

OVERALL LEVEL OF MARITAL SATISFACTION IN CHRISTIAN INDIVIDUALS BASED  
ON MARITAL SETTING AND ETHNICITY

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

School of Behavioral Sciences

Liberty University

2020

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## ABSTRACT

Research on marital satisfaction has been limited to Caucasian couples in a middle and upper socioeconomic status. Because values differ throughout ethnicities, and religious commitment rather than personal satisfaction contributes to higher levels of marital satisfaction, understanding these values and differences may help developers in the field of couple relationship education programs strengthen their approach to helping Christian couples develop skills that contribute to marital satisfaction. The purpose of this research is to examine if marital setting, ethnicity and Couple Relationship Education (CRE) and Marriage Relationship Education (MRE) affect marital satisfaction in Christian couples. The participants in this study will involve 65 Christian individuals married for at least five years who reside in a culturally diverse urban setting in South Florida. This research will include a self-report survey, The Index of Marital Satisfaction (IMS), Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (LWMAT) and the Marital Instability Index (MII).

*Keywords:* attachment, Christian couples, ethnicity, marital satisfaction, relationship education programs.

## **Dedication**

To my wife Beth,

I prayed for someone to love me for me, and God answered with more than what I deserved.

It was you.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Dr. Clay Peters who guided me back to where I belong. Dr. Danny Bird, you have been an inspiration since my first intensive during my master's program at Liberty University when you were completing your Ph.D. and now I have been blessed to have you as my chair. I thank Jean Bosman for her daily support in writing and mostly for closing her eyes while I wrote each of my thoughts into sentences. I would like to thank my parents and family whose continued sacrifice and prayers throughout my failures and successes have carried me here.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD)

American Counseling Association (ACA)

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

Couple Communication (CC)

Couples Relationship Education (CRE)

Emotion Focused Couples Therapy (EFT-C)

Ideals Standards Model (ISM)

Interpersonal Violence (IPV)

Marriage Relationship Education (MRE)

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PREmarital Preparation and Relationship Enhancement (PREPARE)

Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

Level of marital satisfaction is an integral component to healthy marital structure as it can be a specific determinant to marital success (Randles & Avishai, 2018). Unrealistic expectations in finding personal happiness have undermined the significance of marriage as a social institution, and prioritizing happiness over commitment has led to the deinstitutionalizing of marriage, resulting in serious social consequences (Randles & Avishai, 2018). However, research has shown that religion and spirituality correlate with higher marital satisfaction (Mitchell, et al. 2015; Wilmoth & Riaz, 2019) and less marriage dissolution (Knabb, 2014; Vaaler, et al., 2009). This research will be examining any differences in level of marital satisfaction based on first marriage or re-marriage in Christian individuals who have been married for at least five years. It will examine if ethnicity makes a difference in marital satisfaction and if participating in marriage relationship education (MRE) and couple relationship education (CRE) programs makes a difference in providing overall marital satisfaction for Christian couples.

### **Background**

Many social changes beginning in the mid-1960s have altered traditional family life. The role of women in society has been changing, interracial marriage has increased, and same-sex unions and cohabitation have changed perception about family formation (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). Although cohabitation is considered compatible to marriage in many countries, it is not seen to be as durable as marriage in the United States (Treas, et al., 2014). While cohabiters may experience similar economic benefits and wellbeing as do married couples, they have been

shown to have lower relationship quality and a higher risk of dissolution of the relationship (Fincham & Beach, 2010).

Divorce and remarriage have also brought new family formations and challenges. Marriage and remarriage are more frequent among those with a higher level of education, and marital satisfaction is significantly higher in first marriages than in second marriages. Additionally, those with a higher level of education express higher levels of satisfaction. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine how marital satisfaction changes in first and second marriages. Furthermore, research should also examine how children in remarriage affect marital satisfaction (Mirecki, et al., 2013).

When people marry, they want to experience high marital quality, provide a stable foundation for establishing their future family and experience marital satisfaction (Mitchell, 2010; Margelisch, et al., 2017). Marital satisfaction has a positive effect on one's health and wellbeing (Fincham & Beach, 2010) as well as on their personal happiness and interpersonal happiness. Researchers have amassed empirical data relating to the behaviors of couples who have been happily married for many years to understand what leads to successful marriage (Randles & Avishai, 2018). Deinstitutionalization changes the core normative expectations for marriage, and there is an increased tolerance for non-marital unions (Lauer & Yodanis, 2010).

As marriage has become deinstitutionalized, marital alternatives have become more accepted so that society's disapproval of unmarried parents, cohabitation, same-sex marriage, and premarital sex has declined. Increased tolerance for these other relationship options may indicate couple's normative expectations are weakening (Treas et al., 2014). In fact, some posit that relationship options show the resilience of marriage and that social acceptance of marriage

alternatives do not negate marriage and the accepted behaviors within marriage (Treas, et al., 2014).

Disagreements exist regarding what is necessary to validate the premise that marriage has been deinstitutionalized. Changes in marriage norms and ideals have taken place in the past without people fearing the institution of marriage was declining. No empirical research has shown that attitudes regarding relationships outside of marriage necessarily affect core beliefs in marriage (Treas et al., 2014) even though marriage has become more focused on individualism where people are valuing personal happiness over commitment to the marriage (Randles & Avishi, 2018). The challenge exists to help couples find personal happiness and marital satisfaction in order to preserve their marriages. Because marital decline has resulted in negative social outcomes, marriage relationship education (MRE) programs have been established to save the marriage culture (Randles & Avishai, 2018). Yet, parental unhappiness and divorce may influence attitudes regarding marriage itself and result in less commitment to participate in couple relationship education (CRE) programs (Duncan & Wood, 2003).

Research has found that adults who identified themselves as religious have had greater marital commitment (Knabb, 2014). Couples who have religious involvement appear to experience high marital quality, and this is particularly true for lower income couples (Vaaler et al., 2009; Wilmoth & Ruiz, 2019). Spiritual and religious involvement may increase problem resolution and encourage positive behaviors as well as reduce negative behaviors of drug use and infidelity. Spiritual activities also increase commitment and strengthen the ability to forgive (Fincham & Beach, 2010). This understanding has led to CRE programs that include spiritual approaches. While Jacobi (2017) has seen that spirituality and religion play an important role in developing relationships, the effectiveness of this spiritually in CRE programs needs further

investigation. Because the connection between religion and marital satisfaction is supported by research, it is likely that spiritually based programs will be as effective as programs that are empirically based, but further examination of spiritually based programs is important for a greater understanding of their influence (Jacobi, 2017).

Also, when partners are religiously homogamous, they enjoy higher marital quality (Mahony, et al., 2008). However, when wives are more conservative theologically or husbands attend religious services more often than wives, the risk of divorce is higher. Additionally, husbands being religiously conservative is protective against divorce (Vaaler et al., 2009). Although religious values have predicted marital moral commitment, this relationship has not been empirically examined (Nelson, et al., 2011).

Attachment theory and social learning theory are foundational to the study of marital relationships. The attachment theory applies to the study of marital satisfaction because the attachment style of an individual affects marital adjustment (Knabb, 2014). Attachment behaviors begin during infancy and extend into adulthood, affecting beliefs and behaviors such as caregiving, intimacy with partners and independence (Paetzold & Rholes, 2015). Attachment in human relationship extends to the relationship to God. A secure God attachment leads to greater marital satisfaction (Knabb, 2014). Lower marital adjustment accompanies an avoidant and anxious God attachment. Those who have difficulty relying on God have a poorer relationship functioning, and anxious God attachment correlates with anxious attachment in their human relationships which affects marital functioning. However, there are few studies on relationships involving attachment styles, religiosity, and marital quality (Circinhioglu et al., 2018).

Attachment theory explains how divorce impacts people because in divorce, the separation results in loss of attachment. This theory also considers how individuals can respond to new intimate relationships. Attachment needs to be considered during relationship transitions since the breaking of a romantic relationship can cause a person who felt secure to become insecure. However, remarriage is an indication that attachment processes are fluid (Diamond, et al., 2018).

People learn behaviors from what they observe. When behaviors in family-of-origin demonstrate marital instability, younger generations can lack the knowledge of relationship norms that would lead to successful marriage. Teaching new norms may be necessary because this generation has grown up observing failed marriages and alternate intimate relationships when few relationships seem permanent (Randles & Avishai, 2018). Social learning theory also applies to the way individuals function in a marriage relationship. While some behaviors are clearly predictive of relationship distress, researchers influenced by social learning theory have looked at how more subtle interpersonal behaviors predict outcome of relationships (Johnson & Bradbury, 2015). Johnson and Bradbury (2015) concluded that intervention programs based on social learning theory should be strengthened to improve results and that contextual factors such as economic pressure, job stress, and discrimination need to be linked to social learning theory as these can disrupt couple equilibrium. Additionally, the studies by Rauer, Adler-Baeder, Lucier-Greer, Skuban, Ketring, and Smith (2014) and Bodenmann, Bradbury, and Pihet (2009) support the social learning theory that emphasizes skills training improves interaction and communication as a means to bring about positive change.

Happiness in marriage requires individuals to make many adjustments. Marital adjustment is formed when partners live in friendly harmony (Randles & Avishai, 2018). When

this does not occur, spouses can suffer mental and physical illness or be victims of domestic abuse. Many factors influence marital adjustment such as gender, age, education, social support, and religiosity. In cultures where females marry at an early age, they are more likely to suffer violence in the marriage, experience difficulty in childbirth, encounter psychological problems, and lack educational opportunity (Durgat & Kisa, 2018).

One way for couples to learn how to make necessary adjustments in marriage is through CRE programs. When these are held with highly motivated couples, they have been effective in improving marital satisfaction but when studies involved random assignment to treatment groups, efficacy was less apparent (Glenn, et al. 2010). CRE programs focus on developing the attitudes and skills to maintain an interpersonal relationship that provides mutual satisfaction. They can help create marital stability and in doing so will meet larger social goals. Because the context of marriage is changing, interventions to preserve it must also change. CRE programs can encourage people to make deliberate decisions regarding family formations which can lead to successful marriage (Randles & Avishai, 2018).

Couples who take part in CRE programs have a lower risk for experiencing marital distress and/or dissolution of their marriage. However, even though there is significant evidence that CRE increases marital quality, participation is relatively low. CRE programs are most successful in attracting participation if they are inexpensive, close to home, voluntary and led by a skilled provider (Duncan & Wood, 2003). With deinstitutionalization of marriage, couples who want marital stability require the development of relationship skills that make this possible so that no one leaves a marriage at the first dissatisfaction (Randles & Avishai, 2018).

### **Problem Statement**

A need exists for further research regarding marital satisfaction. Gender differences in ethnic racial minorities (Jackson, et al., 2014), multiple ethnic and bicultural marriages (Mitchell, 2010), the effect of major transitions in life on marital satisfaction (Jackson et al., 2014; Mitchell, 2010) all need to be examined more thoroughly. Studies that include data from ethnically diverse distressed couples should examine the effects of family-of-origin and attachment approaches on their marital happiness (Knapp, et al., 2015). More attention needs to be given to CRE programs for the lower income population because their needs are not the same as those of the middle-upper class (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Research indicates that socioeconomic status as well as other demographics influence affect satisfaction in marriage (David & Stafford, 2015). Developers of CRE programs must address cultural differences existing among different ethnicities (Markman, et al., 20198; Brizman & Sauerbeber, 2014).

Ripley (2003) noted there is a paucity of research studies on how the Christian faith affects marital adjustment and family functioning and recommended focusing on samples from a specific religious affiliation to understand more definitive religious functioning. In response, over the past few decades, researchers have increasingly studied the relationship of religion to family functioning, and they have found that those who have a tie with religion also have higher marital commitment, better marital adjustment, and less divorce. Therefore, research should be conducted on the connection between marital satisfaction and religiosity. Several areas of research should include how God attachment affects healthy marital functioning in Christian couples (Knabb, 2014; Lopez, et al., 2011) and how spousal differences relating to religious activities may lead to divorce (Call & Heaton, 1997).

### **Purpose Statement**

This causal-comparative research study will focus on factors that mediate marital satisfaction in ethnically diverse Christian marriages. This research will use the independent variable of marital setting (first marriage or remarriage) and the dependent variable of Christian individuals who have been married for at least five years. Covariates include gender, age, length of marriage, ethnicity, marital setting and prior participation in a CRE program. Measures to address marital dissatisfaction must consider the needs of a diverse population (Johnson & Bradley, 2015; Troy et al., 2006). Additionally, insufficient research has focused on the relationship of religiosity to marital functioning (Lopez et al., 2013) and to divorce and remarriage (Schramm, et al., 2012). Research is also needed to determine if CRE interventions are effective in targeted demographic populations (Epstein & Zheng, 2017) since most research has focused on middle-to-upper class, educated Caucasian couples (Snyder, et al.,).

### **Significance of the Study**

Marital dissolution negatively impacts families as well as society. Research on marital satisfaction has been limited to Caucasian couples in a middle and upper socioeconomic status. Values differ throughout ethnicities, and religious commitment rather than personal satisfaction contributes to higher levels of marital satisfaction. Understanding these values and differences may help developers in the field of CRE programs target their approach to helping Christian couples develop skills that contribute to marital satisfaction.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions for this study are:

**RQ1:** Is there a difference in the overall marital satisfaction of Christian individuals based on marital setting (first marriage or remarriage)?

**RQ2:** Does the overall marital satisfaction of Christian individuals vary by ethnicity?

**RQ3:** Does participation in couple relationship education (CRE) or marriage relationship education (MRE) programs impact the overall marital satisfaction of Christian individuals?

**RQ4:** Does participation in CRE or MRE programs impact marital satisfaction among different ethnicities?

### **Definitions**

1. *Attachment*- Emotional bond between individuals. (Ottu & Akpan, 2011).
2. *Constraint Commitment*- A spouse makes a deliberate effort to save the marriage despite marital quality (Mitchell et al., 2015).
3. *Deinstitutionalization of Marriage*- “A weakening of the social norms that define partners’ behavior.” (Treas et al., 2014, p.1496).
4. *God Attachment*- recognition of God as an attachment figure (Cirhinlioglu, et al., 2018).
5. *Marital Quality*- “A married couples’ subjective assessment of their own marital relationship.” (Cirhinlioglu, et al., 2018, p.207).
6. *Marital setting* – first marriage or remarriage
7. *Moral Commitment*- Recognition of marriage as a permanent relationship (Mitchell et al., 2015).
8. *Relational Commitment*- Spouses have determined to make their relationship last (Mitchell et al., 2015).
9. *Religious Homography*- Spouses share religious beliefs (Call & Heaton, 1997).

### **Summary**

A controversy exists regarding whether cultural changes have altered the norms for marriage and have deinstitutionalized marriage itself as new family formations have emerged (Treas, 2014; Stevens & Wolfers, 2007). In addition, divorce and remarriage have resulted in

blended families where new family roles need to be established. However, finding happiness and satisfaction in marriage is still a goal because families thrive in happy marriages (Mitchell, 2010). Furthermore, researchers have conducted studies on the influence of religiosity in facilitating stability and satisfaction in marriage. Studies have shown that religious commitment is beneficial for marital quality and decreases the risk of divorce (Vaaler et al., 2009). For this reason, many CRE programs are incorporating spirituality and religiosity. Although empirical research is needed, Jacobi (2017) emphasizes that these programs have been effective.

Attachment Theory and Social Learning Theory are both applicable in the study of marital functioning. They address not only how interpersonal conflict and maladjustment develop but also how people can learn to function more effectively in marital relationships. Previous studies on the efficacy of CRE programs have focused predominately on the middle-to-upper class, educated Caucasians, but in the future, they need to target the specific needs of a diverse population since developing the necessary relationship skills can help couples resolve problems and find the satisfaction they desire in their marriage (Randles & Avishai, 2018).

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

The marriage relationship provides for the establishment of families and for the well-being of both husband and wife. Couples who believe that God is a part of their marriage experience greater marital satisfaction (Lu, et al., 2013; Mosko & Pistole, 2010) and less divorce (Mosko & Pistole, 2010). Many researchers see the institution of marriage changing as couples focus on personal satisfaction rather than on the relationship, and this culture change is responsible for increased social problems. They recognize the need for relationship programs to help couples function effectively when the social constraints of the past have declined (Randles and Avishi, 2018). Marriage requires many adjustments; and gender, race, ethnicity, education, age, socioeconomic situation as well as religiosity affect how the relationship functions. Family formation is also changing as marriage is followed by remarriage; and blended families and interracial marriage, same-sex marriage, single parents, and cohabitation have become the norm; and more than half of all first marriages end in divorce (Mirecki, et al., 2013; Mosko, & Pistole, 2010). Because of these changes, couple relationship education (CRE) programs have been established to teach important relationship skills to reduce marital and other relational dissatisfaction for the welfare of the family and society (Duncan & Wood, 2003; Jacobi, 2017).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social learning theory, cognitive behavioral theories, and attachment theory all provide a foundation for the study of relationships and the approaches to help them function for the well-being of individuals and the family.

#### **Social Learning Theory**

Behavioral marital therapy is rooted in Bandura's social learning theory that posits individuals modify the behavior of each other through the consequences of their behaviors. Dysfunction occurs when maladaptive rather than adaptive behaviors are rewarded (Johnson & Bradbury, 2015). Social learning theory involves observational learning when positive or negative consequences influence whether a behavior is maintained or eliminated (Tan, 2011). Social learning occurs when an individual has observed a behavior and then in a similar situation decides whether or not to respond in a similar way, indicating that the learning has been cognitively stored. Learning through observation is an efficient way to acquire new behaviors, but both functional and dysfunctional behavior can be learned this way (Murdock, 2009).

While the exchanges of behavior are important in intimate relationships, Johnson and Bradbury (2015) see the need to incorporate aspects of the social learning theory with other theories that address the role of stress on the marital relationship, emphasizing the importance of social support. When couples are able to support each other in times of stress, they maintain satisfaction in their relationship. The ability to adapt, the core of the social learning theory, enhanced marital quality. "The impact of social learning theory on the science of predicting, preventing, and treating marital dissatisfaction cannot be overstated" (Johnson & Bradbury, 2015, p. 19). However, Markman, Halford, and Hawkins (2019) question the effectiveness of the theoretical approach of the social learning theory to achieve meaningful relationship change.

The social learning theory can be expanded through study of the characteristics of people who are not likely to change whoever their partner is because of personality, race, sociodemographic circumstances or psychological problems. Johnson and Bradbury (2015) posit that contextual influences such as low wages, unsupportive social networks and stressful

environment may lead to maladaptive interactions referred to in social learning theory and that changes in context could lead to behavioral change.

Learning derives not only from exposure but also in responding to the environment and other influences. Many influences on one's life are fortuitous. People are producers as well as products of social systems, and social relationships vary due to cultural diversity and sociodemographic characteristics. Additionally, technology has influenced social forces so that humans are capable of advanced observational learning that has promoted society-wide changes across cultural backgrounds (Bandura, 2006).

### **Cognitive Behavioral Theories**

Life stressors affect both the physical and the psychological health of individuals. These stressors frequently occur in marriages, resulting in relationship distress. Recent studies have shown that cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is an effective early intervention when couples are experiencing low relationship satisfaction with some distress (Markman et al., 2019). The severity of stress depends, to some extent, on the way the couple interprets it. If the couple can avoid negativity and conflict, they are better able to address any existing problems. This can be a challenging process since each spouse may cope differently and have differing emotional responses to a stressor. Cognitive behavioral theories posit that when maladaptive cognitions are confronted and modified, behavior changes can occur (Jacobi, 2017; Mitchell, 2010). CBT is an effective way to intervene when stress affects a marital relationship because it evaluates the way spouses interact with each other, provides strategies to improve their communication, and teaches problem-solving. CBT attacks the distorted cognitions that result in dissatisfaction and conflict by helping couples develop effective strategies to regulate any negative emotional

reactions. When couples become able to listen empathetically, their relationship satisfaction can improve (Epstein & Zheng, 2017; Markman et al., 2019).

The focus of behavioral couple therapy is to establish more functional behavior where adaptive behavior is then rewarded. Although this therapy results in improved relationship satisfaction, researchers have found that only 70% of the participants had maintained the progress for two years, and 15% had ended their relationship within that time and 30% within five years. Behavioral couple therapy was more effective in treatment than in preventing marital distress (Johnson & Bradbury, 2015)

### **Attachment Theory**

Attachment theories posit that attachment behaviors begin during infancy and extend into adulthood, affecting beliefs and behaviors such as caregiving, intimacy with partners and independence (Paetzold & Rholes, 2015). Attachment theory explains how divorce impacts people as the separation results in loss of attachment. This theory also considers how individuals can respond to new intimate relationships since remarriage is an indication that attachment processes are fluid. Attachment needs to be considered during relationship transitions since the breaking of a romantic relationship can cause a person who felt secure attachment to become insecure (Diamond et al., 2018).

In dealing with issues of attachment, couples' counselors use emotion-focused theories which posit that emotions reveal feelings, thoughts, beliefs, desires and bodily experience and that specific emotions relate to adaptive functioning such as grief after loss or anger after being hurt (Pavio, 2013). Since emotional schemas are developed through personal experiences that have shaped perceptions about reoccurring situations (Timulak & Keogh, 2015), emotion-focused therapy (EFT) (Johnson, 2017) emphasizes that emotions are responsible for both

function and dysfunction as they reveal one's inner world. Painful triggers resulting from earlier experiences of emotional injury can be too upsetting for a person to process (Timulak & Keogh, 2015). When these responses are inhibited or under-regulated, therapy focuses on uncovering the problem. Other cognitive-affective behaviors that are problematic can be addressed through process steps that have been developed for the therapeutic approach (Pavio, 2015).

EFT is based on the belief that different emotions and difficulty in processing emotions require specific intervention approaches. This therapy focuses on a therapeutic relationship where individuals can safely address painful issues and process the accompanying emotion in a way to bring about change. The primary emphasis of EFT is on exploring the person's subjective internal experiences and on assisting in regulation of emotions (Pavio, 2013). Timulak and Keogh (2019) state that people will resort to maladaptive processes to avoid core painful emotions. They state that while CBT focuses on developing emotional tolerance and adaptive actions, EFT focuses on helping a person articulate or identify the unmet needs that are causing the pain and learn how to counterbalance the injuries responsible for the present vulnerabilities.

John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth founded attachment theories in 1969 (Bowlby, et al.,1992). They studied the importance of developing a secure attachment to a parent or parent figure for a child to develop healthy emotional regulation (Bowlby, et al.,1992). A person's emotions are closely connected to their attachment to other individuals, and their mental schema is important to attachment bonding. Positive attachment in childhood leads to attachment security in adulthood, a condition that is important to a positive marital relationship where a spouse can be more trusting. Those who are highly avoidant prefer low emotional interaction, have low confidence in the relationship and do not seek to be in proximity with a partner. Low avoidance, where a person is comfortable in proximity with a spouse, facilitates cognitive,

emotional and relational learning. When a person has anxious attachment, he/she seeks constant closeness and reassurance (Mosko & Pistole, 2010). Interpersonal interactions are affected by how people perceive the emotions of the others, and these perceptions significantly affect romantic partners when they are experiencing conflict. Perceiving a threat or neglect may lead to disengagement in the relationship (Sanford & Grace, 2011). Research has shown that emotion-focused couple therapy with people who believe they have an attachment to God provides an additional source of safety and security in the marriage as couples can find that God is responsive to their needs and engaged in their marriage (Knabb, 2014; Maxwell, et al., 2018; Cirhinlioglu et al., 2018).

## **Related Literature**

### **Aspects of Marital Relationships**

***Marital Satisfaction.*** Marriage is an institution that is highly valued and a central factor in the development of individuals and families. People whose marriages are satisfactory report they have better health and well-being (Fincham & Beach, 2010; Mitchell, 2010). When couples describe their marriage as satisfactory, they will likely also have marital stability (Mitchell, 2010). Yet, studies on marital satisfaction have resulted in contradictory findings regarding how marital satisfaction changes throughout the course of marriage with some researchers noting a decline in early years of marriage (Margelisch et al., 2017) with at least 43% of first marriages ending in separation or divorce within 15 years (Hook, et al., 2011, p. 869; Carroll & Doherty, 2003, p. 105) but an increase in later years (Margelisch et al., 2017; Cincinhioglu, et al., 2018), and others finding no connection between duration of the relationship and marital satisfaction (Cinhinlioglu et al., 2018).

Margelisch et al. (2017) found that few different major personality traits existed between unhappily and happily married couples. Therefore, they determined that these traits did not significantly affect the well-being of the couples. Although some studies posited that the connection between marital quality and well-being was stronger in women than in men, they found that well-being resulting from marital quality was gender neutral. Also, when marital relationships are positive and supportive, partners experience few mental health problems (Shapiro, 2014). While marriage stability is usually a predictor of well-being and health, recent research indicates that it is marriage quality and not marital status that results in marital satisfaction (Margelisch et al., 2017). Other research conducted with younger couples showed that personality traits influenced relationship satisfaction, but these findings might not apply to older couples who have been married for a long time. In long-time married couples, marital quality is positively related to subjective well-being (Margelisch et al., 2017).

Mirecki et al., 2013) speculate that because 50% of marriages end in divorce and only one percent to two percent of these occur in couples who have been married 30 or more years, marriage stability and the accompanying satisfaction exist when couples have had lengthy marriages (p. 87). However, despite this fact, marital stability is not synonymous with marital satisfaction since people may stay in an unhappy marriage for a number of reasons (Margelisch et al., 2017). For example, individuals who are prone to feeling abandoned are more likely to remain in an unhappy marriage (Ottu & Akpan, 2011).

Evaluations resulting from research indicate significant potential for CRE to influence development of healthy marriages (Markman et al., 2019). Even though marital therapy is the most researched approach to alleviating marital stress that erodes healthy marriage, few divorcing couples seek mental health counseling because they do not think it will work, it costs

too much, it involves too much time, and/or there is a social stigma involved with psychotherapy (Hook et al., 2011).

***Influences on Marital Satisfaction.*** Several studies have focused on factors that contribute to marital satisfaction. Epstein, Robertson, Smith, Casconcellas, and Lao (2016) found that a spouse's knowledge of partner and good communication are the strongest predictors of marital satisfaction as self-reported in their study. While they found that males and females were very similar in communication skills, the types of skill were different. Males rated higher in conflict resolution, life skills, and stress management while females rated higher in communication, self-management, sex and romance, and knowledge of partner. Additionally, in this study, conflict resolution was not a significant predictor. This finding was surprising to them because it is usually emphasized in CREs. In a diverse sample, Epstein et al. (2016) found that while age was not a significant factor in marital satisfaction, there is a consensus that marriages have a greater likelihood of success when spouses are psychologically mature when marrying, having developed good relationship skills (Glenn, et al., 2010).

Close relationships are a very important factor in personal happiness, and the way people communicate in committed relationships is influential in the quality of that relationship. Effective communication is a critical component in couple stability and is conducive to a positive long-term relationship. Conversely, poor communication is a common cause of relationship problems (Schmidt, et al., 2016). Studies that address marital quality focus on questions that reflect communication styles and quality of relationship.

Communication styles and quality of relationship rely on healthy functioning, an important facet of marital quality which usually relates to lower depression levels, greater empowerment and self-efficacy, better conflict resolution skills, enhanced caring behaviors,

increased trust and confidence in their relationship (Adler-Baeder, et al., 2010) and playful intimacy (Ottu & Akpan, 2011). Because marital satisfaction is strongly associated with sexual satisfaction, it can be concluded that intimacy increases the odds of a happy marriage (Mitchell, 2010).

Some research has suggested that there is an optimal age for marriage that predicts the marriage will be successful. Glenn et al. (2010) posit that some people who marry late have marriages that are as successful as if they had married at the considered optimal age. Their findings do indicate that deliberately delaying marriage, for most persons, does not increase the likelihood of marital success. They also emphasize the need to study the variables affecting marital satisfaction to understand why couples marrying at a later age do not rate their marriages as providing the highest level of satisfaction. In addition, couples who have similar education, come from a stable family, and have similar religious beliefs show a greater success rate for marriage. Marital satisfaction is based on couples understanding the needs of their partners as well as their own needs. Meeting these needs includes practicing desirable behaviors that reduce negative interactions with one another even when this is difficult (Britzman & Sauerheber, 2014).

Furthermore, marital happiness is reduced when there are many children in the family (Twenge, et al., 2003), and marital satisfaction is greatest when children have left home. This stage of life is connected with a higher level of marital quality because retirement lessens stress of a job and gives couples an opportunity to focus on their relationship (Mitchell, 2010). While psychological resilience has been shown to be a protective factor for marital stability, it has rarely been studied using long-term married couples. Because quality marriages provide protection against stress, happily married couples show better well-being and health than do

couples who are unhappily married. As couples age, they may increasingly rely on each other as their circle of friends may decrease due to illness or death. Their marital quality may increasingly depend on their compatibility and agreeableness (Wang, et al., 2018). Because marital quality can help people combat loneliness, it provides life satisfaction (Margelisch et al., 2017).

Today many older adults have greater relationship expectations due to social discourse regarding what is the marriage norm and are experiencing a renewed desire for marital quality. For some, spirituality is the path to realize their desire. While older adults have been neglected in research studies regarding couple relationships, they have new challenges to marital quality as many face age-related problems that threaten their relationship satisfaction (Damianakis, et al., 2018). For example, bad health can threaten marital satisfaction, particularly in older couples (Margelisch et al., 2017).

Grana, Cuenca, and Redondo (2017) reported that in their study, they found that the way men and women perceived their relationship satisfaction influenced their interpretation of both psychological and physical aggression occurring when the couples experienced relationship difficulties. Women who reported relationship dissatisfaction tended to overestimate psychological aggression perpetrated both against them and by them. On the other hand, those who reported relationship satisfaction tended to underestimate these acts. Also, men's level of satisfaction did not influence their psychological aggression. These researchers posited that relationship satisfaction may be defined differently by men and women and that women who had less marital satisfaction perhaps had greater tolerance of acts of aggression. In newlyweds, physical aggression correlates with low marital satisfaction, and psychological aggression often predicts separation or divorce.

### **Marital Dissatisfaction**

**Marital conflict.** Timmons, Arbel, and Margolin (2016) studied the relationship of stress to marital conflict to explore whether a spillover effect exists between the two. Stress causes spouses to react in a negative manner, often with their being confrontational. When both husband and wife were highly stressed, marital conflict was likely on the same day, and conflict tended to last into the next day when the couples had high levels of aggression. When the wife reported that there had been aggression in family-of-origin, this conflict was more likely to involve aggression as well. Interestingly, family-of-origin patterns of aggression impact a female's reaction to stress and conflict in that they have influenced the interpretation of the event and the response (Lam, et al., 2016). Additionally, Fincham and Beach (2010) found that when an adolescent experienced hostility in the family-of-origin, that hostility was connected to hostility in marital interactions in adulthood. When daily stressors spill over into the next day, there may be evidence of negative relationship events in the past, not only in current marital functioning (Lam, et al., 2016).

Marital functioning involves day to day interactions between spouses, their interpersonal skills and their sense of self-worth. Unhappy, unstable marriages are often the result of insufficient knowledge of one's partner and the unrealistic expectations regarding married life. After marriage, personality traits and behavioral patterns emerge, and couples need to learn how to adjust to existing differences (Kam & Man, n.d.). This is a significant concern since nearly one-third of marriages involve discordant relationships (Kreider & Ellis, 2011, p. 31). At risk couples include those with less education or lower income or those who are entering a second marriage (Stanley, et al., 2006), but Lam et al. (2016) state that age, education, years married, family income and ethnicity did not predict conflict. In contrast, Mirecki et al. (2013) state that although research has been limited, dissatisfaction in marriage is less likely among men and

women who are highly educated. In addition, when spouses have negative marital interaction, they are at risk for having poor physical health (Martin, et al., 2015).

Furthermore, failing relationships are most often a result of negative communication, and this poor communication is a predictor of marital dissatisfaction over time, eventually often leading to divorce which is costly economically and emotionally (Knapp et al., 2015). However, unsatisfactory marriages may last for a number of reasons. Glenn et al. (2010) cite some of these reasons to be religious or moral opposition to divorce, economic dependency, the welfare of the children, lack of a good alternative, and the economic cost of divorce. Such a marriage cannot be identified as a marital success.

**Internet use.** Marriage dissatisfaction can also result from the inappropriate use of the Internet. Facebook-related conflict had negative relationship outcomes for couples who had been together for three or fewer years (McDaniel et al., 2017, p. 89). In addition, high Facebook use was a predictor of less marital quality, less marital satisfaction and greater rate of divorce, suggesting that social media use was engaged in by unhappy married individuals as a social support (McDaniel, et al., 2017; Valenzuela, et al., 2014), but relationship length had no influence on conflict from Twitter use (Clayton, 2014). While studies show there are many ways to be involved in infidelity behaviors, McDaniel et al. (2017) state no known research has studied how on-line behaviors contribute to marital dissatisfaction.

**Interpersonal violence.** Marital conflict is a precursor of violence. When women respond aggressively to a partner's nonviolent behavior, men may respond with physical aggression (Finchman & Beach, 2010), and this interpersonal violence (IPV) poses a serious problem worldwide with more than 30% of men and women reporting physical violence in their intimate relationships (Smith, et al., 2018, n.p.). Physical violence also affects the children as “[an]

estimated 15.5 million children in the United States live in domestically violent homes” (Gustafsson, et al., 2015, p. 266). Johnson, Giordano, Manning & Longmore (2014) found that lower levels of interpersonal violence correlated with how long the couple had been married and posited that their result could be due to those experiencing such violence after exiting the relationship.

Intimate partner violence also increases when individuals have substance abuse addictions, and it is a significant problem in veterans who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Physical violence resulting in injury was prevalent among those who were married or cohabitating with someone with substance abuse problems, in particular alcohol abuse (Buchholz, et al., 2017) and among less-educated, low-income, and African American couples (Gustafsson et al., 2015). However, church attendance is a protective factor against IPV, specifically for Hispanic and African American couples (Ellison, et al., 1999).

***Family-of-origin.*** Family-of-origin experiences have a great impact on couple communication patterns. Individuals whose families are highly conflicted with hostile relationships that lead to divorce often replicate the same dynamics, and in their own later marital relationships, they may experience both marital discord and divorce. Family-of-origin communication styles can become multigenerational so that the negative communication patterns that created discord in the parental family also do so in the families established by the children. Hostile communication in the family-of-origin may make good communication difficult in future romantic relationships. Therefore, what a person experiences in family-of-origin becomes a behavioral pattern in spousal interaction (Knapp, et al., 2015).

***Alcohol use and divorce.*** Alcohol use disorder (AUD) is closely associated with divorce. When a spouse is a heavy drinker, the marriage is more likely to end in divorce, and the divorce

predicts increased drinking and engaging in the risky behavior of drinking and driving (Salvatore, et al., 2016). In a Swedish study, Salvatore et al. (2016) explored environmental and genetic influences on AUD, and they found that AUD contributed to romantic distress and divorce. However, when risk factors that predispose people to AUD are known, preventative education can be pursued.

### **Gender Differences**

Women report less marital happiness than do men (Mitchell, 2010; Jackson et al., 2014; Williams & Umberson, 2004; Gager & Sanchez, 2003; Mirecki, et al., 2013), regardless of race (Gager & Sanchez, 2003), especially when they are middle-aged (Mitchell, 2010), and because of the inequitable division of labor in the home (Croyle & Waltz, 2002; Jackson et al., 2014). Jackson et al. (2014) found that because women are more perceptive of the emotional climate in a marriage, they are more likely to acknowledge relationship problems and initiate marital counseling and/or divorce proceedings. However, Kurdek (2005) found few gender differences in the connection between interpersonal processes on marital outcomes.

Jackson et al. (2014) found small gender differences in marital satisfaction in either first marriages or remarriages lasting four years or fewer and none in marriages lasting five or more years (p.117). While very small differences were found in low-income couples, no gender difference existed in either middle-income or high-income couples. Fewer gender differences in marital satisfaction were found in intact marriages, perhaps because those who were not satisfied had divorced. Furthermore, the duration of the marriage affects the predictor of divorce in that the longer marriages can withstand the urge to divorce (Ottu & Akpan, 2011). Racial diversity had little influence on gender differences regarding marital satisfaction (Jackson et al., 2014).

Gender differences exist that are both traditionally and culturally expected among various ethnicities and subpopulations that impact a couple's worldview of what are considered healthy and unhealthy constructs. These constructs ultimately affect other aspects within a relationship's ecology. Consequently, men and women experience marital satisfaction differently. When male spouses are dissatisfied with the relationship, they are more likely to divorce than are female spouses (Ottu & Akpan, 2011). In addition, traditional gender roles assign separate familial responsibilities to men and women based on their perceived aptitudes, and these gender roles serve to guide behavior and often become the standard for self-evaluation. When individuals rigidly adhere to these gender roles, their relationship quality may suffer. In contrast, those who do not follow these strict gender roles generally have greater marital quality (Shapiro, 2014). Additionally, the interpersonal functioning of wives predicts both marital satisfaction and level of conflict in the marriage (Mirecki et al., 2013).

### **Role of Attachment**

***Attachment bond.*** The attachment bond included four criteria involving the relationship of a person to the attachment figure: maintaining proximity, feeling secure in explorative behavior, finding a place of safety, and suffering anxiety when separated. For an attachment bond to God to exist, a believer must see the relationship with God as personal. A secure God attachment is related to finding purpose and meaning in life (Beck & McDonald, 2004). David and Stafford (2015) found that when couples have a relationship with God, they have happier and more fulfilling marriages.

***Types of attachment.*** Attachment styles are influenced by an individual's caregivers and the experiences that have emotionally impacted them (Ottu & Akpan, 2011), but there is disagreement on the nature of attachment, whether it is formed during childhood interactions or

whether it is more fluid (Diamond et al., 2017). Studies have identified anxiety, avoidance, and secure as types of attachment, and research shows that healthy attachment has a positive correlation with marital satisfaction (Cirhinlioglu et al., 2018). The research of Knapp et al. (2015) supports the importance of addressing past difficulties in family-of-origin when dealing with issues arising in marriage relationships. Even if one has learned negative patterns of behavior, secure attachment decreases the likelihood that poor communication will exist in one's marital relationships. The attachment theory is one way to understand how divorce impacts those involved. When a relationship ends, a person can experience a decrease in attachment security and a sense of rejection. However, attachment security can be rebuilt as evidenced by remarriage which often occurs quickly after divorce (Diamond et al., 2017). Theorists also posit that even though early attachment styles can be consistent over time (Knapp et al., 2015; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1999), they can change so that couples can achieve secure attachment.

In the study by Diamond et al. (2017), participants indicated their first marriages had ended within ten years with an average length being 4.26 years (p. 5114). In the assessments, those who were identified as having secure attachment had satisfaction scores that were significantly higher than those identified as having insecure attachment. Participants who were either first-married or second-married did not differ on attachment security; those who were dating had greater secure attachment than those who were not dating. Therefore, they concluded that attachment security of individuals in a romantic relationship does not differ between first and second marriages but is more dependent on the individual's characteristics regarding their attachment style. Those who have higher attachment security have a greater likelihood of having relationship satisfaction (Diamond et al., 2017). Theorists posit that even though early

attachment styles can be consistent over time (Knapp et al., 2015; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1999), they can change so that couples can attain attachment security (Knapp et al., 2015).

Studies on attachment styles and complementary interaction levels reveal that persons with specific attachment styles evaluate and adjust differently in order to maintain relationship satisfaction or endure the difficulties that arise (Ottu & Akpan, 2011). Additionally, the marital quality of parents has a profound influence on the ability of children to establish secure attachment. A dysfunctional family can lead to anxiety in the children's romantic relationships and prevent this secure attachment. Attachment behaviors affect all interpersonal relationships, and attachment security has been increasingly empirically recognized as a central aspect in healthy relationship functioning. Couples who exhibit secure attachment behaviors are happier, more trusting, more satisfied, and more committed to the relationship. When couples have healthy attachment behaviors, they also have better marital communication (Knapp et al., 2015). Secure attachment exists when partners have a close relationship and exhibit sensitivity to the needs of the other. Many studies have shown that secure attachment has a positive correlation with marital satisfaction and that marital adjustment is greatest when both spouses are secure (Cirhinlioglu et al., 2018).

***Attachment injury.*** Even couples with secure attachment can experience attachment injuries, real or perceived, such as betrayal, neglect, disloyalty, breach of trust, fear of closeness, jealousy, less intimacy, and overall relational distress (Knapp et al., 2015). The consequence of an attachment injury is that one will withdraw from a partner because of distrust resulting from lack of responsiveness, accessibility, and/or engagement, causing fear and anxiety and threatening secure attachment (Knapp et al., 2015). Those with insecure attachment exhibit attachment anxiety or avoidance and are likely to be emotionally distant from their partners and more likely

to participate in casual sex (McDaniel et al., 2017). Attachment avoidance and low levels of commitment are predictors of both sexual and emotional infidelity. Anxiety attachment focuses on the behavior of the spouse with a fear of being abandoned while avoidance attachment focuses on one's self-sufficiency and demonstrates emotional distancing (Cirhinlioglu et al., 2018). Individuals who are prone to feeling abandoned are more likely to remain in an unhappy marriage (Ottu & Akpan, 2011). Those with high attachment anxiety may engage in infidelity to meet needs for intimacy when they fear losing their partner (Dewall, et al., 2011). Emotion-Focused Therapy can help identify personal attachment needs to improve bonding, and, therefore, lead to healthy communication (Knapp, et al., 2015).

Knabb (2014) found that when married individuals had a secure God attachment, they also experienced greater marital satisfaction, but anxiety attachment in human relationships correlated with anxiety-related God attachment and a likelihood for marital dysfunction. He posited that a secure God attachment resulted in good mental health as well. The attachment theory posits that humans are made to be in relationships with others and with God, and these relationships are a source of support. A secure God attachment also gives life meaning, and believing God gives guidance impacts marriage positively (Knabb, 2014).

Close relationships are a very important factor in personal happiness, and the way people communicate in committed relationships is influential in the quality of that relationship. Effective communication is a critical component in couple stability and is directly related to marital satisfactions and a positive long-term relationship. Conversely, poor communication is a common cause of relationship problems (Schmidt et al., 2018).

## **Forgiveness**

Relational hurt occurs in many marriages. Significant relational hurt involves a perceived injury, intentional or unintentional, inflicted on a partner. Marital quality is profoundly affected when this hurt occurs, and even if forgiveness occurs, it may take many years. The process of forgiveness requires that both spouses follow the same trajectory toward healing, and commitment must precede the practicing of forgiveness (Anderson & Natrajar-Tyagi, 2016). In their study, Anderson and Natrajar-Tyagi (2016) found that for Christian couples, a shorter time for forgiveness to be achieved occurred when the offense involved either an emotional or physical affair, but if the hurt was a result of financial mismanagement or emotional insensitivity, forgiveness can take many years. For some spouses, while the offense was accepted, forgiveness was never attained. As a result, beneficial outcomes such as an increase in positive behaviors are not begun.

Forgiveness is foundational to a successful marriage and is integral to marital satisfaction. (Nelson, et al., 2011; Anderson & Natrajan-Tyagi, 2016; David & Stafford, 2015). When couples understand they will unintentionally and sometimes intentionally offend one another, asking for forgiveness and being able to forgive is measured parallel to marital quality (Anderson & Natrajan-Tyagi, 2016). On the contrary, the inability to forgive and even to participate in retaliation leads to marital dissatisfaction. While forgiveness is a religious virtue, it also is an important behavior for secular couples (David & Stafford, 2015).

### **Religiosity and Spirituality**

***Marital readiness and timing.*** Mosko and Pistole (2010) found that a person who is a Christian with high intrinsic religiosity and low attachment avoidance tends to have positive attitudes toward marriage and high marital readiness. Young people who have a religious motivation toward marriage may be more positive in their belief in sacred marriage while those who view

marriage as practical may not be as ready for marriage (Mosko, & Pistole, 2010). In research on the social influences that molded their spiritual development, 64% of the adolescents in the study credited family members whose faith gave them resiliency (King, et al., 2017). However, young people may have a negative attitude toward marriage if they observed marital discord in their parents (Mosko, & Pistole, 2010).

Usually, those who marry early belong to religious denominations that emphasize the importance of marriage and establishing families. Conservative Protestants are much younger when they marry than are Catholics or Jews or those who have no religious affiliation. The many Catholics who are cultural Catholics (not practicing) align with the religiously unaffiliated in regard to marriage timing (Rendon, et al., 2014).

***Marriage as a sacred covenant.*** Religiosity and spirituality are connected with stability and satisfaction in marriage, especially when couples see marriage as a sacred covenant, share their religious beliefs, and are involved in religious activities together (Mitchell et al., 2015; David & Stafford, 2015; Damianakis et al., 2018). Couples who believe they have a relationship with God experience marital satisfaction through the practice of spiritual behaviors of forgiveness, love, sacrifice and the belief in sexual commitment that enhances marital quality (David & Stafford, 2015). The positive connection between religiosity and marital satisfaction may be due to spouses viewing their relationship as holy and, consequently, acting in ways to protect their marital relationship (Cirhinlioglu et al., 2018). The belief that God is involved in their relationship facilitates prevention of problems and aids in resolving those that do occur and provides greater marital satisfaction (Lu et al., 2013; Maxwell, et al., 2018). Also, couples who consider their marriage as sacred are better able to cope with stresses that develop (Mitchell et al., 2016) because their faith can ameliorate the stresses (David & Stafford, 2015). These religious values

support stability in the marriage because they strengthen the desire to maintain the relationship when difficulties arise (Mitchell et al., 2015). Having a shared belief in God encourages couples to be more empathetic toward one another (Maxwell, et al., 2018).

Research demonstrates that very religious couples in both first marriages and remarriages also score significantly higher in marital adjustment than less religious spouses. They experience greater marital satisfaction and happiness and higher levels of commitment and faithfulness, including in interfaith marriages. When couples share similar world views and behaviors, they are likely to agree on family decisions. Being involved in church activities provides them more social support (Schramm et al., 2012; Lu et al., 2013; Maxwell, et al., 2018).

***Influence on marital quality.*** Choosing a religious ceremony for marriage is an indicator of commitment and provides support from the congregation for the couple that helps them preserve their marital union. This support, along with pastoral counseling when relationship problems arise, lowers the risk of divorce (Vaaler, et al., 2009). Higher marital quality is associated with religious values and behavior, and couples who practice their religious faith have an improved relationship with their spouses (Wilmoth, & Riaz, 2019; Maxwell, et al., 2018). However, when husbands but not wives are religious (Vaaler et al, 2009), the risk of divorce is higher.

It is believed that denominational homogamy is a protection against divorce (Wilmoth, & Riaz, 2019; Schramm et al., 2012; Lu et al., 2013) because it may be an indicator of shared values and also provides association with others who are likeminded, but this benefit depends on the degree of participation in religious activities. When couples prayed and read the Bible together, their marital quality was positive (Wilmoth, & Riaz, 2019; Ellison, et al., 2007; Lu et al., 2013) but done individually did not have the same effect. Interestingly, while parents

communicating faith values with children brought children and parents together emotionally, it had no positive effect on couple relationship (Wilmoth, & Riaz, 2019).

Damianakis et al. (2019) studied how spirituality can enhance later life relationships as couples encounter age-related challenges. Older adults who are undergoing life transitions and/or facing personal crisis of one kind or another may find religion/spirituality can positively influence their marital quality. Researchers have found that when couples face health issues and caregiving, especially with dementia, religion/spirituality serves as a support. Older age can bring increased spirituality that aids successful aging. Spirituality potentially can facilitate the understanding of older adults on how they can enhance relationship quality.

***Impact on marital stability.*** When only one spouse is affiliated with a religious denomination or when couples do not have similar religious attendance patterns, the risk of divorce is higher (Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993). Joint religious communication among same-faith couples is an indicator of religious compatibility and, as such, positively affects marital satisfaction and stability (David & Stafford, 2015). Also, those with conservative theological beliefs who view the Bible as their source of guidance and consider marriage to have spiritual significance are less likely to seek divorce (Vaaler et al., 2009; Mitchell et al., 2015). Call and Heaton (1997) found that religious attendance impacts marital stability more than any other aspect of religious experience, and difference in attendance between spouses increases risk of dissolution.

Conservative theological beliefs constrain men's behavior because they discipline many men and focus them on family responsibilities. While studies on the influence of religiousness on marital quality are inconsistent, they show that couples who are more religious are also happier as well as more stable since one's religious beliefs affect interpersonal relationships (Cirhinlioglu

et al., 2018). Even though couples are religious, many other variables influence individual relationships (Mitchell et al., 2015).

Increase in marital quality of women occurred when their religiosity increased, causing their anxious attachment to decline, and when avoidant attachment decreased in men, their religiousness and marital quality increased. However, few studies have examined the relationships among religiosity, attachment styles and marital quality (Cirhinlioglu et al., 2018). Ethnic and racial minorities experience a greater positive impact of religiosity on marital quality than do other couples (Damianakis et al., 2018). Perry (2017) found that marital satisfactions and religious practice are negatively impacted by pornography use. Also, masturbation often affects the spiritual health of religious persons through feelings of guilt (Aneja, et al., 2015; Mahajan, et al., 2013).

### **Commitment**

Many couples acknowledge a connection between their religious beliefs and their commitment. There are different types of commitment: relational, constraint and moral. Religiosity is associated with relational commitment that is a significant factor in marital stability and satisfaction, and greater marital quality is experienced when couples have a high level of relational commitment. The study by Mitchell et al. (2015) found this to be true among Jewish, Christian, and Muslim couples and for both African Americans and Caucasians. In constraint commitment one partner may stay in the marriage even when feeling differently about the relationship than what was felt in the beginning and may preserve the marriage but not the marital quality. Relationship stability is affected by both constraint commitment and personal dedication. Both involve a deliberate effort on the part of spouses to preserve the marriage (Mitchell et al., 2015).

While religious values predict moral commitment in marital relationships, no empirical studies have examined this connection. Moral commitment in a marriage relationship involves recognizing marriage as a permanent relationship or an obligation to a specific person and indicates a desire to maintain and preserve this relationship; it is of ultimate importance to both marital longevity and successful marriage (Nelson, et al., 2011). Couples who believed their marriage was directed by God firmly identified their religious experience as intrinsic to their moral commitment, and this belief was central to their marital quality. While research has shown that most couples indicated their religious values were a major influence on their commitment, many in the study by Nelson et al., (2011) saw no connection or they attributed their commitment to spirituality rather than to religion. When participants did not link their spirituality or religiosity to moral commitment, they indicated instead that communication, trust, and honesty were values most important to marital health.

Few studies have examined the relationships among religiosity, attachment styles, and marital quality (Cirhinlioglu et al, 2018), and the experiences vary among couples. Ethnic and racial minorities note a greater positive impact of religiosity on marital quality than do other couples (Damianakis et al, 2018). While moral commitment provides stability in a marriage, it may not contribute to marital health if no positive feelings toward a spouse exist. While emphasis is being placed on religious issues as clients seek Christian counseling, religious aspects often are not included in counselor training (Nelson et al., 2011).

### **Risks for Divorce**

The highest rate of dissolution of marriage exists in mixed-faith marriages (Waite & Lehrer, 2003; Call & Heaton, 1997) and in couples who have no religious affiliation (Call & Heaton, 1997). Couples who share religious values have a better success rate toward marital

longevity since greater disparity in religious beliefs in mixed-faith marriages creates more marital unhappiness (Call & Heaton, 1997; David & Stafford, 2015). Additionally, the wife's religious beliefs regarding marital commitment affect the stability of the marriage more than do the husband's beliefs. Religious homogeneity in church attendance and participation in church activities increases socialization and friendships that support family values and couple solidarity. Because religious practices and beliefs are similar in different denominations, little difference exists in the rates of dissolution among both Catholic and Protestant religious groups. Moreover, the biblical teachings regarding sanctity of marriage may prevent divorce by reducing involvement in non-marital sex (Call & Heaton, 1997).

### **Religion in CRE and Therapy**

Researchers have found that practitioners often have neglected using spiritual or religious values in therapy for fear of imposing their values or because of lack of training, yet religion and spirituality have as important a role as ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, and gender. According to the American Counseling Association (ACA), it is unethical for counselors to neglect addressing spiritual or religious values that clients have (Nelson et al., 2011). Religious organizations have an advantage in providing CRE because most couples marry in religious settings; these organizations recognize the importance of marital education to prevent divorce, their culture supports commitment values, and they have the ability to reach ethnic minorities (Hook, et al., 2014). However, there is a need for further exploration to understand how marital commitment and religiosity influence marital relationships (Nelson et al., 2011).

### **Comparative Views of Religion and Marriage**

Religions have different views on what constitutes marriage and what its purpose is. Mahajan, et al. (2013) examined beliefs on marriage that exist in India. They state that the

Christian view of marriage is that it is an institution that has boundaries which provide security for relationships to flourish as the spouses grow and mature. The Bible compares the relationship of husband and wife to that of Christ and the church. Every society has established restraints on sexual behavior to ensure there exists a healthy context for human intimacy. While cultural shifts have changed in marriage, Christianity still recognizes marriage as a creation ordinance (Mahajan et al., 2013).

Islam is the second most practiced religion in India. Islam proclaims that men and women are created for their mutual benefit. While it has legalized polygamy, it requires that all wives are treated equally. Although a man can divorce his wife, he has the obligation to care for her and their children. Whether the marriage is satisfying to either spouse is not an issue. Where polygamy is practiced, husbands are not to ignore any of the wives even if they favor one over the others. Rules regarding sexuality are strict. Homosexuality is forbidden, extramarital affairs are punished by lashes, and sexual intercourse is forbidden for certain religious or physical reasons (Mahajan et al., 2013).

Lesser known religions like Jainism teach that marriage is for procreation only, and people are encouraged to marry within their religious community. Jains may have sex only within marriage, and sexual relations with a spouse should be limited to avoid sexual indulgence. In the Parsi faith, marriage is considered a righteous act, and homosexuality is seen as evil. The children of those where one spouse is of a different faith are not allowed in the faith. Marrying outside the faith is seen as adultery. In Sikhism, men and women are considered equal. Marriage is by consent of both individuals and their families. It is a monogamous union, and while separation is not permitted, divorce can be obtained in a civil court (Mahajan et al., 2013).

### **Ethnicity and Culture**

Few studies have examined the role of ethnicity and culture in predicting marital happiness even though cultural values regarding marriage differ. Many speculate that cultural background is a significant factor in marital satisfaction (Mitchell, 2010). Research studies have found differing results when comparing diverse cultures even though marital happiness is similar among most industrialized societies (Stack & Eshteman, 1998). While marital dissatisfaction is a predictor for divorce among Caucasians, it is not a good predictor for Africans (Ottu & Akpan, 2011), possibly because African American couples report having better relationship skills (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010). There are important factors that encourage couples to attend CRE programs, yet these factors vary from individual to individual as well as between gender and ethnicity (Duncan, et al., 1996). Research has shown that couples who are from minority populations are less likely to attend these programs. While these populations may need such programs, there are cultural factors/stigmas that play into the reason for their lack of participation even when these programs are offered at no cost. Additionally, there is a need for practitioners who are culturally adept (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010).

Studies have found that in the Latino culture, infidelity is often understood to be an expected behavior and traditional gender roles are established (Snyder et al., 2010). When professionals work with Latinos to help them adapt to the Anglo-American culture, they have to be sensitive to the Latino culture when conducting marriage education. A goal should be to help Latinos function in the Anglo-American culture without giving up their own as they learn that many similar values exist in both. Professionals also found it important to make Latinos aware of laws regarding the consequences of domestic violence (Snyder et al., 2010).

### **Immigrant Population**

Immigrants face greater stress on marital relationships as they often are separated from family and have not yet established a social support system. They may also face discrimination and financial difficulty. Mitchell et al. (2010) conducted a study on four groups of immigrants in Canada to discover their reasons for marital unhappiness. The British cited external demands such as caregiving, paid work, and children at home. The Indo-Indians also cited work related demands but not as often as the British. Instead, they referred to typical immigrant problems. The Chinese were most likely to cite general relationship problems such as communication and differing goals and values. They also reported the lowest level of satisfaction among the groups. The Southern-Europeans were more likely to state they did not have enough time together and were less likely to say that family caregiving was a stressor (Mitchell, 2010).

### **Cultural Factors in Mate Selection**

Mitchell (2010) found that midlife marital happiness was not connected with ethnic identification but that time together and intimacy were more important than cultural factors even though cultural diversity did affect the relative importance given to them. She also found that cultures had different priorities and that relationship stressors varied among them. In Southeast Asian cultures, marriages are usually arranged by parents. While most of these marriages are long-lasting, some fail shortly after marriage, and in India these couples can appeal to an ecclesiastic tribunal. When a person has been forced into a marriage out of fear, that marriage can be invalidated. Even though the marriage is arranged, nor personally chosen, the individual has the right to decline (Marattil, 2009). In Chinese culture, marriage is perceived to be a life-long commitment and as such requires marital preparation. While the study by Kam and Man (n.d.) was conducted among Chinese in Hong Kong, they have realized the importance of premarital education to enrich marital relationships.

The Ideals Standards Model (ISM) was developed to help individuals determine who would be an appropriate partner with whom to establish a relationship (Lam, et al., 2016). Researchers have used cross-cultural studies to discover how the ideals differ among diverse ethnicities and cultures since assumptions and expectations for relationships are not identical in all cultural backgrounds. Lam et al. (2016) compared East Asian and Western cultures regarding ideal standards. In marriage, Western culture focuses primarily on the individuals in the relationship with an emphasis on romantic love while East Asian culture is more concerned with the extended family where family approval is important. Although characteristics of a mate also vary among cultures, most studies on mate preferences focused on a Western perspective of desirable attributes even though the perspective differs in other cultures.

Customs, expectations and norms affect interpersonal relationships and determine whether the relationship is satisfactory depending on if it fulfills the culture's requirements (Lucas, et al., 2008). The research by Lam et al. (2016) showed that the Chinese placed more importance on status as a relationship ideal than Western cultures did. However, both cultural groups placed value on warmth, loyalty, attractiveness, and passion, as well as having similar values and interests. In both cultures, men valued physical attractiveness more than women did, and women valued status and resources more than men did. Also, in both cultures, shared ideals were predictive of positive outcomes in the relationship. Those in Eastern cultures were more likely to marry without love if the mate possessed desirable attributes than were those from Western cultures. While both cultures have ideal standards, they vary in what is most important in their relationship (Lam et al., 2016).

### **Interracial dating and marriage**

Those who engage in interracial dating are usually more progressive, less traditional individuals. Researchers have found that Whites who attend church regularly were uncomfortable with interracial romance, especially with Blacks. Although Protestants may support interracial dating, they do not necessarily practice it themselves which indicates they may not have internalized a faith belief of love and acceptance. However, attending a segregated church limits interaction with other races. In addition, those whose religious faith involves personal devotion are more likely to be racially tolerant (Perry, 2013).

Interracial marriages made up 3% of marriages recorded in the 2002 United States Census. In a study by Troy, Lewis-Smith and Laurenceau (2006) of Hispanic, African American, and non-Hispanic white teenagers, half reported having dated a person of another ethnicity, and in a study of adults, half were not averse to interracial dating (p. 66). While many theories exist on what attracts people of different ethnicities to each other, evidence shows that it is nonracial factors such as common interests that draw people together. However, the costs of being in an interracial relationship may be high as opposition from family, friends, and society often present a formidable challenge, and relationship functioning may suffer when conflicting cultural patterns disrupt relationship satisfaction (Troy & Lewis-Smith, 2006).

### **Demographic Aspects**

**Low income.** Low-income couples and ethnic minorities are healthier when they are married, according to the Center for Disease Control. While they have more diverse needs (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010), few relationship programs target low-income persons or ethnic and racial minorities (Antle et al, 2013) perhaps because some cultural groups attach social stigma to therapy for relational problems and have less access to resources when beginning relationship counseling (Adler-Baeder, et al, 2010).

Hawkins, Stanley, Blanchard, and Albright (2017) found that while low-income couples aspire to stable, healthy marriage, they often do not have hope that they will achieve it. The goal of CRE is to help them focus on positive aspects in their lives even when they are experiencing difficulties so that they can achieve positive well-being. CRE training can help them develop relationship confidence, and the skills they learn can increase their relationship quality which leads to satisfaction.

**Age.** Epstein et al., (2016) found that race, sexual orientation, and education significantly affected marital satisfaction, but age did not. However, Glenn et al. (2010) found that those who marry between the ages of 22-25 have the greatest likelihood of a highest quality marriage (p. 787). Marital relationships change over time as people transition from one stage in life to another (Mitchell, 2010). Research has been limited in focusing on those who were older when they married. Most research on the age of couples when they married defined marital success as lack of divorce. However, staying in an unsatisfactory marriage is most common among those who married at a later age (Glenn et al., 2010).

### **Family Formations**

**Cohabitation.** Cohabitation is becoming increasingly common as 75% of young adults cohabit, and with many cohabiting before marriage (Brown, et al., 2017, p. 1730). However, today those who cohabit are less likely to marry, and the relationship is more likely to end in separation.

While prior studies had found cohabiters had poorer quality relationships than married couples (Glenn et al., 2010), recent research has shown their well-being and relationship quality are the same as for those who are married. It is not cohabitation but the characteristics of the individuals that determine relationship quality. Cohabitation crosses ethnic, racial, age, and education groups with two-thirds of couples who had recently married having cohabited before marriage (Brown

et al., p. 1731). While women who married without cohabitation had the highest levels of happiness, men who married without cohabitating had only marginal happier relationships (Brown et al., 2017). Married couples who are committed to their relationship are more likely to work on a solution to problems that arise than are cohabiters (Jackson et al., 2014).

***Remarriage and blended families.*** Individuals in second marriages where stepchildren are part of the family may rely more on their partners to meet socioemotional needs because binuclear families increase the need. Researchers have commonly found that second marriages lack more stability than first marriages but give varying reasons why this is so, including the existence of personality characteristics that make divorce more likely (Diamond et al., 2018). Second marriages dissolve at a 10% higher rate than first marriages (Mirecki et al., 2013, p. 8) and couples with stepchildren face special difficulties as role relationships need to be established. Remarriages have different critical periods than do first marriages because there are more people involved, and there is often no pre-children time for spouses to make role adjustments (Mirecki et al., 2013).

Couples in first marriages rated their satisfaction at higher levels than did those in second marriages. The length of first marriages also significantly influenced satisfaction, but it was not significant in second marriages. The level of education of spouses in second marriages correlated with satisfaction with more education resulting in greater satisfaction (Mirecki et al., 2013). After divorce and remarriage of parents, children often suffer emotionally and express negative attitudes and behaviors. This difficult period frequently affects transition into the new relationship (Metts, et al., 2017).

The number of blended families is rising and currently represents a large population. Remarriage and cohabitation couples with blended families present themselves with unique

problems that influence overall marital satisfaction (Kumar, 2017; Ladier, et al., 2017). The process of joining two separate families brings complications that create tensions for a couple who cannot set healthy boundaries. Tensions may be created when family expectations and traditions differ between family members. This creates a significant amount of tension for the couple who may not have a healthy communication when it comes to conflict resolution and setting boundaries (Garland, 2012). There is an abundance of evidence that children who experience a parental separation are, on average, worse off than their peers in intact families on several measures of wellbeing. Underlying these effects are multiple mechanisms such as income declines following separation, declines in the mental health of custodial mothers, interparental conflict and compromised parenting. Research shows that children bond within a family structure better than anywhere else (Figueiredo, & Dias, 2012).

### **Relationship Education Programs**

**Goals.** Couple relationship education (CRE) programs seek to help couples develop a healthy relationship that lasts. While they share some of the goals of couple therapy, they are usually of shorter duration. Research shows that unmarried participants may seek to attend out of a need to find a sense of trust and security and to achieve skills that build their relationship, and married couples may seek to enhance the quality of their relationship when they are facing challenges. Recent studies have shown that CREs are an early intervention to improve relationship satisfaction and to relieve mild to moderate stress (Markman et al., 2019).

Many CRE programs begin with premarital classes, but they also address issues of poverty-related and work-related stress, incarceration, gender discrimination, stepfamilies, and military lifestyle challenges (Markman et al., 2019). While a large study by these researchers on low-income couples showed these couples experienced significant positive effects from CRE,

they did not report marital stability two years later (p. 313). Contemporary evaluation research of CRE is focusing on lower income couples who are not married but rather are cohabitating. While results have been statistically significant, Markman et al. (2019) found that the attendance by these individuals was not consistent.

Studies on marital satisfaction provide an indicator of stable and committed long-term relationships. These studies are global in their application and reflect social support and the quality of life endemic to a healthy society. CRE enables individuals to develop healthy attitudes which, in turn, promote a sense of well-being individually and collectively in society (Ottu & Akpan, 2011). The majority of relationship programs are designed to reduce marital distress by addressing conflict because unresolved conflict in marriage is a strong risk factor that may lead to divorce even though conflict by itself is not a good predictor that a couple will divorce (Amato, et al., 2016).

***Importance of learning skills.*** Couples who attend CRE learn what marital satisfaction means to them and what could hinder their relationship together as well as learn skills that help them to reach goals (Britzman & Sauerbeber, 2014). They must learn self-regulation of their emotions, gain the ability to forgive, be willing to sacrifice, and understand commitment to achieve a healthy relationship (Amato et al., 2016). Learning how to communicate effectively is a central goal in CRE programs. Premarital programs can assist couples to address common issues faced by most people so that they will be better prepared to adjust to marriage and be able to preserve the relationship (Kam & Lam, n.d.). Interestingly, CRE programs on the Internet produced as much positive change in relationship quality as did face-to-face programs (Wilmoth & Riaz, 2019). Scores on relationship skills tests positively correlated with how many hours of training people have spent in learning relationship skills (Epstein et al., 2016).

***In conjunction with therapy.*** For some couples, therapy that accompanies CRE is beneficial. Couples in treatment therapy have an 80% advantage over those who do not receive treatment. However, the gains tend to dissipate over time (Schmidt et al, 2016, p. 3). Seventy percent of couples who receive therapy experience a positive impact (Lebow, et al., 2012, p. 31). Couples who are severely distressed or are not engaged emotionally are least likely to benefit from therapy. CRE programs are an important way to intervene in their relationship (Fenz & Trillingsgaard, 2016). Most distressed couples fail to seek help or wait until the damage to their relationship is irreversible. Money, time, and social stigma are all reasons for the delay. Relationship checkups are becoming increasingly prevalent in order to prevent this deterioration from occurring (Fenz & Trillingsgaard, 2016).

***Effectiveness.*** Whether or not CRE programs are effective is controversial, but in most research, they are shown to be successful in improving couple's communication skills, resulting in satisfying relationships. CRE programs are more effective when couples attend together. Some CRE programs do not require that both individuals attend, thus skewing the result if only one partner attends as opposed to both attending (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010). Couples who are distressed may experience more immediate gains than would those who are not distressed (Schmidt et al., 2016). Knowledge of partner, which was determined to be the best predictor of marital happiness, is considered easy to teach because individuals can learn techniques to remember significant information (Epstein, et al., 2016). Some researchers suggest a two-dimensional approach which measures marriage satisfaction in terms of happy and unhappy as well as of ambivalent and indifferent due to findings that show different correlates and exclusive variates in couple behavior (Amato et al., 2016). CRE is important to prevent conflict from developing because once established, these patterns are hard to change (Hook et al., 2014).

Researchers have disagreed whether CRE is effective for couples who are distressed or disadvantaged. The findings of their studies range from no effect to small effect to large positive effects (Hawkins, et al., 2017). A study by Bodenmann, Bradbury and Pihet (2019) found that when positive change occurred in communicating behavior and dyadic coping, the improvement achieved from the program lasted for years.

*At-risk couples.* Markman et al., (2019) noted the need for more research targeted toward less educated, low income engaged couples who have a higher risk for divorce but are not likely to enroll in premarital education programs. Couples at lower risk who participated when Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) was first used had lower divorce rates during the first decade of marriage than did couples with higher risk (Hook et al., 2014). Men who are in lower socioeconomic groups entered with greater challenges and experienced greater changes and overall benefits of participating in CRE programs than did their female partners and men of higher income (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010). Analysis showed that intervention directed at low-income distressed couples can help break the cycle of poverty, resulting in an economic benefit for families and for society (Shamblen, et al., 2018)

High-risk couples are in need to learning the skills necessary to deal with both negative behaviors and thinking. Poor relationship functioning indicates the importance of developing conflict-resolution skills. Even when making greater strides, high-risk couples did not reach the levels of functioning found in low-risk couples pre-test. Studies suggest that CRE programs would be the most beneficial for those high-risk couples with distressed relationships and for the not yet married individuals. Couples who were classified as high-risk experienced more improvement than did low-risk couples, most likely due to their having greater room for improvement (Barton, et al., 2014; Antle et al., 2013). Barton et al. (2014) state that premarital

education should change to adapt to current family formations. To meet the challenges facing today's couples, relationship education should consider "dyadic interaction, family of origin, current family composition, relationship length, and sex differences" (p. 175).

**Gender.** Hawkins et al. (2017) found that when men acquired more positive interaction skills, their partner's relationship hope increased, but an increase in hope was not indicated for men when their partners developed these positive skills. They attributed this difference to the greater sensitivity of women to the changes they note in men. Thus, these researchers drew the conclusion that when CRE focused on men, it could greatly enhance the couple relationship. Females were more negative in their perception of relationship quality than were males, indicating a need to address their negative cognitions. Programs must be sensitive to the differences that exist in relationship dynamics among couples (Barton et al., 2014).

**Diversity.** In the past practitioners dealt with a more homogeneous population whose cultural experiences were similar. Now, within the last decade, heterogeneous populations have presented specific needs in the area of relationship education. Consequently, more CREs have been developed to focus on the cultural needs of these participants. CRE programs must be diverse in their scope to provide relevant information that addresses the cultural differences that exist in a broader population of participants with their own subgroups and trends. The assumptions of the study by Adler-Baeder et al. (2010) could not explain the differences associated with race or other factors that may relate to individual functioning among diverse couples. Antle et al. (2013) found that Latino and African American couples are more satisfied with the programs than are Caucasian couples.

**Specific programs.** Many programs have been developed to provide relationship education. These programs that focus on helping couples improve positive communication and achieve

relationship satisfaction have demonstrated improvement lasting three to five years (Schmidt et al., 2015, p. 4). Most relationship programs have not been empirically validated, but both PREP and Couple Communication (CC) have been empirically tested and proved to be efficacious (Jacobi, 2017; Schmidt et al., 2015) and have demonstrated improvement lasting three to five years (Schmidt et al., 2016, p. 4; Antle, et al., 2013, p. 347). PREP is a marital enrichment program that has been successful in improving communication, increasing problem-solving skills, lowering divorce rates, and raising satisfaction levels. This program emphasizes enhanced communication and conflict resolution skills. PREP couples have half the likelihood of marriage failure and greater relationship satisfaction (Jacobi, 2017). It is the only enrichment program that has recorded long-term outcomes after several twelve-month follow ups. Also, the program can be modified to adapt to specific needs in other countries. Traditionally, PREP classes have been used predominantly with well-educated Caucasians, but initiatives to increase accessibility to diverse groups have begun so that low income individuals, minorities, incarcerated spouses, same-sex couples, and singles who aspire to a relationship can also participate. The PREP program can be adapted to these diverse groups based on their cultural needs (Markman, et al., 2019).

In CC, couples need to sign a contract prior to the start of training that ensures the participant understand what the nature of the program and the goals are and asks them to commit to it. It consists of four sessions that focus on “self, partner, conflict, and communication styles” (Jacobi, 2017, p. 1303). Through self-talk, each person learns about himself/herself so that they can improve couple communication. Emphasis on listening helps them to validate the other’s experience. Couples learn how to handle conflict in a functional rather than a dysfunctional way, and they practice working together rather than trying to be in control. CC can help couples turn

their relationships around. It works well with couples from different socioeconomic groups and those of different ages (Jacobi, 2017).

Marriage Matters is a marital education program that was developed at Willow Creek Community Church located in Chicago, Illinois, to be used in their own congregation. It is now used in many other churches. The program's workshops center on issues of family origin, conflict resolution, boundaries, sexual intimacy, forgiveness, rebuilding trust, anger management, financial planning, and child rearing. While this program is religious based, it has shown to be effective for both Christians and non-Christians. Religious organizations such as this church can provide less stigmatizing marital education programs that are accessible in communities at low cost (Hook et al., 2011).

The Getting the Love You Want Workshop explores childhood relationships. It has had widespread international participation although it has undergone limited research. The research Schmidt et al. (2016) conducted sought to evaluate the program's effectiveness in increasing relationship satisfaction and improving communication skills. This program involves both self-directed study and therapy sessions conducted by licensed professionals who have completed extensive training. It is a psychoeducational workshop focusing on communication skills to increase positive and decrease negative interactions with the goal of enhancing relationship satisfaction. This program differs from other CRE programs in that it emphasizes the impact of childhood experiences.

The PREmarital Preparation and Relationship Enhancement (PREPARE) program classifies couples as vitalized (highest relationship quality/high scores in all dimensions), harmonious (moderate relationship quality/above average scores involving relationship interactions), traditional (moderately low relationship quality), or conflicted (lowest relationship

quality). This program has been validated not only among European-American couples but also with other ethnicities, specifically African American. Both a quasi-experimental and a nonexperimental study reported growth in relationship satisfaction with improved communication and increased confidence (Barton, et al, 2014).

Several programs are focused on low-income couples. The Survival Skills for Healthy Families Program is a relationship education program targeted to low-income adult couples in multicultural communities in California. Michigan's Enhancing Family Formation Project provides classes for couple relationships and parenting for those in the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. Louisiana's Exploring Relationships and Marriage with Fragile Families serves African American low-income families. PREP offers a curriculum called Within Our Reach for low-income couples and singles to teach relationship and decision-making skills regarding safety issues in their relationships. Low-income populations face unique challenges that are addressed in this program. Research into the effectiveness of the curriculum has shown a decrease in personal relationship violence and an increase in relationship satisfaction (Antle et al., 2013).

### **Summary**

Traditionally, marriage has been the foundation for the establishment of families, and happy marriages lead to stability in the relationship (Mitchell, 2010). However, changes in the marriage relationship often lead to divorce (Margelisch et al., 2017) because the experiences one has in family-of-origin and the attachment style that has developed affect the dynamics in a marriage. CRE programs have been developed to address maladaptive behaviors that often lead to dissolution of marriage. They can teach the necessary relationship skills to help couples overcome the problems they encounter (Markman et al., 2019). Research has studied how gender, age, ethnicity, religiosity, education, marital setting, socioeconomic status and other

demographic influences affect satisfaction in marriage. Recent studies have shown how religious commitment can help couples face the stressors they encounter in their marriage (David & Stafford, 2015). Also, it is important to understand cultural differences when developing CRE programs in order to address the varied needs that exist among different ethnicities (Markman, et al., 2019; Brizman & Sauerbeber, 2014). Insufficient empirical study has focused on Christian couples from diverse backgrounds to determine how faith influences marital happiness and stability.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The concept of overall marital satisfaction for Christian married individuals is changing because of cultural influences. One of the goals of the research is to analyze the effectiveness of relationship education and also to determine if marital setting and ethnicity have an effect on overall marital satisfaction. This chapter will provide a detailed description of this research study through a discussion of the following key elements: design, research questions, hypotheses, participants and setting, instrumentation, procedures, and data analysis.

### **Design**

An evaluation of overall marital satisfaction for Christian married individuals will require a causal-comparative research study to be conducted with the independent variable of marital setting (first marriage or remarriage) and the dependent variable Christian individuals who have been married for at least five years. Covariates include gender, age, length of marriage, ethnicity, marital setting and prior participation in a CRE or MRE program. A causal-comparative research design seeks to find a relationship between the independent and the dependent variable based on an action or event which has already occurred (Gall, et al., 2007). This research design is appropriate for this study because it will examine the overall marital satisfaction of Christian individuals who have been married for at least five years to determine the impact, if any, of gender, age, length of marriage, ethnicity, marital setting, and prior participation in a relationship education program.

### **Research Questions**

**RQ1:** Is there a difference in the overall marital satisfaction of Christian individuals based on marital setting (first marriage or remarriage)?

**RQ2:** Does the overall marital satisfaction of Christian individuals vary by ethnicity?

**RQ3:** Does participation in couple relationship education (CRE) or marriage relationship education (MRE) programs impact the overall marital satisfaction of Christian individuals?

**RQ4:** Does participation in CRE or MRE programs impact marital satisfaction among different ethnicities?

### **Hypotheses**

**H<sub>0</sub>1:** There is no statistically significant difference in the overall marital satisfaction of Christian individuals based on marital setting (first marriage or remarriage).

**H<sub>a</sub>1:** There is a statistically significant difference in the overall marital satisfaction of Christian individuals based on marital setting (first marriage or remarriage).

**H<sub>0</sub>2:** There is no statistically significant difference in the overall marital satisfaction of Christian individuals based on ethnicity.

**H<sub>a</sub>2:** There is a statistically significant difference in the overall marital satisfaction of Christian individuals based on ethnicity.

**H<sub>0</sub>3:** There is no statistically significant difference in the participation of couple relationship education (CRE) or marriage relationship education (MRE) impacting overall marital satisfaction of Christian individuals.

**H<sub>a</sub>3:** There is a statistically significant difference in the participation of couple relationship education (CRE) or marriage relationship education (MRE) impacting overall marital satisfaction of Christian individuals.

**H<sub>0</sub>4:** There is no statistically significant difference in the participation in CRE or MRE programs impact marital satisfaction among different ethnicities.

**H<sub>4</sub>**: There is a statistically significant difference in the participation in CRE or MRE programs impact marital satisfaction among different ethnicities.

### **Participants and Setting**

The target for this study is Christians who have been married for at least five years and who reside in a culturally diverse urban setting in South Florida. The two sites that will be invited in this proposed study have the following demographics. Site 1: Local Christian church with a demographics of White, Black, Hispanic, Latino and Asian. Site 2: Local Christian school faculty and staff with demographics of White, Black, Hispanic, and Latino. The 300 total individuals identified as married for at least five years will receive an invitation to participate in the study. The target sample size will be 160 (N=160) total married individuals which will ensure an adequate sample size to produce a medium effect size with a statistical power of 0.7 at the .05 alpha level (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). The responding individuals will participate in the research study through an online survey.

### **Procedures**

The researcher will send invitation letters explaining the research study to the administrative leaders of one local Christian church and the faculty and staff of one local Christian high school in a culturally diverse area of South Florida. Included with the invitation will be an explanation of the study a copy of the participant's rights, and informed consent. The sites will invite participants via email and through snowballing explaining the research study and providing a link where the survey can be taken. Each participant will voluntarily go to the link and complete the survey. The researcher will forward the data to the statistician for statistical analysis.

## **Instrumentation**

A number of different applicable instruments will be used in assessment. A self-report survey created by the researcher will provide information on each participant. This instrument will be utilized as a base-line information in gathering participants age, gender, marital history and ethnicity as well as any CRE or MRE program they may have attended. The Index of Marital Satisfaction (IMS) is a 25- item instrument designed by Walter Hudson (1997) to measure problems in the marital relationship, specifically the extent of difficulties within the relationship as perceived by one partner rather than unitarily. Marital adjustment is not measured in this assessment since a couple may have good adjustment regardless of existing degrees of discord or dissatisfaction. The IMS has a mean alpha score of .96, which indicates an excellent level of internal consistency and a low (excellent) Standard Error of Measurement of 4.00. It also has excellent short-term stability with a two-hour test-retest correlation of .96. The IMS is considered to have an excellent level of concurrent validity, which allows for an excellent correlation to the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (LWMAT). The IMS presents with high levels of construct validity and, therefore, “correlates poorly with what it should not correlate, and correlating significantly with several measures with which it should correlate, such as sexual satisfaction and marital problems” (Corcoran & Fisher, 2013, p. 112). The IMS respondents participating in developing this scale were nonclinical and clinical populations that included married and single individuals who were nonstudents, high school students, and college students.

The Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (LWMAT) is a 15- item instrument authored by Harvey Locke and Karl Wallace (1959), applicable at a global level, was designed to test for marital adjustment which is defined as the way in which marital partners accommodate

each other at any given time. The internal consistency for the LWMAT is considered strong with a .90 correlation, using the Spearman-Brown formula, although there is no information available test-retest reliability. The LWMAT has “evidence of known-groups validity, with scores discriminating between adjusted and maladjusted couples” (Corcoran & Fisher, 2013, p. 128).

## **CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this study was to investigate factors that mediate marital satisfaction in ethnically diverse Christian marriages. It examined Marital Setting (first marriage or remarriage), Ethnicity, and Prior Participation in CRE or MRE (Couple Relationship Education, Marriage Relationship Education). There were four research questions the study addressed. First, is there a difference in overall marital satisfaction of Christian individuals based on marital setting (first marriage or remarriage)? Second, does overall marital satisfaction in Christian individuals vary by ethnicity? Third, does participation in couple relationship education (CRE) or marriage relationship education (MRE) programs impact the overall marital satisfaction of Christian individuals? Finally, does participation in CRE or MRE programs impact marital satisfaction among different ethnicities?

This study used a sample of 67 Christian individuals who had been married for at least five years to their current spouse. The participants were administered measures of Marital Satisfaction and Marital Adjustment. Complete data was available for all 67 participants.

The first research question lacked statistical diversity with 60 of the 67 participants identified as on their first marriage. Therefore, the sample lacked appropriate statistics to conduct any analysis of mean differences between those respondents in their first marriage and those who were remarried. The second, third, and fourth research questions used a Between Subjects ANOVA to determine whether marital satisfaction and participation in Couple Relationship Education (CRE) or Marital Relationship Education (MRE) was impacted by ethnicity and whether participation in CRE or MRE impacted the overall marital satisfaction of Christian

individuals. This chapter presents the results and summary of the research findings with the corresponding hypotheses for the four research questions steering this study.

### Demographics

The sample consisted of 23 male and 44 female participants ( $n=67$ ) who identified themselves as Christian and married to their current spouse for at least five years. Ethnic demographics were 55% White, 22% Hispanic or Latino, 16% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 7% Black. Out of the sample ( $n=67$ ), 90% of the participants identified themselves as being on their first marriage.

See Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 *Ethnic Demographics for the Research Participants*

		Descriptives							
		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
LWM	White	37	80.8649	17.41673	2.86329	75.0578	86.6719	25.00	115.00
	Hispanic or Latino	15	78.3333	30.38013	7.84412	61.5094	95.1573	20.00	114.00
	Asian/Pacific Islander	11	77.0909	23.51363	7.08963	61.2942	92.8876	45.00	119.00
	Total	63	79.6032	21.82152	2.74925	74.1075	85.0989	20.00	119.00
MSAT	White	37	5.8205	.84289	.13857	5.5395	6.1016	3.12	6.80
	Hispanic or Latino	15	5.5227	1.54272	.39833	4.6683	6.3770	2.00	6.80
	Asian/Pacific Islander	12	5.9133	1.26880	.36627	5.1072	6.7195	3.60	7.00
	Total	64	5.7681	1.11172	.13896	5.4904	6.0458	2.00	7.00

### Results

#### Research Question One

This question attempted to examine any difference in overall marital satisfaction of Christian individuals based on their marital setting (first marriage or remarriage). The sample lacked statistical data to conduct an analysis of mean differences between those respondents in their first marriage or those in their second or third marriage. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 ( $H_{01}$ ) was not supported through this research study (See Table 4.2).

Table 4.2

*Demographic Information of Participants Marital Setting (Research Question One)*

**How many times have you been married?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	First Marriage	60	89.6	89.6	89.6
	Second Marriage	6	9.0	9.0	98.5
	Third Marriage	1	1.5	1.5	100.0
	Total	67	100.0	100.0	

**Research Question Two**

This question attempted to examine any statistically significant difference in the overall marital satisfaction of Christian individuals based on ethnicity (see Table 4.1). A one-way Between-Subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the mean scores on tests of marital satisfaction and marital adjustment by ethnicity. The Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment test showed no statistically significant difference in overall marital satisfaction based on ethnicity with an overall  $F$  for the one-way ANOVA as  $F(2, 60) = .156, p > .001$ . The Index of Marital Satisfaction showed no significant difference in overall marital satisfaction with an overall  $F(2, 61) = .501, p > .001$  (See Table 4.3).

Table 4.3 *ANOVA Results for Instrumentation*

		ANOVA				
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
LWM	Between Groups	152.513	2	76.256	.156	.856
	Within Groups	29370.567	60	489.509		
	Total	29523.079	62			
MSAT	Between Groups	1.258	2	.629	.501	.608
	Within Groups	76.605	61	1.256		
	Total	77.863	63			

In a test for homogeneity of variances the Levene's statistic for the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test was less than .05 at  $p = .024$  and the Levene's statistic for the Index of Marital Satisfaction was less than .05 at  $p = .049$  indicating that the two variances are

significantly different. These statistics indicate that the differences are unlikely to have occurred based on random sampling from a population with equal variance. (See Table 4.4).

Table 4.4 *Levene’s Statistics for Instrumentation*

		Test of Homogeneity of Variances			
		Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
LWM	Based on Mean	3.983	2	60	.024
	Based on Median	2.336	2	60	.105
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	2.336	2	44.911	.108
	Based on trimmed mean	3.674	2	60	.031
MSAT	Based on Mean	3.165	2	61	.049
	Based on Median	.905	2	61	.410
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	.905	2	42.209	.412
	Based on trimmed mean	2.339	2	61	.105

In addition, all possible pairwise comparisons were made using the Fisher’s Least Significant Difference (LSD) test. For both the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test and the Index of Marital Satisfaction, in comparing White with Hispanic or Latino, White with Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic or Latino with White, Hispanic or Latino with Asian/Pacific Islander, and Asian/Pacific Islander with White or Asian/Pacific Islander with Hispanic or Latino the test results indicated no statistically significant difference on overall marital satisfaction based on ethnicity (See Table 4.5). Therefore, the research fails to reject the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ).

Table 4.5 *Results of Multiple Comparisons Using Fisher’s Least Significant Difference Test*

Multiple Comparisons							
LSD							
Dependent Variable	(I) Race	(J) Race	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
			(I-J)			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
LWM	White	Hispanic or Latino	2.53153	6.77229	.710	-11.0151	16.0781
		Asian/Pacific Islander	3.77396	7.59808	.621	-11.4245	18.9724
	Hispanic or Latino	White	-2.53153	6.77229	.710	-16.0781	11.0151
		Asian/Pacific Islander	1.24242	8.78264	.888	-16.3255	18.8103
	Asian/Pacific Islander	White	-3.77396	7.59808	.621	-18.9724	11.4245
		Hispanic or Latino	-1.24242	8.78264	.888	-18.8103	16.3255

### Research Question Three

This question attempted to examine any statistically significant difference in the overall marital satisfaction of Christian individuals based on their participation in couple relationship education (CRE) or marriage relationship education (MRE). Research participants were asked to respond to the following questions regarding their level of attendance in relationship education: *I have never attended, I attended before marriage, I attended after marriage* (See Table 4.6).

Table 4.6 *Descriptive Information for CRE and MRE*

		Descriptives							
		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
L	I have never attended	27	79.7407	23.09611	4.44485	70.6042	88.8773	20.00	119.00
W	I attended before marriage	24	79.9583	19.46341	3.97295	71.7397	88.1770	25.00	104.00
M	I attended after marriage	15	75.6667	23.78975	6.14249	62.4923	88.8410	20.00	114.00
	Total	66	78.8939	21.73556	2.67546	73.5507	84.2372	20.00	119.00
M	I have never attended	28	5.8471	1.18894	.22469	5.3861	6.3082	2.32	7.00
S	I attended before marriage	24	5.6417	1.01621	.20743	5.2126	6.0708	3.12	6.88
A	I attended after marriage	15	5.7307	1.16535	.30089	5.0853	6.3760	2.00	6.72
T	Total	67	5.7475	1.11112	.13574	5.4764	6.0185	2.00	7.00

A one-way Between-Subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the mean scores on tests of marital satisfaction and marital adjustment based on their participation in couple relationship education (CRE) or marriage relationship education (MRE). The data analysis on results of the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment test showed no statistically significant difference in overall marital satisfaction based on their participation in couple relationship education (CRE) or marriage relationship education (MRE) with an overall  $F$  for the one-way ANOVA as  $F(2, 63) = .209, p > .001$  at  $p = .812$ . The data analysis on the results obtained from the Index of Marital Satisfaction showed no significant difference in overall marital satisfaction based on participation with an overall  $F(2, 64) = .218, p > .001$  at  $p = .805$  (See Table 4.7).

Table 4.7 ANOVA Results for Instrumentation

		ANOVA				
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
LWM	Between Groups	202.781	2	101.390	.209	.812
	Within Groups	30505.477	63	484.214		
	Total	30708.258	65			
MSAT	Between Groups	.551	2	.276	.218	.805
	Within Groups	80.931	64	1.265		
	Total	81.482	66			

In a test for homogeneity of variances the Levene's statistic for the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test was greater than .05 at  $p = .593$  and the Levene's statistic for the Index of Marital Satisfaction was greater than .05 at  $p = .623$  indicating that the two variances are not significantly different (See Table 4.8)

Table 4.8 Levene's Statistics for Instrumentation

		Test of Homogeneity of Variances			
		Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
LWM	Based on Mean	.527	2	63	.593
	Based on Median	.649	2	63	.526
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	.649	2	62.703	.526
	Based on trimmed mean	.613	2	63	.545
MSAT	Based on Mean	.476	2	64	.623
	Based on Median	.170	2	64	.844
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	.170	2	61.947	.844
	Based on trimmed mean	.443	2	64	.644

In addition, all possible pairwise comparisons were made using the Fisher's Least Significant Difference (LSD) test. For both the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test and the Index of Marital Satisfaction, in comparing *I have never attended* with *I attended before marriage/after marriage*, *I attended before marriage* with *I have never attended/attended after marriage* and *I attended after marriage* with *I have never attended/attended before marriage*, the

test results indicated no statistically significant difference on overall marital satisfaction based on ethnicity (See Table 4.9). Therefore, the research fails to reject the null hypothesis (H<sub>0</sub>3).

Table 4.9 Results of Multiple Comparisons Using Fisher's Least Significant Difference Test

Multiple Comparisons								
LSD	Dependent Variable	(I) Did you attend couple relationship education or marriage relationship before or after marriage?	(J) Did you attend couple relationship education or marriage relationship before or after marriage?	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
							Lower Bound	Upper Bound
LWM	I have never attended	I attended before marriage	I attended after marriage	-.21759	6.17328	.972	-12.5539	12.1187
		I attended before marriage	I attended after marriage	4.07407	7.08624	.567	-10.0866	18.2348
	I attended before marriage	I have never attended	I attended after marriage	.21759	6.17328	.972	-12.1187	12.5539
		I have never attended	I attended after marriage	4.29167	7.24269	.556	-10.1817	18.7650
	I attended after marriage	I have never attended	I attended before marriage	-4.07407	7.08624	.567	-18.2348	10.0866
		I have never attended	I attended before marriage	-4.29167	7.24269	.556	-18.7650	10.1817
MSAT	I have never attended	I attended before marriage	I attended after marriage	.20548	.31281	.514	-.4194	.8304
		I attended before marriage	I attended after marriage	.11648	.35981	.747	-.6023	.8353
	I attended before marriage	I have never attended	I attended after marriage	-.20548	.31281	.514	-.8304	.4194
		I have never attended	I attended after marriage	-.08900	.37013	.811	-.8284	.6504
	I attended after marriage	I have never attended	I attended before marriage	-.11648	.35981	.747	-.8353	.6023
		I have never attended	I attended before marriage	.08900	.37013	.811	-.6504	.8284

#### Research Question Four

This question attempted to examine any statistically significant difference in the overall marital satisfaction of Christian individuals based on their participation in couple relationship education (CRE) or marriage relationship education (MRE) by ethnicity. Research participants were asked to respond to the following questions regarding their level of attendance in relationship education: *I have never attended*, *I attended before marriage*, *I attended after marriage*. In response to the statement *I have never attended*, 46% of White, 27% Hispanic or Latino, and 33% Asian/Pacific Islander responded yes. In response to the statement *I attended before marriage*, 38% White, 20% Hispanic or Latino, and 58% Asian/Pacific Islander responded yes. In response to the question *I attended after marriage*, 16% White, 53% Hispanic or Latino, and 9% Asian/Pacific Islander responded yes. There was not enough research support to include Black (See Table 4.10). This research question was addressed with the data provided

from question two and question three (See Tables 4.3-4.9). The test results indicated no statistically significant difference on overall marital satisfaction based on participation in CRE or MRE by ethnicity (See Table 4.9). Therefore, the research fails to reject the null hypothesis ( $H_04$ ).

Table 4.10 *Response to Participation in CRE or MRE by Ethnicity*

		Did you attend couple relationship education or marriage relationship before or after marriage?			Total
		I have never attended	I attended before marriage	I attended after marriage	
Race	White	17	14	6	37
	Black or African American	3	0	0	3
	Hispanic or Latino	4	3	8	15
	Asian/Pacific Islander	4	7	1	12
Total		28	24	15	67

### Summary

A participant sample of 67 Christian individuals who had been married for at least five years to their current spouse was used in this study. The first research question attempted to examine any potential difference in overall marital satisfaction based on marital setting (first marriage or second marriage). The sample lacked diversity with 89.6% of the research participants identified as first marriage therefore lacking appropriate statistics to conduct any analysis with the mean differences between respondents for marital setting. For research question two, a one-way Between-Subjects ANOVA was used to compare the mean scores on tests of marital satisfaction and marital adjustment by ethnicity. Results showed no statistically significant relationship between marital satisfaction and ethnicity or between marital adjustment and ethnicity. To address research question three, a one-way Between-Subjects ANOVA was used to examine any relationship between overall marital satisfaction and participation in couple relationship education (CRE) or marriage relationship education (MRE). Results showed no

statistically significant relationship between overall marital satisfaction and participation in either couple relationship education or marriage relationship education. Finally, research question four attempted to examine any significant difference in the overall marital satisfaction of Christian individuals based on their participation in either couple relationship education or marriage relationship education by ethnicity. Research results evidenced no significant relationship between overall marital satisfaction and participation in couple relationship education or marriage relationship education by ethnicity. Further discussion of the results is provided in chapter five.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS**

### **Overview**

This chapter addresses the significance of the findings related to the research questions this study investigated: a) Is there a difference in the overall marital satisfaction of Christian individuals based on marital setting (first marriage or remarriage), b) Does the overall marital satisfaction of Christian individuals vary by ethnicity, c) Does participation in couple relationship education (CRE) or marriage relationship education (MRE) programs impact the overall marital satisfaction of Christian individuals, and d) Does participation in CRE or MRE programs impact the marital satisfaction among different ethnicities? Chapter Five also includes discussion of limitations and implications and recommendations for future research.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate factors that mediate marital satisfaction in ethnically diverse Christian marriages. Sixty-seven Christian individuals who have been married at least five years to the current spouse were administered the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test to measure marital adjustment and the Index of Marital Satisfaction to measure marital satisfaction.

Much research has been done on marital satisfaction, yet little of this research has been able to correlate the mediators that cause individuals to experience satisfaction within their marriage. Although Christians are taught that the marriage relationship is a covenant relationship, it was expected that having a Christian belief by itself would not ensure that there would be a greater degree of overall marital satisfaction. Research has discovered that individuals who attend CRE or MRE programs usually attend prior to marriage or because they may be experiencing difficulties within their respective relationships; however, the commitment

required to achieved marital satisfaction is ongoing throughout the course of that relationship, and the skills learned within MRE or CRE programs must be intentionally practiced on a daily basis.

Additionally, many other factors contribute to overall marital satisfaction that were not measured within this study such as if individual expectations were met, whether financial difficulties were a moderator, and what lessons were learned between prior marriage and remarriage. Since many couples remain together out of religious obligation, the question arises whether religious obligation is a mediator to experiencing a deeper sense of satisfaction within marriage (Nelson et al., 2011).

It was important to measure Christian individuals who had been married for longer than five years with the hope that some of those individuals had taken a CRE or MRE program before or after marriage within their respective churches since the targeted churches have some form of marriage ministry which hosts MRE programs such as Love and Respect, Sacred Marriage or PREP. The findings of this study did not measure the influence of such programs in providing the necessary skills that contribute to individual marital satisfaction even though it is important to understand how the learning of such skills that these programs provide contribute to marital satisfaction. Without this training, these skills are otherwise learned through social learning and role modeling behaviors which are not always positive.

Research has indicated that there is a greater sense of moral commitment to remain in a marriage despite ethnicity due to a belief in Christ's sacrificial love (Nelson et al., 2011); therefore, it was not expected that there would be any difference in marital satisfaction among Christian individuals based on ethnicity since the identities of Christians are rooted in Christ's example of love and sacrifice. This study met this expectation.

## Research Question One

Is there a difference in overall marital satisfaction based on marital setting (first marriage or remarriage)? This study lacked statistical diversity since 60 of the 67 participants reported they were in a first marriage. The results of the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test used to measure marital adjustment and the Index of Marital Satisfaction used to measure marital satisfaction in remarriage could not effectively measure marital satisfaction in remarriage; therefore, the study can neither support nor reject  $H_0$ .

While no measure in this study indicated how long first marriages had lasted in those couples that had remarried, previous research by Cirhinlioglu et al. (2018) had found no connection exists between length of marriage and marital satisfaction. Additionally, attachment security, which is indicative of marital satisfaction (Mosko and Pistole, 2010) is not determined by whether the marriage is a first marriage or a remarriage (Diamond, Brimhall, and Elliot, 2018).

Furthermore, research studies on marital satisfaction have produced contradictory findings regarding changes that occur throughout the course of a marriage. Margelisch et al. (2017) noted a decline during the early years of marriage (Carroll and Doherty, 2003) but marital satisfaction increased in later years (Cirhinlioglu et al., 2018; Margelisch et al., 2017) while other researchers found no such connection (Jackson et al., 2014). Religious couples in both first marriage and remarriage reported greater marital satisfaction than non-religious couples (Lee et al., 2013; Maxwell et al., 2018 Schramm et al., 2012). David and Stafford (2015) found that couples who have a secure God attachment have happier marriages. Since the couples in this study were Christians, this study appears to confirm these previous studies.

Secure attachment is an essential element of a lasting marriage. Because one's emotions

affect attachment to another, one's mental schema is an essential element in attachment bonding (Mosko & Pistole, 2010). Individuals develop emotional schemas through their experiences which have shaped their perception of events (Timulak & Keogh, 2015). If a person perceives neglect or a threat to the relationship, conflict may arise that leads to the disengagement from the relationship (Sanford & Grace, 2011). While Knapp et al. (2015) recommend addressing past difficulty in family-of-origin when marital problems arise, other researchers disagree on whether attachment style is formed during childhood experiences (Diamond et al., 2017).

Achieving marital satisfaction is difficult as evidenced by more than half of first marriages ending in divorce (Mirecki et al, 2010; Mosko & Pistole, 2010), and couples who are in a second marriage are at a greater risk for marital dissatisfaction (Stanley et al., 2006). Remarriage poses special problems since more people are involved in the process of role adjustment. However, Mirecki et al. (2013) found that couples in a first marriage reported their marital satisfaction at higher levels than did those in a second marriage, and the length of the first marriage was more significant than length of the second marriage. This study could not measure any statistically significant difference between first marriage and remarriage.

The attachment theory applies to the success or failures to achieve marital satisfaction in both a first marriage or remarriage. Research studies have linked healthy attachment with marital satisfaction (Cirhinlioglu et al., 2018). Attachment security in spouses is necessary for them to trust each other (Mosko & Pistole, 2010), and secure attachment increases the likelihood of good communication which is essential to marital satisfaction. Also, attachment can become more secure over time (Knapp et al., 2015) which is a significant factor in marriages that have lasted at least five years (Diamond et al., 2017). Conversely, attachment avoidance is a predictor of both emotional and sexual infidelity (Cirhinlioglu et al, 2018) and anxiety attachment, where a spouse

feels abandonment, correlates with anxiety God-related attachment which presents a likelihood for marital dissatisfaction (Knabbe, 2014).

The social learning theory also applies to this study as it impacts the prediction, prevention, and treatment of marital satisfaction. The ability to adapt, which is the core of social learning theory, enhances marital quality. Couples who support each other can maintain satisfaction in their relationship (Johnson & Bradbury, 2015). On the contrary, Markman, Halford, and Hawkins (2019) question in their investigation whether the theoretical approach of social learning can result in any meaningful change.

### **Research Question Two**

Does the overall marital satisfaction of Christian couples vary by ethnicity? In this study, neither the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test nor the Index of Marital Satisfaction showed any significant difference in overall marital satisfaction based on ethnicity. Therefore, this study retains  $H_0$ : There is no statistically significant difference in overall marital satisfaction of Christian couples based on ethnicity.

Research conducted on the effect of racial diversity on marital satisfaction has produced mixed results. Bandura (2006) found that while cultural diversity affects behavior in social relationships, technology has made possible observational learning across cultural backgrounds. In addition, Lam et al. (2016) in their study concluded that ethnicity was not a predictor of conflict, and Mitchell (2010) reported that few studies show ethnicity predicts marital happiness or unhappiness. In contrast, Adler-Baeder et al. (2010) found marital dissatisfaction was a predictor of divorce among Caucasians but not among African Americans.

However, cultural expectations influence what constitutes a satisfactory relationship, and these expectations vary in different cultural background (Lam et al., 2016). For example, in

Latino cultures, different expectations exist in marriage. Since in these cultures, infidelity may be considered expected behavior, its occurrence may not contribute to marital dissatisfaction (Snyder, Duncan, & Larson, 2010). These different cultures also have different priorities in marriage (Lam et al., 2016; Mitchell, 2010), and the relationship is deemed satisfactory based on whether it fulfills the culture's requirements (Lucas et al., 2008). Professionals working with ethnic couples can apply the social learning theory of observing the mores and laws of the society in which they live and adapt to them (Snyder et al., 2010).

Today there are multiple ethnic and bicultural marriages (Mitchell, 2010). These interracial relationships may have conflicting cultural patterns that affect marital satisfaction (Troy & Lewes-Smith, 2006). In ethnically diverse distressed couples, the effects of family-of-origin and attachment style affect their marital happiness (Knapp et al., 2015). Damianakis et al. (2018) noted a greater positive impact of religiosity on marital quality in ethnic and racial minorities with church attendance being a protective factor for both African American and Hispanic couples (Ellison, et al., 1999).

### **Research Question Three**

Does participation in couple relationship education (CRE) or marriage relationship education (MRE) programs impact the overall marital satisfaction of Christian couples? The goal of CRE and MRE programs is to facilitate healthy, lasting relationships through reducing conflict in marriage. This is accomplished when couples develop skills such as self-regulation of emotions, forgiveness, and sacrifice (Amato, et al., 2016). In this study, neither the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test or the Index of Marital Satisfaction showed any significant difference in overall marital satisfaction based on participation in either CRE or MRE programs. Therefore, this study retains  $H_03$ : There is no statistically significant difference in the overall

marital satisfaction of Christian couples based on their participation in couple relationship education (CRE) or marriage relationship education (MRE). It is probable that these results demonstrated as having no statistical significance since CRE and MRE programs were not programs that participants reported being involved in throughout their marriage but rather taken once prior to or after marriage.

In recent studies, Markman et al. (2019) found these programs provide early intervention that improves relationships. Epstein et al. (2016) reported that relationship skills tests following CRE or MRE correlated with the time spent in training. Lasting change, however, varied among participants. While positive change in dyadic coping could last for years (Bodenmann, et al., 2019), the benefits low-income couples experienced were minimalized after two years (Markman et al., 2019). Both CRE and MRE focus on spousal communication because it is a strong predictor for marital satisfaction (Epstein et al., 2016; Schmidt et al., 2018).

The success of CRE and MRE programs is greater when both spouses attend (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010). Research studies have shown inconsistent results in that positive effects vary from no effect to small effect to significant positive effect among distressed couples. High risk couples experienced greater improvement than did couples at low risk (Antle et al., 2013; Barton, Futris, & Bradley, 2014). Unfortunately, most relationship programs lack empirical validation (Jacobi, 2017; Schmidt et al., 2015). The PREP program is the only program that has recorded long term outcomes (Markman et al., 2019). Therefore, while researchers have found beneficial results from CRE and MRE training programs, there are contradictory results as well.

Johnson and Bradbury (2015) recommend intervention programs incorporating social learning theory to address the contextual factors which disrupt marital functioning such as job stress, economic pressure, and discrimination. Studies by Rauer et al. (2014) and Bodenmann,

Bradbury, and Pihet (2009) support the social learning theory applied in CRE and MRE since it places emphasis on skills training to bring positive change. The cognitive behavior theory also applies to these programs because it posits that when individuals confront maladaptive cognitions and modify them, they can change their behavior (Jacobi, 2017; Mitchell, 2010). Therefore, if couples have been experiencing low relationship satisfaction, early intervention can help them develop effective strategies for improvement (Epstein & Zheng, 2017; Markman et al., 2019). However, the programs' efficacy may be short-lived because some researchers found that in two years, only 70% of participants had maintained this progress (Johnson & Bradbury, 2015).

#### **Research Question Four**

Does participation in CRE or MRE programs impact marital satisfaction among different ethnicities? This study retains H<sub>04</sub>: There is no statistically significant difference in the overall marital satisfaction of Christian couples based on their participation in couple relationship education (CRE) or marriage relationship education (MRE) based on their ethnicity. Once again, it is probable that these results demonstrated as having no statistical significance since CRE and MRE programs were not programs that participants reported being involved in throughout their marriage but rather taken once prior to or after marriage.

Previous studies have focused on the efficacy of CRE programs among minority couples, but Adler-Baeder et al. (2010) found minorities are less likely to attend CRE programs perhaps because of cultural factors. They were unable to explain how race related to individual functioning. However, the study did show African Americans and Latinos were more satisfied with the results than were Caucasian couples. Development of relationship skills that are taught in these programs is important because once conflict begins, the behavioral patterns are difficult to change (Hook et al., 2014). While the theoretical approaches applicable to CRE and MRE are

consistent among all couples, professionals must be culturally sensitive in administering the programs.

### **Implications**

Understanding the relationship between marital satisfaction and marital dissolution and the negative effect divorce has on families and society is of paramount importance. The implications of this study indicate the need for further research on the components that contribute to healthy marital structure. This study lacked the statistical power to measure marital satisfaction based on setting because it fell short in the number of individuals reporting being in a remarriage and therefore could not validate prior research that demonstrated higher levels of marital satisfaction in first marriages than in second marriages (Mirecki, Chou, Elliot, & Schneider, 2013). It is interesting to note, however, the majority of the individuals sampled in this study were in their first marriage. Research has shown that individuals who believe that God is a part of their relationship and view their relationship as holy experience enhanced marital quality. This kind of commitment is an important component toward the developing of marital satisfaction. It is important for researchers to develop a better understanding on what keeps individuals committed to their first marriage.

The study further revealed that there is no difference in marital satisfaction based on ethnicity, and, in retrospect, this result may be due to the sample population not being targeted to culturally specific individuals. While many respondents were of Asian ethnicity, a central tenet of Christianity, written in the New Testament, is that there is no distinction between ethnicities, but rather one's identity is in Christ (Romans 10:12, Galatians 3:28). Further research would help to understand why there is no difference among Christian individuals based on ethnicity and if this tenet is correlated. Presently, a gap exists regarding understanding marital satisfaction in

bicultural marriages. In addition, while in general, individuals have expectations that may include a desire for happiness, many other factors are important to consider. Some of these factors include the ability or desire of a couple to have children, socioeconomic status, major transitions in life and family of origin issues that are endemic to humanity regardless of ethnic or cultural differences. The study of these factors would bring greater understanding of any difference in overall levels of marital satisfaction in individuals based on ethnicity.

Additional implications of this study are that while CRE and MRE programs may be foundational to developing relationship skills, they do not necessarily make a difference in the overall level of marital satisfaction in Christian individuals regardless of ethnicity or participation in a CRE or MRE program prior to or after marriage. Respondents to the survey were in large part female. Anecdotal evidence suggests that women seem to be more inclined to realize when their relationship is not doing well and, consequently, are the ones who initiate the process of getting help. Most respondents related that they were experiencing average to high levels of marital satisfaction with the ceiling effect being “extremely satisfied.” It is possible that these couples may have scored high due to their religious commitment since they attended CRE or MRE programs through a religious organization.

Twice as many respondents attended a CRE or MRE program prior to marriage than those who attended after marriage. The possible reason for this may be that individuals who view their marriage as a religious commitment may seek to prepare themselves for marriage as an act of devotion that is performed before God. Those who attended a program after marriage may have done so because most religious institutions have a marriage ministry which periodically offers such programs to enrich marriages, to promote fellowship among married couples, and to

preserve existing marriages. Another possibility is that couples are often encouraged to attend such programs by friends who have attended in the past or plan to attend a program in the future.

Slightly under half of the respondents reported they had never attended a CRE or MRE program. The possible reason for this may be that much of the existing problem with participation among diverse ethnicities is that in some cultures there is a stigma associated with attending such programs. They may assume that these programs are for individuals with mental issues.

While CRE and MRE programs provide foundational information, they may be limited in scope. Marriage is an ongoing commitment that requires continual support, and relationship education should begin long before marriage. Religious leaders and researchers within the field of curriculum development should consider revisions within CRE and MRE programs. These revisions should include elaborating on major transitions of life as well as on family of origin issues.

### **Limitations**

There are numerous limitations within this study that must be considered. First, due to COVID-19 closures of churches, targeted populations were significantly reduced, causing the inability to provide larger sample sizes to provide statistical power to this research study. While this study included several different ethnicities in addition to Caucasians, minority groups were underrepresented, African American in particular. A greater number of participants might show statistical significance in some measures where none existed in this study.

In addition, the sample groups taken for this study were limited to a group of individuals who are Christian. Therefore, the findings in this study cannot be applied to a general population

who do not share Christian beliefs. Another limitation was that the findings in this study cannot be applied to a general population who do not share Christian beliefs.

Furthermore, while the study measured whether a CRE or MRE program was taken, not all participants related which program was taken, and if so, the study did not measure the influence of the program in contributing to overall levels of marital satisfaction making it difficult to generalize these findings to represent all Christian individuals and all MRE and CRE programs available.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Further research is needed on the factors that influence marital satisfaction. Researchers need to conduct studies on gender as a factor in ethnic racial minorities (Jackson et al., 2014), on whether ethnic and bicultural marriages face the same challenges as do Caucasian marriages (Mitchell, 2010), and on how life's major transitions affect marital satisfaction (Jackson et al., 2014; Mitchell, 2010).

More study is needed on how family-of-origin influences marital satisfaction and attachment styles (Knapp et al., 2015). Research by Lam et al. (2016) found that in family-of-origin, patterns of behaviors influence a female's reaction to conflict regarding the perception of the event. Since family-of-origin styles of communication can become multigenerational, negative patterns in the parental family can also appear in the children's families (Knapp et al., 2015). In addition, studies should focus on whether these influences are culturally created.

Further research should investigate the effect of level of commitment in religious families on marital satisfaction, as religious beliefs associated with commitment are a significant aspect of marital satisfaction. This effect of religious commitment is true for Jewish, Muslim, and Christian couples and for both Caucasians and African Americans (Mitchell et al., 2015).

Insufficient research has investigated the relationship between religiosity and marital functioning (Lopez et al., 2013) or to the effects of divorce and remarriage on marital satisfaction (Schramm et al., 2012).

Christian couples can come from a broad religious background. For example, Catholics and Protestants have different practices, as do Protestant conservatives and liberals. A measure that addressed this factor would provide a more specific application of the effect of religiosity on Christian couples. In addition, since most research involving MRE and CRE has involved educated, middle-to-upper class Caucasian couples (Snyder et al., 2010), more study should focus on targeted demographic populations (Epstein & Zheng, 2017).

The level of marital satisfaction is a factor in marital success (Randles & Avishai, 2018). This research examined any differences in level of marital satisfaction based on first marriage or re-marriage in Christian couples who have been married for at least five years. Since marital satisfaction has a positive effect on one's health and wellbeing (Fincham & Beach, 2010) as well as on their personal and interpersonal happiness, studies should include how unrealistic expectations for finding personal happiness weaken the significance of marriage as a social institution resulting in serious social consequences of failed marriage, poverty, and crime (Randles & Avishai, 2018).

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## Appendix

### Participant Invitation Letter

Dear Potential Participant:

As a doctoral student in the School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to examine any differences in the level of marital satisfaction based on first marriage or re-marriage in Christian individuals who have been married for at least five years, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be married to their current spouse for at least five years and identify themselves as Christian. Participants, if willing, will be asked to complete a self-report demographic survey (5 minutes), the Index of Marital Satisfaction survey (5 minutes) and the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment survey (8 minutes). Participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be collected.

In order to participate, please click here [https://eSurv.org?u=marriage\\_survey2020](https://eSurv.org?u=marriage_survey2020)

to complete the attached surveys.

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary and consent to participate is indicated when you click the link to access the provided surveys.

Sincerely,

Rafael D. Acosta, MA  
Doctoral Student  
rdacosta@liberty.edu

## Informed Consent Form

**Title of the Project:** Investigating Overall Marital Satisfaction in Christian Couples based on Marital Setting and Ethnicity

**Principal Investigator:** Rafael D. Acosta, MA, Liberty University

### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be married for at least five years to your current spouse. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is examine any difference in the level of marital satisfaction based on first marriage or re-marriage in Christian individuals who have been married for at least five years.

### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete an online demographic self-report survey (approximately 5 min.)
2. Complete online the Index of Marital Satisfaction (approximately 5 min.)
3. Complete online the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Survey (approximately 8 min.)

### How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include: The results of this research could potentially provide insight into the marital satisfaction in Christian individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

### What risks might you experience from being in this study?

**The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.**

### How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher and research statistician will have access to the records. Data will be secured on a password-locked computer and will be retained for three years upon completion of the study. No names or identifiable information will be included on the surveys.

### How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

#### **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time prior to submitting the survey without affecting those relationships.

#### **What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please exit the survey and close your internet browser. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study.

#### **Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Rafael Acosta. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at 561-704-3207 or [rdacosta@liberty.edu](mailto:rdacosta@liberty.edu). You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. William Bird, at [wbird@liberty.edu](mailto:wbird@liberty.edu).

#### **Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu)

#### **Your Consent**

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You can print a copy of this document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above

# Institutional Review Board Approval

Date: 9-6-2020

IRB #: IRB-FY19-20-152

Title: Investigating Overall Marital Satisfaction in Christian Couples based on Marital Setting and Ethnicity

Creation Date: 2-17-2020

End Date:

Status: **Approved**

Principal Investigator: Rafael Acosta

Review Board: Research Ethics Office

Sponsor:

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## Study History

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Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Exempt	Decision	<b>Exempt</b>
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## Key Study Contacts

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Member	William Bird	Role	Co-Principal Investigator	Contact	wbird@liberty.edu
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Member	Rafael Acosta	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	rdacosta@liberty.edu
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Member	Rafael Acosta	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	rdacosta@liberty.edu
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