, for no person wishes for all children, or for all old people; while both old, young, and middle aged ones are to be divided. There is no equitable way of dividing them, but by allowing each one to take his portion of both children, middle aged and old people; which necessarily causes heart-rending separations; but ‘slaves have no feelings,’ I am sometimes told” (1849:34).

No group in the owning and selling of human beings evaded the detrimental repercussions of treating people as property though, including the slave owners. W. E. B. Du Bois once argued, “The Southern planter suffered not simply for his economic mistakes—the psychological effect of slavery, upon him was fatal. The mere fact that a man could be, under the law, the actual master of the mind and body of human beings had to have disastrous effects” (1976:52). Slave owners coped with the psychological backlash by downplaying the dehumanizing nature of the institution in an attempt to lessen the inherent contradiction of owning another human. They saw the enslaved community as individuals only when it suited their purpose of equalizing monetary gain among them, but lacked humanity towards those affected. White slave owning society assuaged any potential guilt over separating families by claiming innate differences between races in terms of emotional capabilities. The oppression the enslaved community experienced by existing within a society that both dehumanized and neglected the importance of families, regardless of the effect it had on whites, encouraged the enslaved African American community to band together.

Community involvement as social support functioned as the most utilized coping
strategy by enslaved people, aside from religion. This social support proved irreplaceable to enslaved families due to the relatively constant stress of separation and uncertainty they faced by being from Virginia. A comparison of slavery forms across the South during the 19th century argues that the harshness of Virginia’s slavery did not result in extreme mortality rates such as were seen in the rice kingdom, but rather in the additional form of frequent separation of families (Dusinberre 2011:140). “In the Upper South, forcible separations probably destroyed one out of three first marriages, and roughly one out of three slave children under age fifteen was separated from one or both parents” (Franklin and Schweninger 2007:30). For enslaved Virginians, separation imposed chronic emotional stress of uncertainty and fear that never subsided. Steward empathized with the enslaved people after a large sale of slaves had been made from his plantation, feeling, “And oh, the terrible uncertainty of the future, that ever rests on the slave, even the most favored, was now felt with a crushing weight. To-day, they are in the old familiar cabin surrounded by their family, relatives and friends; to-morrow, they may be scattered, parted forever” (2002:21). Fedric overheard a woman who went so far as to say the emotional stress of separation proved worse than physical pain, retelling, “I was standing by, one Sunday, and heard a woman say to her, ‘Selling is worse than flogging. My husband was sold six years ago. My heart has bled ever since, and is not well yet. I have been flogged many times, since he was torn from me, but my back has healed in time’” (1863:10).

Only on rare occasions did slave owners in Virginia attempt to keep family members together, but when this occurred it merely stemmed from selfish motives. In an
1853 letter from James Cooke’s manager of slave hiring, Hez Ford, to James Cooke concerning a potential slave to hire he suggested, “If you conclude to take him or not he will then know how to act— if Soloman is sound and continues in health, he will pay a good percent on his cost, and again, Fanny will be worth to you a good deal more by having Soloman, than if you separate them.” Even Ford acknowledged the power of keeping the married couple, Fanny and Soloman, together yet only because it benefited the slave owner as well. The reality unfortunately remained that typically the financial potential of separating families for individual sale kept slave owners from troubling themselves with keeping them together for humanistic reasons.

The sufferings of separation reveal the clearest indication of the emotions of the enslaved community. From the birth of one’s child, parents experienced constant fear and dread over the potential fate of their children (e.g. Brown 1849:15; Veney 1889:26). The enslaved community confronted the actual occurrences of separation with anger and grief, often using linguistic references to the toll on their heart to express the emotional pain. At the parting between Veney and her first husband, Jerry, after he was sold South she confessed, “I stifled my anger and my grief, brought his little bundle, into which I tucked a testament and catechism some one had given me, and shook hands ‘good-by’ with him. So we parted forever, in this world” (1889:25). Brown contextualized the effect separation had on the enslaved, proclaiming,

“Far beyond, in terrible suffering, all outward cruelties of the foul system, are those inner pangs which rend the heart of fond affection, when the— ‘bone of your bone, and the flesh of your flesh’ is separated from your embrace, by the ruthless hand of the merciless tyrant, as he plucks from your heart of love, the one whom God hath given you for a ‘help-meet’ through the journey of life; and more fearful by far than all the blows of
the bloody lash, or the pangs of cruel hunger are those lashings of the heart, which the best of slaveholders inflict upon their happy and ‘well off’ slaves, as they tear from their grasp the pledges of love, smiling at the side of devoted attachment” (1849:12-13).

Smith explains the unrecoverable emotional state his mother fell into upon the selling of his sister, sympathizing, “Oh! how it rent my mother's heart; although her heart was almost broken by grief and despair, she bore this shock in silent but bitter agony” (1881:13).

The narratives also demonstrate anthropologist Michael Blakey’s assertion that “absence of [social] support increases one’s vulnerability to stress—elevating the stressfulness of life events and the likelihood of clinical, psychological, and physical symptoms” (1994:161). Smith’s mother, addressed above, was hastened to an early death due to her compromised emotional and physical response to the separation from her child (1881:14). Also, hypertension due to high psychosocial stress, which has been shown to be a factor among African Americans rates from facing discrimination (Spruill 2010), provides another possible explanation for the suggestion of hypertension seen in enslaved people of Virginia and Maryland (Kelley & Angel 1987).

The intense emotional and physiological response elicited by the stress of threats and the realities of separation, contribute to the pervasive feeling of hopelessness throughout the community. In recounting the families he had seen torn apart from sales, Smith attested, “Oh! how many such partings have rent many a heart, causing it to bleed as it were, and crushing out all hope of ever seeing slavery abolished” (1881:33). In addition, the Virginian enslaved community’s belief that separation was imminent created a sense of helplessness among them that nothing could prevent such events.
Grimes clearly demonstrated this notion when admitting, “There is nothing in slavery, perhaps, more painful, then the unavoidable separation of parents and children” (1971:72).

The social component of enslavement created an unfortunate paradox to enslaved African Americans. The social support from the black community offered the most effective coping strategy for handling the different stresses brought on from enslavement. Yet contradictorily, social stress from the unpredictability of sales formed the greatest burden upon African Americans since slave owners exploited the enslaved community’s relationships and human needs to demonstrate power, maintain control, and provide maximum monetary gains for themselves. The actions of slave owners removed control over the results of long-term family relationships, consequentially destabilizing family structures (Blakey email to author, March 4, 2015). Due to this circumstance, enslaved blacks formed stronger, more intimate emotional and physical ties with friends from the community at large, beyond just family members. Brown addressed this difference from white society, arguing, “We love our friends more than white people love theirs, for we risk more to save them from suffering” (1849:34). Additionally, heavy reliance had to be placed on other coping strategies that could afford alternative relief from stress. Religion, almost exclusively Christianity during the 19th century, represented a practical alternative from the way the enslaved community interpreted its benefits. One could argue these two aspects of mitigating the stress of enslavement, strengthening bonds with the larger community and Christianity, form the foundation of African American cultural coping.
Ownership

In a society that deemed enslaved blacks as the human property of a slave owner, acts of ownership allowed this subjugated group to take back a sense of control and autonomy in their lives. Having additional funds to support personal needs or wishes offered enslaved African Americans a limited form of independency from their owners. Participation in local markets through selling surplus produce or goods, and side jobs or renting out one’s services for work provided individuals the ability to achieve some financial security. Before Smith escaped, he returned for his savings telling, “I went a few blocks where I kept my box, and in it I had three dollars, all the money I possessed in the world” (1881:40). This money allowed him an easier escape since he could afford transportation by boat from Maryland to Philadelphia, then again from New York to Massachusetts. Owning money allowed Smith to physically cope with enslavement through aiding his escape to the North and emotionally cope through the freedom to make decisions about his own life.

Other enslaved African Americans had the opportunity to shape their lives while in enslavement through the use of personal funds. More freedom existed beyond the watchful eye of one’s slave owner and could be achieved through affording housing off his or her property. Veney used her skills to earn extra money allowing her to rent housing away from the main plantation and explained the process, saying, “At last, we got back to Luray, and master agreed with me that I should pay him thirty dollars per year for my time, and whatever I earned above that should be my own. I rented of John Prince a little house at Dry Run, just at the foot of the mountain, and with my little boy Joe, now
about two years old, lived very contentedly” (1889:32). Brown did the same for his wife paying their owner $50 a year to allow her to live off the plantation, while also paying $5,000 for his promise not to sell his family (1849:52). Both circumstances gave the individual a measure of security in their living arrangement with the emotional benefits of certainty and contentment in an environment typically plagued by stress and uncertainty. Unfortunately, financial security could never permanently guarantee a reprieve from the stresses of enslavement as Brown experienced. The agreement arranged with his owner proved only temporary because the fickle man still sold his wife to a church friend a short time later. The selfish and manipulative actions of slave owners justified the mistrust the enslaved population felt towards white society.

The enslaved community felt exhibiting control over one’s living quarters and housing situation could provide a measure of relief from the physically and socially stressful issue of housing. Slave housing composed a point of stress in the lives of enslaved Virginians because of its poor quality and use as social control by slave owners. Eighteenth century dwellings varied in size and material depending on local availability, but most were very small having only one window, a fireplace, dirt floors, and poor construction showing the intention of the owner to economize on labor (Upton 1982:49, cited in McKee 1992). Despite the general movement towards improved housing in the later part of the 18th to 19th century, quite often this rudimentary housing remained in use in Virginia. Reflecting on his housing, Steward illustrated, “As was the usual custom, we lived in a small cabin, built of rough boards, with a floor of earth, and small openings in the sides of the cabin were substituted for windows. The chimney was built of stick and
mud; the door, of rough boards; and the whole was put together in the rudest possible manner” (2002:3). The amenities provided to the enslaved occupants proved just as crude. Smith told of his housing and bedding, lamenting, “We dwelt in log cabins, and on the bare ground. Wooden floors were an unknown luxury to the slave. There were neither furniture nor bedsteads of any description; our beds were collections of straw and old rags, thrown down in the corners; some were boxed in with boards, while others were old ticks filled with straw” (1881:7). A slave quarter might be either single room or a duplex with a single room, and possible loft, housing from six to twenty four people (Upton 1984:60). This environment made for overcrowding and possible centers of sickness for the enslaved community.

On a national basis from the end of the 18th century throughout the 19th century, the condition of slave housing improved in relation to size and construction (Genovese 1976:524). These upgrades included raised floors, log or frame construction, a standardized floor plan of sixteen square feet, and only a single room (Herman 1984:262; Winer 1985). Yet while improvements of the 19th century brought about better living facilities for enslaved people, the slave owners had self-serving motivations if they chose to act on this trend. The African American community provided a point of stress for slave owners so the reformed housing served several functions: “to house slaves in an economic and healthy way, to reflect their concern for their human property, to convey to slaves a sense of their inferior status, to serve as mechanisms controlling slave behavior, and to encourage productive and stable slave families” (McKee 1992:204). This control through determining housing layout, structure, and condition intended to demonstrate the
domination of the white masters over all areas of their enslaved population’s life, from work hours into their private time (Epperson 1990; McKee 1992).

Alterations to slave housing and control over the use of the landscape around them demonstrated a means of ownership. White plantation owners or overseers commonly determined location and size of cabins while likely the enslaved population could arrange the space around their homes (Heath 1999a:33). Steward explained how the enslaved community was in charge of their furnishings, noting, “As to the furniture of this rude dwelling, it was procured by the slaves themselves, who were occasionally permitted to earn a little money after their day’s toil was done” (2002:3). Shelving may have been added along with nails to hang dry herbs (Upton 1984:60). Owning and utilizing locks on one’s housing offered protection, as demonstrated when Steward and his friends locked out the plantation patrol, who intended to harm them, from getting in the cabin when the enslaved community held a gathering inside (Steward 2002:14). Lock and key sets, and pieces of locks by themselves, may have been a method to cope with instability and mistrust, while additionally suggesting acts of defiance if they had been stolen (Heath 1999a:62-63).

Perhaps the biggest modification came in the form of holes dug into the dirt floors of the slave quarters or under the wood flooring. Within Virginia, over 150 subfloor pits have been discovered and excavated across sixteen African American sites (Samford 1996). There is an ongoing scholarly debate about the uses of these dug out pits inside the quarter, arguing they were used for food storage, hiding places for private or stolen goods (Kelso 1984; Neiman 1997; Epperson 1990:34) or ancestral shrines (Samford
The enslaved community living in housing made during the 19\textsuperscript{th} century improvement movement utilized these subfloors pits less, but they did not fall out of use completely. In fact, some scholars argue the raised floor improvements to slave housing were a calculated response by slave owners to stop the use of subfloor pits (e.g. Convey and Eisnach 2009:52; Samford 1996). A 19\textsuperscript{th} century cabin at Flowerdew Hundred exemplifies this by having raised flooring and no root cellar, while a quarter at Bremo Recess Plantation under the same condition does have one (Kelso 1984:30). Subfloor pits provided a means of coping with the lack of privacy afforded enslaved individuals while carrying on an African practice. Having subfloor pits allowed for an unsupervised space apart from slave owners and a small level of control for the enslaved person over an aspect of their housing, which otherwise was predetermined and managed by his or her master.

Beyond changes to the building, the tight, dark, enclosed spaces of slave dwellings also encouraged activity outside the quarters into the yard and broader landscape. Community activities occurred frequently in the yard space directly outside the quarters, included gardening, raising poultry, cooking, West African cultural practices, and socialization (Heath and Bennett 2000). Often the enslaved community fenced off the immediate yard area as archaeology has shown at the slave home quarters at Poplar Forest. To create a space of privacy, exclusively separate from the white plantation occupants, enslaved people at Poplar Forest located their enclosed yard on the side facing away from the mansion and overseer’s house (Heath 1999a:44-45). Creating,
personalizing, and inhabiting this space provided a means of coping with the oppressive level of power by slave owners and providing physical and psychological fulfillment.

Ownership of self-made or purchased clothing and adornment items also presented a method of dealing with the hardships of enslavement. This occurred because the lack in quantity and quality of clothing supplied by slave owners existed as a consistent stress in the lives of enslaved people. Types of clothing provided generally varied by labor position, age, and gender. Fluvanna County slave owner James Galt recorded his yearly fall inventory of provisions from the 1840s as one dress, cotton, shoes, socks, handkerchief/hood, and blanket per woman and two shirts, one coat, pants, socks, shoes, stockings, hat, blanket, and occasionally flannel per man. Despite the array of clothing articles provided, they lacked quality in material. Randolph explains his experience of poor quality, describing, “They have one suit of clothes for the year. This is very poor, indeed; and made by the slaves themselves on the plantation. It will not last more than three months, and then the poor slave gets no more from the slaveholder, if he go naked” (1855:18). When young, children usually fared worse in quality and quantity of clothing. Smith detailed, “Our dress was made of tow cloth; for the children, nothing was furnished them but a shirt; for the older ones, a pair of pantaloons or a gown, in addition, according to the sex. Besides these, in the winter season an overcoat, or round jacket; a wool hat once in two or three years for the men, and a pair of coarse, brogan shoes once a year” (1881:7).

Clothing, like food rations, required additional efforts on the part of the enslaved community to compensate for the deficiency in substantial provisions. Fortunately, cloth
increased in availability to enslaved blacks throughout the 18th and 19th centuries (Meaders 1997:42; Heath 1999a:52-57), and they capitalized on the opportunity to buy it. Making their own clothing increased the amount and often the quality of their clothing options, while allowing for personalized stylistic choices. The quantity of personal adornment items archaeologically recovered at the Poplar Forest slave quarters suggests the importance of personal adornment as a tool for self-expression and communal identity (Heath 1999a:53,1999b). A runaway slave advertisement from the Virginia Independent Chronicle and General Advertiser in 1790 even told of an enslaved man “Francis, 25 years old,” who “had six good linen shirts, a fine new brown broadcloth coat, a green shag jacket, breeches of several kinds, with shoe-boots and shoes” (Windley 1983:416). Having additional clothing, but especially owning ornamental items, let enslaved blacks differentiate between dressing up and regular clothing (Heath 1999b). Remembering a community gathering, Steward recalled, “The females were seen flocking to the place of resort, with heads adorned with gaudy bandanna turbans and new calico dresses, of the gayest color—their whole attire decked over with bits of gauze ribbon and other fantastic finery” (2002:11).

Aside from Jillian Galle’s (2010) more extrinsic focus on clothing articles as costly signaling to others, these items held value to the individual for showing his or her individuality in a social circumstance attempting to control and subjugate the enslaved community as a whole. Smith attests to this argument through his decision and justification of choosing to spend money on clothing he felt confident in; “In this way I saved at one time fifteen dollars; I went to the store, bought a piece of cloth, carried it to
the tailor and had a suit made—I had already bought a watch, and had a chain and seal.
You can imagine how I looked the following Sunday; I was very proud and loved to dress
well, and all the young people used to make a great time over me” (1881:28). Others
used their monetary funds to purchase gifts for loved ones. Brown, speaking about an
enslaved man from a different plantation, said, “He had sent a thousand hickory-nuts to
market, for which he afterwards informed us he had received thirty-six cents, which he
gave to his wife, to furnish her with some little article of comfort. This was the sum total
of all the money he had ever been the possessor of!” (1849:26-27). The act alone of
owning such clothing and items or being able to provide these for another, apart from
their owner’s offerings, helped enslaved African Americans indirectly cope with the
psychological stress of dehumanization and consideration as property.

The learned skills of enslaved individuals comprise an intangible form of
ownership that must not go underappreciated because, unlike material items, they could
never be taken away. Acquiring skills gave individuals more options in occupation,
possibly allowing him or her to do a job he or she preferred and felt rewarding. More
freedom of movement and a better chance of escape also came with skilled abilities, since
slave owners would rent out their enslaved laborers for work to turn a profit. In fact,
runtaways tended to be male skilled artisans or house servants whose occupations granted
them some mobility and the skills to support themselves in freedom (Heath 1999b:53). A
sense of emotional fulfillment also came along with performing jobs beyond those of a
field or house laborer. Steward experienced joy at the opportunity to do skilled work,
proclaiming, “I thought there would be no problem about that; and oh! How I dreamed of
and anticipated the happiness of being something besides a slave, for a little while at least” (2002:36). For some, the chance to do different work may have felt rewarding as well when selected for the position. Veney told about her opportunity to be a cook, stating, “After a time, master took a job of work on the pike, designing to work it with free negroes, whom he could hire for a small sum, and board them. He took me out there to cook for them. It gratified me to know that he placed confidence enough in me to do this; and I did my best to deserve it” (1889:31). Performing their own work to earn money and fulfillment gave a sense of hope for the future and aspiration to the enslaved community that one day the entirety of their labors would be their own. Dwelling on this pursuit of total future ownership Brown certified,

“How he is ready to perform irksome tasks; for the avails of his labor will be of value to himself, and with them he can administer comfort to those near and dear to him, and to the world at large, as well as provide for his own intellectual welfare; whereas before, however kind his treatment, all his earnings more than his expenses went to enrich his master (1849:30).

As one might imagine, the ability and decision to do skilled work, or just additional work to earn extra income, did not occur without consequences upon the enslaved community. Choosing to use free time in pursuit of financial security meant less time with loved ones, especially on days off when enslaved persons would typically travel to other plantations to visit and spend time with family (Pargas 2010:91). Also, white society often felt threatened and jealous by enslaved people who they held as inferior to themselves yet could do just as skilled, or even more skilled, work and make sufficient money. Smith experienced such a response from his owner when working at the latter’s shoemaking store, describing,
"I ran the shop for one year, during which time my young master became jealous of me. He thought I was making more money for myself than for him; it was not so, he was mistaken about it. What little I did earn for myself was justly my own. While I was away enjoying myself one Christmas day, he took an ox-cart with my brother, for Heathsville. The driving devolved on my brother. My master carried off my tools and every thing that was in the shop; he hired me out to a man who was considered by every one to be the worst one in Heathsville, whose name was Mr. Lacky, advising him ‘to keep me very strict, for I was knowing most too much’" (1881:25).

Both the enslaved population and white Southerners realized the power of knowledge, especially knowledge of the written language. Fearing equality among blacks and whites, Virginian officials took legal action enacting a law in 1805 making it illegal to teach blacks to read and write (Morgan 1985:4); and often slave owners also punished enslaved individuals they found learning. Although, this backlash did not often deter enslaved people from learning and sometimes even made them want the skills more. Steward, after being whipped for getting caught practicing reading, asserted, “This treatment, however, instead of giving me the least idea of giving it up, only made me look upon it as a more valuable attainment. Else, why should my oppressors feel so unwilling that their slaves should possess that which they thought so essential to themselves?” (2002:38-39).

Knowledge of a written language opened up new opportunities to enslaved individuals. Randolph, who to begin with only received a list of letters and basic understanding of spelling from a friend, divulged, “Then I learned to write. Here I had no teaching; but I obtained a book with the writing alphabet in it. I copied the letters until I could write. I had no slate, so I used to write on the ground. All by myself I learned the art of writing. Then I used to do my own letter-writing, and write my own pass” (1855:26-27). Literacy facilitated better information gathering as coping for
enslaved blacks because they could read runaway advertisements, plantation passes, and the Bible. The ability to read, the Bible particularly, allowed enslaved African Americans to interpret and access biblical passages without the polluting influence of white motives and often offered the opportunity of religious leadership since often literacy and preaching held close ties (Cornelius 1983:171-172). This knowledge continued throughout enslaved communities, being passed on and taught to others, as supported by Randolph’s first exposure to reading and writing, along with the discovery of fragments of a writing slab found in the slave quarters at Poplar Forest (Heath 1995a:55). Achieving proficiency in a given task, a learned skill, gave enslaved people the ability to cope with lack of control of their own lives and escape from undesirable circumstances, whether it was hard manual labor or enslavement entirely.

*Appropriation of Food*

In addition to the overwhelming psychological and social stress of dehumanization performed by slave owners, their economic choices also cultivated physiological stress on the enslaved population. Consistent with the slave owner’s focus on the economics of slavery, they often did whatever necessary to ensure financial gain. Planters were interested in keeping costs at a minimum to maximize profit, suggesting slave owners may have offered a little less than bare sufficiency to their slaves depending on their monetary choices (McKee 1999:221). Accounts of food, housing, and clothing provisions illuminate the poor standard of subsistence provided to enslaved people. The amount of food allotted to enslaved laborers generally varied depending on age, gender,
and type of labor one performed. White Southern slave owners recommended, ideally each field hand be given 1- 1½ peck of cornmeal, 3½- 4 pounds of meat and a liberal amount of vegetables and fruits weekly during seasonality (Breeden 1980:89). Nineteenth century Virginia slave narratives present a different reality of rations. These records attest each enslaved person received far below the “ideal” by only getting on average 1- 1½ peck(s) of cornmeal and ½- 2 pound of meat, typically bacon, per week. These rations easily underfed the average field worker who required approximately 4,900 calories daily (Singleton 1985), with most caloric intake needing to be from protein rich foods to sustain energy. Traditional maize and fatty pork rations were severely protein deficient (Steckel 1986), leaving enslaved people without a balanced diet and sufficient nourishment. Meat cravings especially plagued enslaved African Americans so severely that Grimes exclaimed at one point, “Why, I have been so hungry for meat that I could have eat my mother” (1971:70-71).

Slave owners consistently used food provisioning as a means of social control and manipulation as well. The Christmas holiday proved to be a time when they showed their “good grace” to the enslaved population by providing extra rations. During the Christmas of 1841, Charles City County slave owner Charles Selden distributed an extra peck of flour, coffee, sugar, and lard in addition to the regular allowance (1841). These gifts occurred to reinforce the social position of the master to his enslaved workers and often came with expectations of appropriate conduct. On the other extreme, Richard Eppes reduced rations as punishment for misbehaving or poor hygiene to deter such behavior (cited in McKee 1999:227). Fedric exemplifies how the enslaved community
was aware of the underlying motives of their owners in concerns to food manipulation
when declaring, “This mode of living is no doubt adopted for the express purpose of
brutalizing the slaves as much as possible, and making the utmost difference between
them and the white man” (1863:8). Slave owners insisted on having the authority to both
determine provisions and how they are provided to the enslaved community as a means
of control over them.

To meet immediate needs, many enslaved people turned to appropriating food as
a method of coping with the physiological stress caused by hunger. Stealing, hunting,
fishing, and owning a personal garden exemplified the most utilized means for
supplementing the limited provisions they received. Even from a young age, enslaved
African Americans turned to appropriating food to ward off hunger and nutritional
cravings because they were afforded so little. Recalling his youth, Fedric reminisced,
“As a lad, hearty, and only poorly fed, I was always delighted, if I could get any extra
food; and my memory seems to be very tenacious of anything having reference to eating”
(1863:8). Richard Steckel’s (1986) analysis on growth impediment in enslaved
populations due to malnutrition, illuminates this fact that children were fed more
inadequately to their needs than adults. Nevertheless, adults as well participated in
stealing food since it often posed the easiest means to provide nourishment. Grimes
clearly recalled his past behavior, stating, “We used to steal meat whenever we could get
a chance; and such was my craving for it, that if the punishment was death, I could not
have resisted the temptation” (1972:70). In a way, Grimes unintentionally highlighted
the potential severity of punishment for stealing within the state. Hog stealing in
particular was so prevalent as early as the mid-18th century that in 1748 Virginia decreed the death penalty for a third offense (Genevese 1972:599). White slave owning society felt so threatened by, and vengeful over, the actions of enslaved blacks they opted for dramatic legal punishment rather than the humanistic option of increasing rations. The knowledge that so many enslaved African Americans still chose stealing food as a coping strategy even though the behavior could result in death, reiterates its effectiveness in assuaging physiological needs. Additionally, it demonstrated the feeling of desperation among some enslaved people who would never intentionally want to break the law, but felt it was their best or only means to achieve fulfillment.

Stealing, especially from one’s owner, provided an emotional reward to enslaved blacks as well by offering a sense of retribution on white slave society or specifically one’s master (McKee 1999:234). Steward described an instance when trying to guarantee enough food, continuing, “to meet the emergency of the case, they took, without saying ‘by your leave, Sir,’ some property belonging to their master, reasoning among themselves, as slaves often do, that it cannot be stealing, because ‘it belongs to massa, and so do we, and we only use one part of his property to benefit another’” (2002:11; italics original). This shared rationality reconciled the distinction between taking and stealing due to the injustice of consideration as property (Aptheker 1939:6). Some owners persecuted their enslaved workers who were found stealing, while others took advantage of their actions and just stipulated such behavior could not occur on his or her plantation. Brown once overheard: “This man enjoined upon his slaves never to steal from him again, but to steal from his neighbors, and he would keep them from
punishment, if they would furnish him with a portion of the meat!” (1849:27). This tactic by slave owners proved beneficial to them because it ensured they did not have to provide increased rations, yet their enslaved laborers would be better fed and therefore healthier.

More often though, members of the enslaved community resorted to hunting or fishing the local game for subsistence, which slave owners almost always allowed. This approval by slave owners merely reflects their desire to have slaves adequately feed, but not at the time or expense of their own efforts. Only during enslaved individuals’ free time, after finishing their labor for the day or on their free day of the week, were they permitted to hunt or fish. Randolph commented on setting traps, explaining, “One slave with sometimes have fifteen to twenty of them, and will go at night, with his torch of pitch-pine and see if his traps have caught him anything to eat” (1855:19). Smith also exploited the local resources for additional food, telling, “In order to make our allowance hold out, we went crabbing or fishing. In the winter season we used to go hunting nights, catching oysters, coons and possums” (1881:8). Archaeology of Virginia Chesapeake sites attest to this resource of wild game. Five to twenty percent of faunal assemblages in the Chesapeake come from wild taxa (Atkins 1994:21), a substantial percentage unequaled in Anglo-American faunal assemblages regardless of socioeconomic status (Franklin 2001:100-101). If a slave owner allowed hunting, the hard earned meat would often have to be first divided with the overseer before sharing among the individual’s family and friends. Others foraged wild fruits for extra food; Randolph described some of the native Virginia fruits, mentioning,
“There are some little fruits in Virginia, that are called ‘simmons’; they grow very plentifully, and are sweet and good. The slaves get them in the fall of the year, then they get a barrel and put the ‘simmons’ into it, and put water there too, and something else that grow on trees, that they call ‘locusses,’ which are about ten inches long, and two across. They put the ‘locusses’ and ‘simmons’ into the water together, and let them stand for two or three days” (1855:20).

The need of the enslaved population to collect their own subsistence presented the benefit of spending time and familiarizing themselves with the undomesticated surroundings of wooded areas, therefore affording enslaved African Americans anonymity and secrecy (Franklin 2001; Isaac 1982). The security this space offered, created a refuge for enslaved people since activities carried out in the wooded areas laid outside the watchful eye of slave owners and overseers.

Raising poultry and tending garden plots throughout the late 18th and 19th centuries also offered a means to supplement poor provisions given by slave owners as well. The produce amassed by both sources could be given to members of the family or community to offset the limited nutritional value of the rations, sold to masters or at the market for cash, or traded for other items. Age and family structure had a significant influence on how the garden produce was utilized. Those selling typically did not have children under ten years old during their time of participating since the food would be prioritized for nourishment of the family (Heath 2004:24-25). Enslaved people’s gardens in the yards at the Virginia plantations of Rich Neck, Poplar Forest, and Wilton Plantation grew cultivated species including beans, melons, corn, wheat, cowpeas, squash, and peanuts (Edwards-Ingram 2001:43). Additionally, certain weeds and locally gathered resources by enslaved people doubled as pot herbs and medicine. The use of
folk medicine by enslaved people, and for enslaved people, may have empowered the black community while effectively solving health concerns in the population such as colds and worms (Edwards-Ingram 2001).

Slave owners may have thought themselves kind for often allowing their enslaved population to have livestock or gardens in addition to rations, but the extra time these activities took cut into their only free time away from work. To make the best of their situation field hands would generally pool a portion of their weekly provisions and other goods, then dictate the cooking to one individual (Steward 2002:4). Large iron pots accompanied by bone fragments across enslaved house sites reiterate that enslaved communities often opted for “one pot meals” as a means to have more time, receive more nutrition from the marrow, and take part in an African cultural tradition (Franklin 2001:97). What may have originated as a practical coping strategy to deal with restrictions on food and time, provided an ideal opportunity for the enslaved to practice an African cultural tradition. Black-eyed peas, a crop commonly grown and consumed by West Africans, offered a popular option of protein and tradition among enslaved African Americans (Covey and Eisnach 2009:84; Moore 1989). Fedric detailed the food regiment his community practiced, explaining, “The dinner consists generally of black-eyed peas soup, as it is called. About a quart of peas is boiled in a large pan, and a small piece of meat, just to flavour the soup, is put into the pan. The next day it would be bean soup, and another day it would be Indian meal broth” (1863:7). Despite the tireless efforts of enslaved people, bioarchaeological research shows anemia still occurred in the majority of certain enslaved populations in Virginia and Maryland (Kelley & Angel 53
1987). The symptoms of anemia could have increased stress in other areas of their lives
as well by negatively impacting their ability to carry out daily tasks due to fatigue,
dizziness, weakness, cognitive problems, and shortness of breath (The Nurse Practitioner

The allotment of poor rations and burden of appropriating one’s own source of
subsistence was not consistent across the enslaved population. Enslaved house workers
typically fared better than field hands in relation to clothing and food. Randolph
illustrated the benefits, but also the overlooked hardships of house workers, comparing,

“These [house slaves] are not treated as cruelly as the field slaves; they are
better fed and wear better clothing, because the master and his family
always expect to have strangers visit them, and they want their servants to
look well. These slaves eat from their master's table, wear broadcloth and
calico; they wear ruffled-bosomed shirts...These slaves, although dressed
and fed better than others, have to suffer alike with those whose outward
condition is worse” (Randolph 1855:15-16).

Grimes who experienced both types of work, preferred field work in comparison to the
constant vigilance and abuse suffered under house employment except in relation to his
meals, recalling, “...although at the same time I longed to return on account of my food,
(as did the children of Israel to the flesh pots of Egypt) (1972:66-67). Whether intended
by manipulative slave owners to create animosity and instability among their enslaved
population or not, the stark inequality between the enslaved house and field workers
rations created a level of contempt between them. The burden on field workers of having
to do more to get by invoked the emotion of envy among them towards those better off,
as mentioned by Steward: “...they [house slaves] are ever regarded as a privileged class;
and are sometimes greatly envied, while others are bitterly hated” (2002:12). House
workers may have felt slightly superior to the field hands because of the benefits being in the “great house” afforded them. Smith’s father, who replaced the previous house-keeper Cella, was poisoned by Cella because she felt she had been demoted from house-keeper and forced to work as a field hand (1881:5). “But in most cases all slaves knew they were first slaves, secondly house-servants, and cast their identity with the black majority” (Boles 1984:110).

The division within the enslaved community was less than the divide between enslaved African Americans and free African Americans over the accessibility to opportunities and freedom. When working as a cook for free blacks who had been hired by her slave owner, Veney remarked, “They were despised by the master-class, because they could not subject them to their will quite in the same way as if they were slaves, and despised by the slave-class, because envied as possessing a nominal freedom, which they were denied. Thus are contempt and envy closely allied” (1889:31-32). The physiological and psychological stress, emotions, and coping strategies from poor and unfair circumstances had significant social implications. They reinforced cooperation among those of similar situations, fostered additional coping by community involvement, furthered the social divisions among blacks, and the racial divide between blacks and whites.

Appropriation of food proved a useful coping strategy to enslaved African Americans to deal with poor rations and feelings of injustice towards their masters. Food problems may have originated from the larger circumstance of enslavement, but coping was directed towards the more achievable solution of ending hunger and obtaining
nourishment. This goal shows the problem-focused coping applied by enslaved African Americans. By taking part in appropriation of food the enslaved took back control of their psychological and physical fulfillment, which often slave owners did not provide (McKee 1999:234-235).

**Avoidance**

Agentive activities such as running away, self-injury, and feigning injury constitute coping strategies on the part of enslaved African Americans to mitigate the burden of daily problems. They employed these actions as a means of avoiding or delaying an adverse situation. Attempting to address an immediate concern led many enslaved people to choose avoidance rather than defiance to deal with the root of their problem. Generally avoidant coping is considered maladaptive (Zeidner & Saklofske 1996:514), but since this coping strategy often achieved a desirable outcome and comprised culturally recognized methods to deal with enslavement, enslaved African Americans continued utilizing avoidance with positive results.

The threat and act of physical abuse posed a constant problem to the enslaved community. The physical abuse carried out towards this group by slave owners, slave dealers, overseers, and plantation patrols represents the most clearly defined type of stress referenced in historical accounts. Even slave narratives from Virginia that more often tell of “kind masters and mistresses,” did not exist without the reality of harsh corporal punishment and abuse. Brown attested to this notion emphasizing, “The lash is still held above his head, and may fall upon him, even if its blows are for a long time withheld.
This the slave realizes; and hence no kind treatment can destroy the depressing influence of a consciousness of his being a slave,—no matter how lightly the yoke of slavery may rest upon his shoulders” (1849:29-30). Visitors to plantations recognized the pervasiveness of physical violence as a form of punishment in the institution. I. de Courcy Laffan, upon introduction to Ritchie’s Brandon plantation in Prince George County, wrote to him in appreciation: “I was happy to find a system of order, kindness and humanity established in the treatment of these unfortunate people such as is I am afraid seldom to be met with else where. Corporal punishment is scarcely known on this Estate; by multiplying the number of overseers, crime is prevented” (1841; underlining original). The fact that an institution conducting any physical abuse towards enslaved laborers was considered “kindness and humanity” in the minds of outsiders, demonstrates the level of acceptance white society had for this type of behavior. Furthermore, the mention that scarcity of physical punishment constituted the minority of order systems further illustrates the larger picture of this act in American slavery.

Response to acute acts of abuse often evoked a form of coping that could provide clear, immediate results to alleviate the stress. Upon threat of another whipping after being whipped the day before, Grimes reflected, “In this manner do the overseers impose on their planters, and compel their slaves to run away, by cruel treatment. If I went to the field, I was sure to be whipped, and to run away I did not like to. However, like most, I presume in my situation, I chose the latter alternative, so away I ran for the mountain” (1971:68). The cost-benefit analysis, the weighing of different options, inherent in problem-focused coping and applied here provides a clear indicator of this type of coping
strategy. In some instances, often among children, the thought to flee abuse proved almost instinctual. When a child, Smith upon returning from running away from his mistress who had been beating him reasoned to her, “She asked me why I ran from her; I told her that it hurt me so bad when she struck me, that I did not know that I was running” (1881:11). Physically abusive conditions increased the incentive to run away for many enslaved people. On Brown’s plantation, the slave owner enacted corporal punishment in response to criticism from fellow slave owners of being too kind, and by doing so he unknowingly encouraged running away; Brown attested, “We now began to taste a little of the horrors of slavery; so that many of the slaves ran away, which had not been the case before (1849:30). This circumstance reveals the chain of pressures and consequences experienced in the institution as well. The overarching white society supported the use of strict corporal punishment for handling of enslaved laborers, which then pressured individual owners to comply or otherwise risk being ostracized by the greater community, by which the enslaved population had to suffer the terrible choices made by their personal owner.

The occurrence of being sold constituted another main reason for running away, sometimes to the North for freedom and at a moment’s notice. Joe and Rosa, Steward’s married couple friends, upon hearing they were to be sold South and separated, chose to finally attempt escape. Steward recounted Joe’s words to his wife, stating, “Courage wife, no fate can be worse than the one designed for us; and we have no time to lose” (2002:100). Zip, a friend of Smith, returned home from his work one day to his wife’s pleas of running, as Smith retold, “From there he went to his house, for he lived there in
town, and as soon as he entered the house his wife warned him to flee for his life, for a trader had bought him, and had been to the house with several young men whom we saw behind the stable as we rode up, placed themselves there for the purpose of waiting till we came (1881:39). As his wife requested, Zip left that night along with Smith and another man to escape North fulfilling their eventual long-term plan sooner than expected. All around the age of 22 when fleeing, Smith and his friends represent the majority of runaways as young men in their late teens/twenties (Berlin 2007:28; Heath 1999b:53).

For other enslaved people, the absence of familial or social support drove their desire to escape from enslavement. Grimes recounting his plight from being sold away to a new owner as a boy, confessed,

“There, without friends, torn from the arms of my mother, who has since died in slavery, not being allowed to see me, her only son, during her last illness… together with my sufferings, is sufficient to convince my readers, that any boy of my age would endeavor to find, and also improve an opportunity to clear themselves from the house of bondage (1972:66).

Brown explained his reasoning for planning his famous escape in a three by two inch box, reasoning, “I had suffered enough under its heavy weight, and I determined I would endure it no longer; and those reasons which often deter the slave from attempting to escape, no longer existed in reference to me, for my family were gone, and slavery now had no mitigating circumstances, to lessen the bitterness of its cup of woe” (1849:56).

On many occasions enslaved Virginians who ran away remained in the vicinity to stay close to their social support of family and friends despite the chance of escaping to the North. Enslaved individuals sometimes absconded into the local woods for long
periods of time, referred to as “lying out,” surviving by living off the land for food, stealing from others, or receiving aid from friends (Franklin and Schweininger 2007:25). The experience allowed for a temporary relief from the daily stresses of enslavement, but ultimately the enslaved individuals returned to the life he or she knew due to concerns for their health, wellbeing, or loved ones. Randolph’s brother, Benjamin, utilized this strategy due to the threat of a second flogging in two days at the hands of his vengeful overseer so he fled to the woods. “For seven months, he lived in the swamps of Virginia, while every effort was made to catch him, but without success. He once ventured on board a vessel on James River. There he was caught, but soon made his escape again to the swamp, where my mother and myself used to carry him such food as we could procure to keep him alive” (Randolph 1855:28). Sometimes runaways lying out would band together to form small gangs, with Virginia having one of the largest gangs across the entire South, numbering in the thousands and residing in the Great Dismal Swamp (Franklin and Schweininger 2007:26). Smith remarked on the existence of such a group nearby and the threat they represented to him while walking back from a religious meeting on another plantation, commenting, “Here used to be a great many run-aways in that section, and they would hide away in the woods and swamps, and if they found a person alone as I was, they would spring out at them and rob them” (1881:27). Some individuals chose this group life to permanently end the stress of enslavement, but most only used it to temporarily avoid the immediate stress they had fled from since lying out contributed its own form of stress, as discussed below.

Enslaved people also utilized running away, not only as a means of avoiding
stress, but a means to end separation from family as well. One study of nearly 600 advertisements for runaway slaves in Virginia showed that one third of the fugitives were attempting to visit relatives who lived in a distant location (Davis 1986:29). While hired out, Smith escaped back to his family when left alone to watch over his cruel boss’ docked ship, confessing, “After I had been there a few weeks, I sought an opportunity to run away. I saw a vessel one day going to my former home, Mr. Dick. Mitchell’s, I got on board this vessel for home, having been gone for two years” (1881:20-21). Despite his disobedience, Smith’s coping strategy proved hugely successful because he avoided working with his former boss any longer and he received no punishment from his slave owner upon arriving home. Other instances of running away for which enslaved people often received no punishment from their masters, were short-term trips off the plantation also known as truancy. The commonality of these and the instance that they sometimes benefited the slave owner by meaning one less mouth to feed or idle worker, led slave owners to typically tolerate or just give mild punishments for short absences by members of the enslaved community (Franklin and Schweininger 2007:23; Walvin 1996:125). The lack of response on the part of the slave owners to strictly enforce truancy, except when caught in the act (e.g. Grimes 1972:68), in addition to the ability to temporarily avoid dealing with issues of enslavement and all while providing a measure of freedom, supported the use of running away as a coping mechanism.

Overworking presented another stress many enslaved African Americans attempted to handle through avoidance. The planter’s mentality of minimizing costs and maximizing profit translated through to the labor requirements of enslaved African
Americans. Typical workdays started at sunrise and continued till sunset only breaking for mealtimes. Brown recalled his extreme working conditions in a Richmond tobacco factory, specifying, “We were obliged to work fourteen hours a day, in the summer, and sixteen in the winter” (1849:41). Another example from the journal of Charles Selden, shows that in one year despite records of rain, snow, and hail, he only mentioned a single occasion of his slaves having an uncharacteristic day off (1841). The extreme work schedule composed only half the hardship on enslaved men and women with the other half being the physicality of labor demanded of them. Higher frequency of modifications in muscle attachment and osteoarthritis on the skeletons of enslaved female Virginians and Marylanders as compared to 20th century females demonstrates the strenuous work conditions and strain the former operated under (Kelley and Angel 1987). These findings are consistent with evidence of laborious work in other enslaved populations throughout North America as well (e.g. Blakey et al. 2004; Mann et al. 1987; Owsley et al. 1987; Rathbun 1987).

To avoid such physically demanding and time consuming work, enslaved people found efficient methods to cope with the stress while evading interpersonal conflict with slave owners. Smith, who experienced the extreme labor requirement of a seven-day work week, aimed to stop his Sunday workday, explicating,

“I resolved that I would break up, or put an end to my Sunday employment; so I studied a plan, while I sat down in the field one Sabbath, how I should accomplish it. First, I thought I would feign sickness; then I said to myself, that will not do, for they will give me something that will physic me to death. My next contrivance was that I would pretend that I had the stomach ache; then, I said again, that will not do either, for then my mistress will make me drunk with whisky, as she had done before by her repeated doses. I devised another scheme, I thought the best of all,
and that was to pretend that I had a broken leg again. As this plan was satisfactory to my mind, I arose from where I was sitting and resumed my work” (1881:21).

Instead of confronting his slave owner directly, every weighed option included deception and feigning an injury, acknowledging that avoidance offered an easier means of achieving his goal than defiance. While Smith faked an injury, others like Grimes and Brown proceeded to actually wound themselves in an effort to produce a desired effect. After being sold South, Grimes first offered money to a man to break his leg with an axe, but when refused he attempted to do it himself to avoid going to Savannah, Georgia (1972:78). He did not succeed in his plight, but Brown experienced better results by getting time off from work due to his injury. Brown, needing free time to plan his escape, successfully avoided work by disabling his hand through the application of vitriol oil on his finger, which convinced the overseer to approve his absence since the finger was burned to the bone (1849:58). Calculating manipulation, rather than confrontation or direct refusal provided the opportunity to swing the circumstance in the favor of the enslaved person with minimal negative backlash from his or her oppressor.

Each act of avoidance above composed a fundamental behavioral problem-focused coping strategy for the enslaved African Americans who utilized them. Sleep and alcohol consumption constitute the only behavioral emotion-focused coping techniques (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Thoits 1991:111), as opposed to cognitive emotion-focused coping, carried out by enslaved Virginians. Sleep commonly evades scholars’ notice as agentive activity since without a psychological evaluation of intentionality, they may perceive the act as merely a biological necessity even when
practiced out of context. This escape method, an activity that distracts one from his or her problem, offered no tangible reward such as those of running away or self-injury to get out of work, but enslaved African Americans choose sleep to avoid dealing with the high emotional stress. When trying to attend a religious meeting or social gathering on Sunday, “Should a pass not be granted [by an overseer or master], the slave lies down and sleeps for the day- the only way to drown his sorrow and disappointment” (Randolph 1855:30). Veney seconded this notion stating, sleep “relieved us of our fears” (1889:24). These records indicate passing the day sleeping to relieve oneself of dealing with sadness was an accepted behavior because the enslaved community’s empathy, due to their common circumstance, condoned such coping.

The slave narratives attest to the partaking in alcohol consumption, and the archaeological record concurs to the presence of such activities in Virginian slavery and beyond. Randolph went so far as to claim “all the slaves, as well as their owners, are addicted to drinking…” (1855:17). Archaeologist Frederick Smith (2005) attests to the use of alcohol as an escape from hardship and way to confront anxiety among dehumanized people including enslaved Africans, Creoles, and indentured servants in the Caribbean. Given the stressful circumstances, in addition to its recognition as a prevalent coping mechanism in other groups, supports the notion that enslaved individuals may have used alcohol for both its social and coping functions. Alcoholic beverages may have been prevalent purchases, specifically whiskey for men and brandy for women, because they offered an escape from daily struggles and were popular at social interactions (Heath 2004:29).
The choice in using avoidance as a coping mechanism, came with different physical, psychological, and social consequences. The emotion of fear in the enslaved population often accompanied running away. Veney relayed her first husband’s status when he fled into the woods for two days to escape his fate of being sold, stating, “He was frightened and uneasy. He had been hiding around in different places, constantly fearing detection” (1889:23). Living in the woods with limited accessibility to social support, a mildly stable food source, and adequate shelter took a toll on one’s body and morale. For many, the added stress became too much and they returned to the familiarity and relative comfort of their home. For some though, such as Veney’s first husband Jerry, the emotional and physical wear proved too overwhelming between simultaneous long-term and short-term stresses faced. Veney explained, “The excitement of the last days - the fasting and the fear - had completely cowed and broken whatever of manhood, or even of brute courage, a slave might by any possibility be presumed at any time to be possessed of, and the last remains of these qualities in poor Jerry were gone” (1889:24). Jerry exemplified the symptoms of long-term stress that Blakey lays out as “perception of powerlessness, an inability to cope, and physiological wear and tear” (1994:164).

Even acts of truancy to spend time with, or stay with, family or friends proved frightful over the chance of getting caught. National laws passed in the 1850s allowing plantation patrols to enter any slave quarter (Walvin 1996), which exacerbated the already existing problem the enslaved community faced with patrols. Steward narrated an instance of fear from absenteeism when the patrol found out about a party he attended, illustrating, “Many a poor slave who had stolen from his cabin, to join in the dance, now
remembered that they had no pass! Many screamed in affright, as if they already felt the lash and heard the crack of the overseer's whip” (2002:13). Avoidance that involved manipulating one’s slave owner also came with a level of fear over the possibility of being found out. Smith took great precautions to maintain his ruse of fake sickness, admitting, “When she returned with some bacon and corn-cake, (meal cake) I did not dare to eat much for fear that the rest of the family would mistrust that I was not sick” (1881:24). Steward had a similar emotional reaction after he broke the lock of his owner’s shotgun and was approached by him about it, confessing, “I denied it, and told him I knew nothing about it; but I was so terribly frightened that he saw I was guilty, and told me so, foaming with rage; and then I confessed the truth” (2002:9).

White society interpreted occurrences of enslaved people slowing down or evading work, drinking, and sleep as justification of enslaved blacks’ inferiority. Period writings from whites demonstrate how white society used enslaved people’s actions to both shame and belittle them as allegedly being lazy or having behavioral problems. Scientific racism offered a popular method to explain and justify the actions of enslaved African Americans. Physician and Virginia native, Dr. Samuel Cartwright, diagnosed enslaved blacks with different mental illnesses of his own “finding”: Dysaesthesia Aethiopica supposedly caused them to have a natural temperament to sloth and mischief, while Drapetomania caused them to run away (cited in Olmstead 1856). In other circumstances, slave owners took advantage of the community’s preferred coping strategies, especially drinking, to benefit them. Grimes’ owner made him drink an entire bottle of spirits, which almost killed him, deducing, “This he did to conceal from me a
scrape he was going to have, as I supposed” (1972:73). On a different occasion, Grimes’ overseer told his boss, the slave owner, that Grimes was drunk to cover up his own indiscretion (1972:76). Randolph told about how his slaveholder would purposefully get the enslaved population drunk when Northerners would visit to show how “happy” they were with their enslaved status (1855:17).

In spite of the accompanying fear and social backlash from whites, individuals continually chose avoidance since the benefits of a physical or mental reprieve from immediate stress and getting to spend time with loved ones outweighed the risks. These coping techniques offered a fleeting opportunity to change what the enslaved community felt was a hopeless and often helpless situation. The dramatic lengths to which enslaved individuals would go to avoid the daily stresses of enslavement, attest to the underlying feeling of desperation that on occasions came to the forefront during moments of acute stress. Veney divulged this feeling when she found out about her owner’s accruing debt, avowing, “I knew well there was trouble ahead, and that, for McCoy's debts, I might at any moment be sold away from my boy, as I had been before from my girl. I determined this should never be. I would take my child and hide in the mountains. I would do anything sooner than I would be sold” (1889:35; italics original).

Defiance

Defiance as a problem-focused coping strategy functioned to deal directly with the cause of stress. Frequently these acts resulted in a confrontation with an authority figure. Defiance encompassed such acts as blatantly disobeying orders, rebellion, and

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confrontation while representing the least common coping strategy applied by enslaved African Americans, but by no means comprising rare occurrences (Aptheker 1939). The range of defiant acts functioned as problem-focused coping merely differing in level of intended effect. Stopping an event that caused, and was intended to perpetuate, physical and mental stress on the individual or community represented the ultimate effectiveness of this coping strategy.

Slave owners were only one of the authority figures confronted during defiance; often overseers took the brunt since their presence was always near. For this reason as well, enslaved African Americans often tell of more abuse by the hand of overseers than their actual master. Brown characterized his perception of overseers as “low, miserable, cruel, barbarous, and sometimes religious beings” who “hardly deserve the name of men, for they are lost to all regard for decency, truth, justice and humanity” (1849:40). On Grimes’ plantation he testified, “The overseers have an unlimited control over the slaves on the plantation, and exercise their authority in the most tyrannical manner” (1972:67). The overseer’s looming supervision symbolized the possibility of a whipping at any moment. “Our overseer,” Steward remarked, “thus armed with his cowhide, and with a large bull-dog behind him, followed the slaves all day; and, if one of them fell in the rear from any cause, this cruel weapon was plied with terrible force” (2002:4).

Black overseers and drivers may have mentally and physically fared worse than white overseers because slave owners assigned the position to these men without their consent (Randolph 1855:12). How well they performed their duties determined the treatment they received from the slave owner. Fedric explicated how and why an
enslaved male may be made an overseer, explaining,

“But other slave proprietors, in order to save the cost of an overseer, but chiefly to exact as much work as possible out of the niggers, make a nigger an overseer, who if he does not cruelly work the slaves is threatened with a flogging, which the master cannot give to a white man. In order to save his own back the slave overseer very often behaves in the most brutal manner to the niggers under him” (1863:6).

Randolph, whose enslaved father worked as an overseer, divulged his father’s remorse over his actions, confessing, “My father would often tell my mother how the white overseer had made him cruelly whip his fellows, until the blood ran down to the ground. All his days he had to follow this dreadful employment of flogging men, women and children, being placed in this helpless condition by the tyranny of his master” (1855:34). Examples, like the above, from slave narratives demonstrate that black drivers “sought to preserve their integrity—thereby refusing to be turned into psychologically devastated brutes” and therefore were not as selfishly motivated and depraved as historical accounts have claimed (Deburg 1979:115).

Enslaved African Americans did not often openly lash back at overseers or slave owners on plantations or places of employment, although some did choose to channel their motivation into risky acts of defiance. In response to an overseer about to whip him, Grimes declared, “I clinched him and told him that if he struck me, I would inform my master about his riding a favorite horse without my master’s consent” (1971:67). Grimes’ application of information gathering and observation provided enough leverage to force the overseer into submission. His use of blackmail not only stopped the immediate stress of physical abuse, but guaranteed him a measure of certainty and control in future interactions with the overseer. On a less effective occasion, Grimes defied his
white overseer, Bennet, declaring, “One day I was sick and did not go to ploughing. Bennet came after me, and told me he would whip me if I did not. I took up a stick, and told him if he put his hand upon me I would strike him: and marched towards him as bold as a lion” (1971:75). As alluded to, Grimes’ overseer did not accept this disobedience and the confrontation resulted in a physical altercation between them before two other enslaved men helped restrain Grimes for a whipping.

Virginia slave owners consistently used threats of violence in tandem with physical abuse. The ramifications of a verbal or demonstrative warning had physical and emotional effects on the enslaved community. Utilizing both threats and the action of abuse served slave owners as a form of social and behavioral control through intimidation, manipulation, and punishment. At times, slave owners even required enslaved individuals to assist in the act of corporal punishment upon their comrade, or him or herself. Grimes outlined the occasion of an assisted flogging he experienced, reporting, “First, he caused me to be what they call horsed up, by being raised upon the shoulders of another slave, and the slave to confine my hands around his beast; in this situation they gave me about forty or fifty lashes; they whipped me until I had hardly any feeling in me” (1972:65-66). Steward also underwent such specific type of punishment for breaking his master’s shotgun, divulging, “I was commanded to take off my clothes, which I did, and then master put me on the back of another slave, my arms handing down before him and my hands clasped in his, where he was obliged to hold me with a vise-like grasp” (2002:9). Veney experienced forced participation in the ritual of her own physical abuse. She told of her master’s command after being blamed for an accident and
sentenced to a beating, elucidating, “So, when we came up to the house, master was sitting in his chair by the window; and, as I passed into the room near him, he handed me his jack-knife, and said, ‘Now, girl, go cut me a good hickory, a good one, mind you; for, if I have to cut it myself, I’ll get a hard one, you may be sure’” (1889:12). Rather than accept the punishment, Veney challenged her master’s authority through contracting aid instead of resorting to physicality or threats. She sought out help from her owner’s father who lived locally to confront him about not punishing her since she had run away before receiving the whipping. Veney effectively read and used the bond between her master and his father, and her master dropped the punishment altogether (1889:12-13). Despite their differing methods, both Grimes’ blackmail and Veney’s seeking of help attained positive results from their acts of defiance.

In addition to threats and acts of physical abuse, African American woman experienced the threats and acts of sexual exploitation as well. Women encountered multiple co-occurring forms of oppression: they were viewed as both labor and reproductive resources to owners and faced a high likeliness of sexual assault during enslavement (Walvin 1996:100). Addressing the status of enslaved women and his perception of slave owners, Brown argued,

“It is my candid opinion that one of the strongest motives which operate upon the slaveholders, and induce them to retain their iron grasp upon the unfortunate slave, is because it gives them such unlimited control in this respect over the female slaves. The greater part of slaveholders are licentious men, and the most respectable and the kindest of masters, keep some of their slaves as mistresses. It is for their pecuniary interest to do so in several respects. Their progeny is so many dollars and cents in their pockets, instead of being a bill of expense to them, as would be the case if their slaves were free; and mulatto slaves command a higher price than dark colored ones; but it is too horrid a subject to describe” (1849:23).
Women who were sold at slave auctions, faced the horror of consideration as potential mistresses to vulgar slave owners. In certain instances slave auctions, including those conducted in Richmond, marketed light-skinned women strictly for the purpose of prostitution, referring to them as “fancy girls” and the general practice as “Fancy Trade” (White 1985:37). On plantations, women experienced unwanted attention from white males that at times resulted in sexual assault. While commiserating over her newborn daughter’s future, Veney spoke to the mentality of enslaved mothers, attesting, “From her own experience she sees its almost certain doom is to minister to the unbridled lust of the slave-owner, and feels that the law holds over her no protecting arm” (1889:26).

Randolph witnessed the truth Veney spoke of. Remembering his first overseer’s vulgar advances toward enslaved females, Randolph stated, “The men had no comfort with their wives, for any of the latter who pleased him [the overseer], he would take from their husbands, and use himself. If any refused his lewd embraces, he treated them with the utmost barbarity” (1855:22). From their extra challenges as both African American and women in a racist, sexist slave owning society, African American women had to develop a firm self-reliance and extra level of interdependence with fellow enslaved women, which men did not have a necessity for (White 1985).

Typically, defiance resulted in either physical violence, a battle of wills, or openly challenging the status quo. In an oppressive environment, even small acts of defiance afforded a level of control over a situation or event. Fedric remembered an enslaved house worker who confronted and questioned contradictory aspects of his enslaved condition to his mistress, retelling,
“One day, on receiving the Bible from his mistress, he began as follows,—
‘Give your slaves plenty of bread and meat, and plenty of hot biscuit in a
morning, also be sure and give him three horns of whiskey a-day.’ ‘Come,
come, stop that, Bob,’ his mistress cried; ‘none of your nonsense, Bob,
there is nothing of that kind there.’ Bob, throwing down the book, said,
‘There, there, take it yourself, read it; you says a great deal more than
you'll find there’” (1863:12-13).

Other enslaved individuals applied their minimal personal freedoms to challenge their
oppressors’ control. During his adolescence, Grimes acted out by shaving his head to
make himself undesirable “for the purpose of having the advantage,” since his master had
intended on making him a house slave again against his will (1971:70). Since slave
owners usually allowed enslaved individuals more freedom with their hairstyle of choice
(Heath 1999b:55), Grimes actions exhibits how even such decisions as haircuts could
illustrate the contention for control between owners and enslaved blacks.

Veney entered a battle of wills when she aspired for retribution against the man,
McCoy, who had separated her from her first husband and children, avowing, “McCoy
had bought me away from my child; and now, he thought, he could sell me, if carried to
Richmond, at a good advantage. I did not think so; and I determined, if possible, to
disappoint him” (1889:27). Veney along with the enslaved community knew that slave
auctions exemplified a prime venue for both the objectification and humiliation of
enslaved people. During a sale, potential buyers could intimately evaluate the physical
condition of the individual, the epitome of treating humans as livestock. A person might
be required to remove clothing to reveal possible handicaps and scars, show his or her
teeth to show dental condition, and if a woman, prove she is capable of childbearing.
Randolph exposed the experience of a slave auction, lamenting, “Some come up to look

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at him, pull open his mouth to examine his teeth, and see if they are good. Poor fellow! he is handled and examined like any piece of merchandize; but he must bear it” (1855:7). Applying her knowledge of the routines of slave market and the consequences of unpleasantness, she successfully sabotaged her owner’s attempt to sell her by applying tricks learned from a fellow black woman to create a “bilious condition” in her mouth and acting rudely to potential buyers (Veney 1889:30).

Acts of defiance on a larger scale and more violent in circumstance existed in Virginia as well. An instance of rebellion, recalled by Steward, tells of the patrol coming to break up a large dance being held on Easter night. Realizing many had no authorization to be there led to panic and an African man took the lead commanding they should stand their ground. “The men were terrified at this bold act of their leader; and many with dismay at the thought of resistance, began to skulk behind fences and old buildings, when he opened the door and requested every slave to leave who felt unwilling” (Steward 2002:13). The altercation that ensued resulted in the death of the leader and four other enslaved individuals. This account demonstrates the differing mentalities between the African man and the predominant African American culture. Enslaved Africans, who had experienced the many stages of enslavement from their homeland to America, were more likely to orchestrate violent revolts than enslaved African Americans (Walvin 1996:123). Additionally, African Americans had an understanding that the best way to deal with certain whites, especially the slave patrols, was to “stay clear of them altogether, and endless strategies were devised for doing so” (Webbers 1978:72). The leader’s impulse was to cope with the distress by confronting
the problem, while the majority of African Americans preferred avoidance by means of hiding or escape. Smith witnessed a similar reaction among his community when his owner came to break up an unauthorized funeral gathering he attended, recounting, “The people were very much frightened; with throbbing hearts some of them went up the log chimney, others broke out through the back door, while a few, who were more self-composed, stood their ground” (1881:31).

Although avoidance may have outweighed defiance as coping, this does not neglect the fact that white Virginian society experienced a great deal of unrest from the enslaved population. Virginia, along with North Carolina, experienced the greatest amount of disturbance by enslaved blacks across the South in the years following 1790 (Aptheker 1943:209). From 1790 till the end of 1864, more than 38 revolts by enslaved people were reported in Virginia (Aptheker 1939:71-72). Gabriel’s Rebellion, also known as Gabriel’s Plot and the Gabriel Conspiracy, had the potential to be a highly effective revolt had it not been called off from the thunderstorm that occurred on the planned night of August 30, 1800. With approximately 1,000 enslaved people ready to fight, James Monroe, the Governor of Virginia at the time, felt the threat so great he posted canons at the capital and had 650 men ready to defend the city of Richmond. Consequently, at least 35 enslaved individuals who took part in the conspiracy were killed (Aptheker 1939, 1943). Regardless of the fact that the revolt did not occur, knowledge of the organization abilities and intentions of the enslaved population invoked great fears in the whites of Virginia.

Nat Turner’s Rebellion constituted another famous example of defiance by
enslaved blacks from Virginia, and was considered nationwide as a highly influential uprising. In 1831, Nat Turner and between 50 to 60 followers led an insurrection in Southampton County that resulted in the death of 55 whites, which included slave owners and their family members. Turner noted in his testimony while in jail, the discussion that occurred with his followers before the rebellion, narrating, “I saluted them on coming up, and asked Will how came he there, he answered, his life was worth no more than others, and his life as dear to him. I asked him if he thought to obtain it? He said he would, or loose his life” (1849:12). These men saw the enslaved community as an extension of themselves and aimed to eliminate what they perceived as the problem, the white slave owner families, clearly understanding the high possibility of death for their acts. Regretfully, 75 black Virginians lost their lives due to the rebellion and close to 200 more were killed from the hysteria of white society that followed (Brown 1863; PBS N.d.).

The enslaved population who participated in acts of defiance did so out of anger towards the institution of slavery and the individuals who perpetuated their oppression. Brown conjured the imagery of witnessing an uprising, illustrating, “the fierce yells of an infuriated slave population, rushing to vengeance” (1849:39). Defiance frequently occurred during moments of heightened emotion, with violence occurring most often spontaneously (Loren and Schweninger 2007). Steward attested to as much when detailing the moments prior to the revolt aforementioned, certifying, “Their unrestrained merriment and delicious fare, seemed to arouse in them the natural feelings of self-defence and defiance of their oppressors” (2002:13).
Small scale or everyday acts of defiance awarded enslaved African Americans the possibility of removing a stress and providing a measure of control. Large scale insurrections and revolts ended in a mixed form of effectiveness in that sometimes slavery supporters were killed removing the immediate threat, but at the high cost of enslaved persons’ lives. The intrinsic cost-benefit analysis of problem-focused coping most often discouraged participation in this extreme form of coping by groups or individuals. Brown addressed this circumstance after having been enslaved at the time of, and witness to, Nat Turner’s Rebellion, articulating,

“It is strange that more insurrections do not take place among the slaves; but their masters have impressed upon their minds so forcibly the fact, that the United States Government is pledged to put them down, in case they should attempt any such movement, that they have no heart to contend against such fearful odds; and yet the slaveholder lives in constant dread of such an event” (1849:38-39).

The “fearful odds” that Brown mentions refer to whites’ disproportional reaction to the vengeance sought against them. “However much death and destruction was done to local white society, it was visited tenfold on the slaves” (Walvin 1996:122). Although defiance represented an empowering activity, guaranteeing survival and wellbeing most often held higher importance to African Americans when choosing coping methods.
DISCUSSION

Scholarship looking at the actions of enslaved African Americans through the dichotomy of accommodation versus resistance (e.g. Bracey 1971), in which they exclusively lump acts such as defiance in the latter, sometimes fail to address the complexity of shared mentality within enslaved life through this lens. Defiance posed only one coping strategy to choose from, and often did not reflect the best option to dealing with the particular stressor. Additionally, scholars grouping other stereotypical acts such as running away, stealing, and feigning injury as resistance oversimplify the reasoning for such actions and shift focus from those performing the acts to the difficulty it inflicted on white society. Anthropology should critically reevaluate the concept and use of the term “resistance” in discussions of enslavement to bring attention back to Africans and African Americans instead of white society. Investigating the acts of the enslaved community through the filter of coping, portrays blacks as having the deciding power of choosing to adjust, or not adjust, their behaviors due to complications presented by whites.

Also, the enslaved community was not ignorant of the intricacies of how slavery functioned and perpetuated its existence. Often they recognized from experience and reflection that white slave owning society was an offender of, yet also a pawn to, the institution of slavery. After experiencing a friendly encounter with a white non-slave owning Southerner, Brown believed, “On the contrary, if it were not for slavery's withering touch, the Southerners would be the kindest people in the land. Slavery possesses the power attributed to one of old, of changing the nature of all who drink of its
vicious cup” (1849:25-26). Veney realized this ability to change from contact with the institution, proclaiming, “It was true that many Northern men came South very bitter in their opposition to slavery, and after a little while came to be the hardest and most cruel slaveholders” (1889:13). Reflecting on his past, Grimes simply deduced, “I ought, perhaps to blame slavery more than my master’s” (1972:76).

Reducing directly or indirectly harmful and violent acts of coping to resistance and the more dominant peaceful and cooperating acts of coping to accommodation rests on an old model of why and how coping functions as it does on a psycho-physiological level. Coping can be better understood to work as a “homeostatic system for the regulation and maintenance of human sociality (the tendency to be attracted to and exist together with members of one’s own species,” over the currently accepted concept that humans are inclined to “aggression and competition” (Blakey 1996:162). Proceeding on this improved perspective may explain the inclination towards coping that involved more socially based, non-aggressive means to deal with stress. This approach additionally provides a new outlook on how enslaved individuals could still have moments of connection and empathy with slaveholders, overseers, and other whites instead of compartmentalizing them as only oppressors. Brown shows this complex relationship with a slave owner he was rented out to, admitting, “He told me if I would behave well he would take good care of me, and would give me money to spend, &c. He talked so kindly to me that I determined I would exert myself to the utmost to please him, and would endeavor to do just what he wished me to, in every respect” (1849:37). Veney grappled with her emotional response to plotting to runaway with her first husband.
during an opportunity presented to them from trusting slave owners, revealing, “Then we remembered that White had trusted us, in letting him come to me, and we felt ashamed, for a moment, as if we had tried to cheat; but what right had White to carry him away, or even to own him at all?” (1889:21). The humanity of enslaved African Americans could never be lost in the face of their enslavement for the very reason that they were human (Blakey personal conversation with author April 9, 2014). Grimes powerfully worded this notion when he summarized, “We are human beings, sensible to injuries, and capable of gratitude to our masters” (1972:69).
CONCLUSION

Nineteenth century Virginia constituted a unique circumstance, geographically and socially different from other parts of the South due to its long history of slavery, diverse agricultural practices, selling of enslaved laborers to the lower South, and a dominant native-born population of enslaved people. Faced with an oppressive institution that generally felt outside the control of the enslaved African Americans, agentive activities constituted their best means of coping with the effects of stress. I proposed including coping within “agency of power” to tease out what agentive behaviors comprise coping strategies for handling stress in enslaved populations. This framework utilizes Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) coping theory and subsequent emotion-focused and problem-focused coping categorization. The scholarship of Vygotsky and Bruner plays a critical role in showing how psychology may complement my anthropological research in theory and methods, while Rosenwein’s concept of “emotional communities” guides the discussion of emotions associated with stress and coping within the African American culture. Drawing on 19th century slave narratives, I have shown that enslaved African Americans used the agentive activities of religion, community involvement, ownership, appropriation of food, avoidance, and defiance to cope with the stresses of enslavement.

The slave narratives reveal the pervasive emotions of sadness, grief, anger, and fear, which accompany the stresses faced by the enslaved community, typically using descriptions of the state of their heart to illustrate the emotion. The overwhelming negative conditions of enslavement fostered a sense of uncertainty and hopelessness that
most felt only death could provide a satisfactory resolution to. Usually the enslaved community fought back against the lure of helpless feelings, but many succumbed in situations of sales and separations since their occurrence were so common and devastating. People who perceive their situation as uncontrollable most often turn to forms of emotion-focused coping (Schussler 1992), explaining why enslaved African Americans dominantly chose the coping strategies of religion and community involvement that had this main component. These two activities compose the basis of African American cultural coping due to their integral role in social life and suppression of stress from white society.

Religion, and most specifically Christianity, already considered as more consistently beneficial and better than reappraisal, meaning to positively reevaluate a circumstance, alone (Wethington & Kessler 1991:20), provided a successful means for the enslaved African American community to deal with the dehumanization and accompanying cruel behaviors by whites. The act of spirituality allowed enslaved people to reappraise their oppressed circumstance to one of comfort, believe justice would eventually be achieved, and experience the emotion of hope in the knowledge that they had a future free of enslavement even if it came through death. The impact proved so great, research on coping in contemporary African American culture recognize spirituality-based and community-based coping as dominant strategies (Utsey et al. 2000).

The enslaved population used community involvement for its foundation of social support, which offered bountiful physical and emotional benefits. A unique predicament
arose for enslaved blacks from having the most socially dependent coping be the most utilized source, since the social component of enslavement proved the greatest stressor. The destabilization of family structure and social support by slave owners drove the enslaved community to form stronger and more intimate ties with members of the community beyond their immediate family members. At times, this coping perpetuated an emotional feedback loop between grief from separation, and happiness from tighter bonds. For this reason, the enslaved community placed heavy reliance on other forms of coping as well to have an alternative means to cope with the stress this situation created.

In addition to the social and psychological benefits religion and community involvement offered, the enslaved community used different methods of coping to handle other needs as well. The physical and social manipulation of slave housing, clothing, and food lead to a stressful situation requiring actions on the part of the enslaved community to rectify. They took measures to alter their housing conditions, buy and make clothes, along with supplement their rations through appropriating food to combat the physical, psychological, and physiological stress. Since these activities could only be conducted through either financial sources or time consuming activities, enslaved individuals had to use their free time to do additional work to earn money or spend it trying to provide self-sufficient means of comfort. Slave owners forcing the enslaved population to use their personal time to help themselves in these ways took a toll on the amount of time they could spend with family and friends who they typically traveled to see on days off.

Avoidance and defiance form a dichotomy that highlights the learned mentality of African American culture. Africans more often chose defiance to cope with the
oppressive members of white society, while African Americans had learned that
generally avoiding situations with these people typically had less dire consequences and
proved more successful overall. Running away constituted one of the most notable forms
of avoidance since it was utilized for pursuing freedom in the North, escaping sales, and
reuniting with family. Although it was a means to cope with fear, avoidance coping
paradoxically came with its own form of constant fear in the worry over being caught and
limited resources in the cases of running away. Acts of defiance were more rare than
those of avoidance, but they did not comprise a small number of incidents by far.
Whether personal demonstrations of defying orders or a battle of wills, to large uprisings
such as Gabriel’s Rebellion and Turner’s Rebellion, defiance gave a means to cope with
the different forms of abuse at the hands of white Southerners.

Research on the coping strategies of enslaved African Americans in Virginia,
illuminates the changes over time of actions and emotions of the enslaved, the
development of the institution, and the distinctiveness of the African American culture.
Due to the enslaved community’s circumstance, their process of coping could never be
carried out as a unilinear, one-directional relationship between stress and coping. Legal,
physical, and emotional manipulation and dehumanization by Virginia’s white society
perpetuated the complexity by which the enslaved community had to navigate and weigh
their choices and consequences of different coping strategies. Through this investigation
into coping techniques we observed how sociality was a driving force in the enslaved
African American community and often the relationship to whites could never be as
simple as victim and oppressor. These ideas lend credence to the claim that coping
studies offer a viable alternative to resistance studies and can provide an enriching, multidimensional understanding to the lives of enslaved African Americans.

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i Vygotsky’s contributions to anthropology, specifically in relating culture’s influence on
ii Lazarus’ coping theory has been shown as an anthropologically useful framework for defining and identifying coping in a population (e.g. William Dressler 1980).
iii Kuo (2011) provides further discussion on theories of cross-cultural coping versus culturally dependant coping.
iv I recognize my data set excludes narratives from African individuals, although this was not done intentionally. I was unable to find such sources dating to the 19th century possibly because by that time the enslaved Virginian population was predominately made up of first, second, and third generation native-born African Americans.
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