

**Premarital Counseling and Christianity: A Composition of Couples Intuition and
Understanding as it relates to Marital Satisfaction**

by

Sheila Delores Salley

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

School of Behavioral Sciences

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

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APPROVED BY:

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ABSTRACT

Increasing divorce rates in the United States of America have resulted in Premarital Counseling (PMC) gaining grave popularity over the last couple of decades. There has been a proliferation of premarital counseling programs in the United States of America since the 1930s with a thrust toward building and sustaining satisfying marriages. Traditional premarital counseling programs focus on ensuring satisfaction once the couple is married; however, there is a significant gap in researching the impact of incorporating Christian values as a means of therapeutic intervention. This study involved eight Christian, African American, heterosexual couples who received Christian-based PMC (CPMC) and have been married for a minimum of seven years. An interpretative phenomenology approach (IPA) to qualitative research was utilized to obtain in-depth knowledge regarding how the couples view the contribution of CPMC to the attainment of marital satisfaction. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews that were conducted via Zoom video conferencing. Data was summarized using IPA analytics. Topics such as cohabitation, and family of origin, are discussed in the study.

Keywords: Christian, Biblical principles, marital covenant, marriage, premarital counseling, divorce, cohabitation

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this project to my husband, mother, children, and best friend, all of whom played an integral role in encouraging me by word and deed throughout my doctoral journey. My husband never wavered in his belief that I could and would complete the task. My mother raised me to be confident and courageous, both of which were needed to even attempt to earn what so few have, a Doctoral degree. My children checked in just at the right times to nudge me to completion, and my best friend never failed to text me uplifting emoji's, send beautiful, thoughtful cards, to keep me encouraged.

They say it takes a village to raise a child, I say it takes one to earn a Doctorate degree. I am very grateful for my village. I could not have done it without them!

I also dedicate this project to my grandchildren, nieces and nephews who have a long road ahead of them called "life." My hope is they will recognize that whatever they set out to do, can be accomplished through Christ who strengthens us.

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List of Abbreviations

CPMC.....	Christian Premarital Counseling
IPA.....	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
PAIRS.....	The Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills
PMC.....	Premarital Counseling
PREP/ENRICH-P/E.....	Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program
SYMBIS.....	Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts

Chapter One: Introduction

Overview

The purpose of Chapter One is to introduce the research topic. The background establishes the topic of research within relevant existing literature by identifying what is known and the gap that exists in understanding marital satisfaction among African American couples of Christian faith. The chapter also identifies the specific problem and purpose of the research. The importance of the research is described, and the definition of key terms is presented. The information provided in Chapter 1 is expounded upon in Chapter Two.

Background

Historical

Divorce rates steadily increased from the mid-1800s to the 1950s. Governor Ronald Reagan of California signed into law the "No Fault" divorce bill in 1969. Couples were no longer obligated to cite wrongdoing to divorce their spouses. This bill was adopted by every state in the union and resulted in a divorce revolution in the United States of America (US), (Weltzman, 1985). From 1960 to 1980, the divorce rate more than doubled – from 9.2 divorces per 1,000 married women to 22.6 divorces per 1,000 married women. Less than 20% of couples who married in 1950 ended up divorced; 50% of couples married in 1970 ended up divorced (Riley, 1991). Recent evidence indicates that there is a divorce case for every two marriages (Schweizer, 2019). The divorce rates in the US vary based on race with African American women having the highest cases of divorce (Schweizer, 2019). Marital satisfaction is attained when both partners adapt to the process of conflict resolution to the extent that each partner is satisfied with the other in the marriage (Arafani, 2017; Margelisch et al., 2017). Family of origin, spirituality, value systems, and self-esteem can play a significant role in marital satisfaction over time (Baker,

2019; Fonseca et al., 2018; Karimi et al., 2019). Premarital counseling helps couples acquire the necessary skills to develop a satisfying marriage (Kariuki, 2018; Navabifar et al., 2020). While each partner may experience satisfaction at distinct levels within the marriage, working to satisfy each other can bring about a satisfying marriage (Baker, 2019).

Premarital counselors (PMC), and Christian premarital counselors (CPMC) have used counseling as an intervention to address the concerns over divorce and social, psychological, and health concerns associated with dissatisfied marriages (Margelisch et al., 2017; Brand et al., 2019; Lawrence et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2020). Marriage counseling originated in Germany in the 1920s as part of the eugenics movement. In the 1930s, the first institution for marriage counseling was birthed in the United States. According to Borowski and Tambling (2015), 44% of couples who are getting married receive premarital counseling before they take their wedding vows, yet 50% of marriages end in divorce despite participation in premarital counseling (PMC) programs (Felkey, 2016). This evidence indicates that marital satisfaction could be elusive in marriages.

Premarital counseling programs like the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program PREPARE/ENRICH (P/E), Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts (SYMBIS) and The Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS) provide skills for marriage preparation and maintenance (Alaf et al., 2017). The programs offer practical tools that if applied, could lead to marital satisfaction. P/E focuses on the communication factor between couples through using computerized testing and analysis (Mortazavi et al., 2020). Relationship dynamics such as leisure activity, sexual relationships, spiritual beliefs, couple's closeness, monetary management, personality, communication, conflict resolution, relationship roles, avoidance, assertiveness, and partner dominance are explored for compatibility and differences

(Kwong & Yin, 2000, Mortazavi et al., 2020). SYMBIS is a similar assessment tool that evaluates each partner's attitude toward marriage, goals, strengths, weaknesses, relationship with potential in-laws, relational well-being, spirituality, sex, money, conflict, and communication patterns (Parrott & Parrott, 2015). The Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS) focuses on how each partner views love and teaches partners knowledge of self, emotional efficacy, and how to change ineffective behavior (Alaf et al., 2017). Each of the three programs (PAIRS, SYMBIS, and P/E) has a built-in component that addresses spiritual intervention however, there is a gap in the literature concerning the intervention of Biblical principles as a premarital counseling construct that is supported throughout the Bible (Wilcox, 2020).

Social

Empirical studies have proven the positive impact that PMC has on marital satisfaction (Fawcett et al., 2010). However, there is little known evidence on how the Biblical principles, when integrated in Christian Premarital Counseling (CPMC), could contribute towards addressing marital satisfaction. Schonick (1975) found that in the State of California, the majority of couples seeking a marriage license sought marriage preparation from a pastor.

According to Felkey (2016), 90% of marriages are performed by ministers with an aim toward fostering spiritual families under God yet there is a 50% divorce rate of the marriages performed. Buikema (2001) reported, in a study conducted by Covenant Theological Seminary, that the seminary experience did not equip ministers to be effective premarital counselors. According to Jones and Stahmann (1994), 50% of the pastors surveyed, performed premarital counseling without academic training. A vom Eigen's (1983) study of Presbyterian ministers

reached a similar conclusion and called for seminaries and theological graduate schools to address this concern.

African American couples are among the demographics with the highest incidence of challenges in marital dissatisfaction leading to divorce (Alaf et al., 2017; Baker, 2019; Mortazavi et al., 2020). Findings from previous studies indicate such couples are likely to experience marital satisfaction if they focus on their spiritual growth (Bawa, 2018; Shearin, 2016). Some researchers argue that premarital counseling approaches such as CPMC that incorporate biblical teaching during the counseling sessions are likely to help the couples develop satisfying marriages (Bawa, 2018; Shearin, 2016). It should be however noted that the researcher did not find evidence based on African American couples that support suggestions made by Shearin (2016) and Bawa (2018).

Theoretical

As indicated by the Behavioral Family Counseling Theory, an individual is able learn and implement a given behavior (Watson, 1913). According to Kariuki, (2018), Behavioral Family Counseling Theory can be used by researchers to explore how married couples perceive the role that counseling plays in the learning of new behaviors in marriage. In this study, the researcher uses the Behavioral Family Counseling Theory to explore if couples who perceive biblical principles to be rewarding in terms of enabling them to have satisfying marital relationships, are likely to implement them (Kariuki, 2018; Watson, 1913). This study explored whether incorporating biblical principles during CPMC strengthens a couple's intuition and understanding of marriage, an understanding that could lead to marital satisfaction.

Situation to Self

My motivation for conducting the study was to explore the philosophical assumption that counseling Christian couples from the incorporation of Biblical principles, will encourage marital satisfaction. As a licensed and ordained minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I have counseled many married couples over the past three decades. Commonalities were observed in couples experiencing marital dissatisfaction. The couples lacked the fundamental principles and purpose of marriage according to the Bible. This lack of knowledge compelled me to conduct my study. The purpose and premise of the study is for me to obtain deep, thick, rich data as human experiences are sought, and explored. Common themes were generated to help me understand how Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, married a minimum of seven years who received CPMC from credentialed counselors, perceive marital satisfaction. I believe that when Christian couples follow the Biblical blueprint (The Holy Bible) concerning marriage and family, satisfaction will follow. God is the creator of heaven and earth and all that dwells therein. He has given us all things that pertain unto life and godliness according to His Divine power (II Peter 1:3, *King James Bible*, 1769/2017).

Smith and Ceusters (2010) define ontology as the study of one's ideas derived from one's existence and reality. Epistemology is defined as theoretical knowledge derived from methods, validity and scope that distinguish belief from opinion (Merriam-Webster (1828)). My focus on this topic is informed by the belief that marital satisfaction could be attained when Biblical principles are coupled with other therapeutic intervention methods of counseling. However, from the assessment of literature, I noted that the church, in many ways, has failed to promote God's plan for marriage and family by not fully engaging the Bible toward the attainment of oneness (Köstenberger & Jones, 2004) within the scope of premarital counseling. I have also noted from

the assessment of the literature that although ministers preside over 90% of Christian marriages performed in hopes of fostering marital unions and spiritual families, marital dissatisfaction continues to be reported (Felkey, 2016). I hope my work provides important insights that will assist Christian premarital counselors in understanding and delivering counsel from a Biblical perspective.

Problem Statement

The problem is that evidence indicates that heterosexual African American couples have the higher rates of divorce compared to other groups in the US (Schweizer, 2019). It is likely that the reported high divorce rates among heterosexual African American couples is due to marital dissatisfaction (Schweizer, 2019). Ministers preside over 90% of marriages performed in hopes of fostering marital unions and spiritual families under God but are yet realize a 50% divorce rate (Brown, 2019). Given the high divorce rates, researchers have raised concerns over whether the premarital counseling that the heterosexual African American couples get from ministers help the couples to navigate marital challenges and build satisfying marriages (Alaf et al., 2017; Baker, 2019; Mortazavi et al., 2020). Evidence indicates that couples who have a good understanding of biblical texts and implement the teachings in their marriage are likely to experience marital satisfaction (Bawa, 2018; Shearin, 2016). It has been suggested that premarital counseling such as CPMC that emphasize biblical principles could lead to better problem solving, communication, understanding, role sharing, and expression of love and empathy (Bawa, 2018; Shearin, 2016) which could bring about marital satisfaction. It should however be noted that some evidence indicates that biblical principles when used as one-size-fits-all in premarital counseling, may not be beneficial in enhancing marital satisfaction (Shahhosseini et al., 2014; Tuffour, 2017). Understanding the role of biblical principles in

addressing the problem of marital dissatisfaction among Christian, heterosexual, African American couples is limited by the lack of known evidence on their experiences of marital satisfaction. Therefore, understanding the contribution of CPMC towards marital satisfaction is important in proposing evidence-based strategies for developing satisfying marriages in Christian, heterosexual, African American couples.

There is limited research that examines if the incorporation of Biblical principles into the fabric of CPMC will strengthen a couple's intuition and understanding of marriage, thus leading to marital satisfaction. This qualitative study will examine the lived experiences of eight Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, married a minimum of 7 years, that received CPMC from credentialed counselors.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover how Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, married a minimum of 7 years, that received CPMC from credentialed counselors, at two churches located in large Northeastern, and Southeastern states, perceive marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction is defined as a mental state that reflects experiences where partners work to satisfy each other and bring about a satisfying marriage. The theory guiding this study is Behavioral Family Counseling Theory that was proposed by Watson (1913). The theory conceptualizes that behavior is learned. According to Watson, people have the capacity to internalize information regarding new behavior and to implement such behavior in their lives. The second concept of Behavioral Family Counseling Theory is that couples can act based on the reinforcement provided. The theory and its emphasis support my focus of inquiry in the discovery of whether the incorporation of Biblical principles in CPMC can lead to marital satisfaction.

Significance of the Study

This study provided insights into the lived experiences of eight Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, married a minimum of seven years, that received CPMC from credentialed counselors. The findings helped to address the concerns regarding the limited understanding of experiences of marital relationship among couples who received premarital counseling that focus on biblical principles (Shahhosseini et al., 2014; Tuffour, 2017). It is my expectation that the significance of this study was impactful in three diverse ways. The first is the research community. It is expected that the outcome of the study will add to the existing literature regarding the experiences of marital satisfaction among Christian heterosexual African American couples that received CPMC from credentialed counselors. The second is that this study will have a practical impact on the development and implementation of new CPMC methodologies that focus on the incorporation of Biblical principles to the attainment of marital satisfaction. Lastly, it is expected that the outcome of the study will lend itself to increased marital satisfaction and decreased divorce rates among Christian heterosexual African American couples when biblical principles are incorporated into CPMC.

Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to discover how Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, married a minimum of seven years, that received CPMC from credentialed counselors, perceive marital satisfaction. A semi-structured interview format was used to maintain consistency with the purpose of the study. The overarching RQ was addressed based on the following sub-questions:

SQ1. How do couples who received CPMC define marital satisfaction?

This research question focuses on understanding how CPMC contributes to their perception of marital satisfaction (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

SQ2. How do couples who received CPMC perceive the Bible contribution to marital satisfaction?

This research question focuses on discovering how couples perceive Biblical context as a contributor to marital satisfaction (Arafani, 2017; Felkey, 2016; Wilson et al., 2019).

Definitions

Biblical Context: The process of assigning meaning as a means of understanding the circumstances in which scripture is introduced and executed (Felkey, A., 2016).

Christian: A person who believes in Jesus Christ and follows his teachings (Felkey, A., 2016).

Credentialed Christian Premarital Counseling/Counselors (CPMC): Counseling provided by a Christian lay person, professional or clergy that is licensed, or certified in the discipline of CPMC (Hook, et al., 2009).

Heterosexual: A person who is sexually attracted to a person of the opposite sex (Hull, et al., 2010).

Marital Satisfaction: A mental state that reflects experiences where partners work to satisfy each other and bring about a satisfying marriage (Aman et al., 2019).

Premarital Counseling (PMC): Educational and supportive guidance to individuals planning marriage provided by a member of the clergy trained in counseling, a therapist, or some other appropriately qualified person (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Professing Christian: A person who openly proclaims to be a follower of Jesus Christ (Stackhouse, M., 1997).

Spiritual Intervention: An approach that involves religious or existential aspects such as finding meaning and purpose in life (David & Stafford, 2015).

Summary

Evidence indicates that African American couples have a higher rate of divorce compared to other groups in the US (Schweizer, 2019). It was my intention to provide a compelling case for qualitatively researching how Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, married a minimum of seven years, that received CPMC from credentialed counselors, perceive marital satisfaction. Researchers have raised concerns over whether the premarital counseling received from ministers, help the couples to navigate marital challenges in ways that lead to marital satisfaction (Alaf et al., 2017; Baker, 2019; Mortazavi et al., 2020). The researcher seeks to understand how Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, married a minimum of seven years, that received CPMC from credentialed counselors at two churches located in large Northeastern, and Southeastern states, perceive marital satisfaction. According to Shahhosseini et al., (2014), a couple's readiness for marriage is raised during traditional PMC using techniques and strategies that promote enhanced fundamental abilities. However, counseling is limited to becoming more acquainted with themselves and each other. The research that will guide this proposed qualitative study is interpretative phenomenology. Interpretative phenomenology allows the development of knowledge, based on the experiences and views of the participants (Alase, 2017; Smith, 2011). The collection of rich, deep, wide, thick data gathered from the shared phenomenon of the participant, was organized, and synthesized. The data collected was used to identify emerging themes in the narratives of the couple's marital satisfaction. The study is expected to contribute toward the formulation of CPMC that will help counselors better understand how CPMC can impact marital satisfaction in couples.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Overview

This literature review provides an overview of the effectiveness of aspects related to marital satisfaction as perceived among couples that received CPMC. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to discover how Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, married a minimum of seven years, that received CPMC from credentialed counselors, at two churches located in large Northeastern, and Southeastern states, perceive marital satisfaction. The assessment of the existing literature also sought to establish if there is a gap in the research area. The literature was reviewed to gain intuition and understanding of existing research relative to the study. Concepts and ideas that assess marital satisfaction based on the Christian perspective were searched and synthesized. The researcher used peer-reviewed studies and published reports specific to the subject matter. The study is extended from the work of Nelson et al., (2011) who explored and discovered that couples who acknowledge God as their source and believe marriage to be sanctified unto Him who is present and active in their marriage, through the application of His Word (The Holy Bible), experience higher levels of marital satisfaction. The literature review is organized into three major sections. The first section is the theoretical framework, followed by the presentation of themes from the reviewed literature; the third and last is the summary.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that guides this study is the Behavioral Family Counseling Theory that was proposed by Watson (1913). The theory is based on the emphasis that behavior

is learned. According to Watson, people have the capacity to internalize information regarding new behavior and to implement such behavior in their lives. The second emphasis of Behavioral Family Counseling Theory is that couples could act based on the reinforcement provided.

Watson (1913) argued that when individuals are provided sufficient motivation, they act in a predictable reinforced manner. He further noted that the individuals are not likely to implement a given behavior unless there is a more rewarding alternative behavior.

Based on the Behavioral Family Counseling Theory the prospective candidates of marriage can learn new behaviors through counseling (Kariuki, 2018). Metcalf (2011) noted that through interventions such as premarital counseling, individuals can learn how to adopt adaptive behavior while avoiding maladaptive behaviors. Adaptive behavior allows individuals to adapt in a positive manner to various situations while maladaptive behavior refers to conditions which detriment the well-being of an individual (Metcalf, 2011).

Behavioral Family Counseling Theory is relevant for addressing the purpose of the study. Using the theory, the researcher explored the key aspect of ensuring marital satisfaction. The researcher uses the theory in assessing how premarital counseling informs the couples' intuition, understanding, coordination, communication, honesty, and empathy (Navabifar et al., 2020; Rajabi et al., 2019). Evidence indicates that the challenge is even greater among African American women with higher divorce rates (Schweizer, 2019). The theory therefore facilitated the exploration of whether the African American couples understand CPMC to be a solution that enhances couple's marital satisfaction. According to Baker (2019), providing couples with quality and effective consultation on various marital experiences and equipping them with skills required to address marital challenges could result in marital satisfaction. Having satisfying

marriages is critical for the health of the family, its development, well-being of the family members, protection of children, and a thriving society (Brand et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2020; Lawrence et al., 2019; Margelisch et al., 2017).

The Biblical Orientation of Marriage and Family

To Christians, marriage is a covenant institution between a man and a woman consummated by the two becoming one until parted by death (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Mathew 19:3-8). According to Christian beliefs, God's Word is inerrant and the final authority over life and living. Marriage is designed exclusively for a man and a woman; any other combination is not a marriage by God's design (Kostenberger & Jones, 2010). Hence, one of the criteria for participant recruitment is that the couple must be heterosexual. Christianity within the context of the Bible, emphasizes Christian marriage as a covenant versus a contract (Wilcox, 2020). When marriage is viewed in the context of a covenant, sacrifice, commitment, and vow-taking, are done to understand that the couple is the primary unit of the marriage. Spiritual intervention is used to define and restore relational order (Hook & Worthington, 2009).

Spirituality and religion can be part of the couple's problem and part of the couple's solution given that it is a powerful source of purpose and meaning. Its incorporation helps counselors to support couples in contributing to the common good of each other (Dobson, 2012). Christian counseling is grounded on Biblical scripture while acknowledging social, theological, and historical factors (Hardin, 2014). According to Weise (2014), marriage is the divine and blessed lifestyle. Incorporating prayer, scripture, and spiritual issues relative to Christian concepts and belief systems are recognized as Christian integration. According to Christian belief, the priority for premarital couples should be their relationship with Christ. The Bible says,

"But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you" (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Mathew 6:33).

People that hold religious beliefs tend to participate in positive social relations in addition to social and community service activities (Graham et al., 2001). People who are spiritual pursue personal growth and creative activities (Wink & Dillon, 2003). Religion and spirituality positively correlate with managing stress and the assessment of distressful situations. Greater overall health is realized in people who are religious and spiritual (Graham et al. (2001).

According to Kostenberger and Jones, (2010), the church in many ways, has failed to promote God's plan for marriage and family by not fully engaging the Bible toward the attainment of oneness. Ministers preside over 90% of marriages performed in hopes of fostering marital unions and spiritual families under God yet are faced with a 50% divorce rate (Brown, 2019). According to a study conducted at Covenant Theological Seminary, 89 of 99 respondents to a survey asking if their seminary experience equipped them to provide premarital counseling services effectively responded, there was a paucity of formal training. The training content was insufficient to prepare the student to provide effective premarital counsel (Buikema, 2001).

According to Hull et al., (2010), since colonial times, Americans have viewed marriage as the bedrock of healthy families and communities, and vital to the functioning of democracy itself. Despite such a fundamental framework shaping the marital foundation, the divorce rate is continually increasing in marriages across America and in particular, Christian marriages, (Cherlin, 2009). Relevant previous studies were used as the catalyst to solidify the theoretical approach that will explore the phenomena of how Christian, heterosexual, African American

couples, married a minimum of seven years, who received CPMC from credentialed counselors, perceive marital satisfaction.

The Covenant Framework

According to the Bible, the concept of marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman and it involves permanence; marriage partners commit to one another in steadfast love (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Matt. 19:6, Mark 10:9;). Kostenberger and Jones (2010), in concert with the Bible, proclaim that marriage should not be entered into lightly or ill-advisedly. More than just a human agreement between two consenting adults, marriage is sacred, intimate, mutual, exclusive, and a solemn promise made before God and the marriage partner. The concept of covenant refers to a unique relationship between God and humanity and is deeply rooted in creation. The Reformation of systematic theology developed the covenant concept into a doctrine, and the doctrine of the covenant continues to be the central theme of Biblical revelation (Vorster, 2016). Overlapping covenants that were later developed during the reformation tradition declare that the families enter covenant with God along with the marrying couple. This is intended to create a bond of accountability between the couple, their parents, family members, and society.

The integration of spirituality into marriage exists within a covenant framework. Individuals are not only committing to each other in marriage, they are making a covenant with deity. According to Stackhouse (1997):

The covenant is to take place as discerned and made manifest in the mutual pledges of enduring faithfulness under God between a man and a woman as confirmed by witnesses to be in accordance with the first principles of

righteousness and well-being of society. The wedding thus is a public declaration before God and the people in the validation of love made privately in pledges of love to each other. (p. 26)

The marriage covenant is a commitment vowed before God that extends far beyond performance. It pledges to love in sickness and in health, poverty, and wealth until death parts them (Wilcox, 2020). In the United States of America, the states of Arizona, Arkansas, and Louisiana, marrying spouses can opt for a legal covenant marriage by agreeing to obtain premarital counseling and accept more limited grounds for later seeking a divorce, such as a 2-year waiting period. According to Matthews (2015), the populace in the three states mentioned reports that less than 5% of married couples opted to enter a legal covenant marriage since its inception. Sixteen other legislatures considered laws between 1999 and 2002 but failed to enact them.

A recent study explored how having the option to enter a covenant marriage changes couples' relationship decisions Felkey (2016), utilized marriage and divorce rate data from Arizona, Arkansas, and Louisiana, and three non-legal covenant states, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Texas, between 1990 and 2013. The goal of the study was to determine if legal covenant status was effective in its goal to develop satisfying marriages and decrease divorce rates. It was determined that in the state of Arkansas, covenant marriages of a particular age, dissolve at a significantly lower rate than did traditional marriages of the same age. This means that the direct effect to couples that chose the covenant option, stayed in their marriages longer, however, was not an indication of marital satisfaction. However, when all marriages of a particular age were

pooled together, it was concluded that covenant longevity insignificantly affects divorce rates and produced an unintended negative effect on the marriage rate (Felkey, 2016).

It will take several years for researchers to assess whether this type of legislation builds satisfying marriages (Felkey, 2016). The willingness of marrying couples to enter covenant marriage law is a demonstration of their commitment to making their marriages last which indicates that they may have been satisfied in a traditional marriage (Felkey, 2016).

Related Literature

The following review of the literature sought to discover how Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, married a minimum of seven years, that received CPMC from credentialed counselors, perceive marital satisfaction. The scope of the reviews included published literature, scholarly articles, and books. Empirical studies have proven the positive impact that PMC has on marital satisfaction (Fawcett et al., 2010). However, there is little known evidence on how the Biblical principles, when integrated in Christian Premarital Counseling (CPMC), could contribute towards addressing marital satisfaction.

Challenge of Divorce

The rate of divorce is a major concern especially in the US (Schweizer, 2019). Gottman and Gottman (2017) stated that half of all first marriages end in divorce. Second marriages do worse, failing at a rate of about 60%. Schweizer (2019) produced a report that indicated that for every two marriages in the USA there is one divorce. Schweizer (2019) also noted that African American women had the least number of marriages compared to divorce followed by Hispanic women and then White women. The report also indicated that African American women were

the only demographic group with a divorce rate that was higher than the marriage rate. According to Schweizer (2019), the number of divorces was higher than marriages among women aged between 45 and 55 and between 64 and 65 years. The researcher also indicated that the divorce rates were higher than the marriage rate among women aged 15 to 24 years and those aged above 65 years.

It should be noted that despite Cohen (2019) pointing towards a future decline in the number of divorces in the US, the researchers also noted that the country is progressing towards a point where marriage becomes rarer. This, therefore, raises the question of whether the divorce rates are falling, or people are no longer interested in entering marriage because of the challenges, disappointment, dissatisfaction, and instability experienced by the existing marriages.

There are various constructs associated with increased divorce rates with one being marital dissatisfaction (Arauo & Lima, 2016). A study inclusive of three men and four divorced women of various socioeconomic backgrounds residing in the same city that had been divorced more than two years was conducted under the presupposition that separation and divorce results in long-term emotional destabilization and difficulty facing the new civil context (Arauo & Lima, 2016). Semi-structured interviews were conducted using targeted questions relative to the expression of feelings experienced after separation. The analysis revealed that feelings and emotions lived through the critical period of separation equally ranged from “happiness and peace” to “failure and sadness.”

Searching and establishing a new affective bond was a strategy used by the participants to strengthen and support the resignification of their identity, thereby rejecting the presupposition that separation and divorce results in long-term emotional destabilization and difficulty facing

the new civil context (Arauo & Lima, 2016). The implication for Christian counselors is recognizing that reframing either by reconciliation, establishing a new affective bond, or re-identifying one's identity contributes to uniqueness, growth, and maturation (Arauo & Lima, 2016). The strength of the study is its usage of divorced men and women over two years that allowed emotions to settle enabling rational and well-considered expression.

Among Christians, evidence indicates that marriages end up in divorce because of the low level of religiosity among other factors (Baker, 2019). According to Kariuki (2018), couples who do not receive PMC are at the risk of divorce especially in the early years of marriage. The reduced number of divorces associated with PMC has been linked to enhanced communication between the couples, limited conflicts, and the ability to solve potential problems (Moeti et al., 2017). The evidence quoted by Baker (2019) also indicated that individuals who received PMC were 31% less likely to end up in divorce.

Scott et al. (2013) conducted a study of 52 divorced individuals who received the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) while engaged. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used to understand participant reasons for divorce. The “final straw” reasons for divorce were substance abuse, infidelity, and domestic violence. Commonly reported reasons were arguing, infidelity and lack of commitment. When asked for recommendations from participants to improve marriage, they responded: receiving relationship education before committing to marry, receiving support to implement skills outside of the educational setting, and knowledge of the stages of marital development (Scott et al., 2013).

According to the scriptures, separation and divorce are not ideal in the sight of God (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Malachi 2:16). Jesus established His position regarding divorce during

his dialogue with Moses. When Moses asked Jesus if it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife, Jesus responded that it was never God's intention from the beginning; however, because of the hardness of a man's heart, a bill of divorcement was permitted (Gen. 1:27, 2:24, *King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Mark 10:5–8). It is therefore evident from the assessed literature that divorce continues to be a problem in the United States. What stands out from the reviewed literature is that the divorce rates vary across the different demographics with the African American couples having higher rates. Assessing the factors associated with the high rates of divorce could be beneficial in developing strategies on how to help marriages to remain satisfying, especially the African American marriages.

Marital Satisfaction, Stability and Religious Beliefs

A growing body of literature indicates that marital stability and satisfaction are key predictors of divorce (Chapman, 2015; Kariuki, 2018; Springer et al., 2019). This section provides an in-depth analysis of marital satisfaction and marital stability and explains how the two aspects relate to Christian religious beliefs. Based on the definition of stability, which refers to the ability to return to the original position following displacement, Kariuki (2018) defined marital stability as the resilience that sustains and strengthens the marriage. According to the researcher, the hallmarks of marital stability include good mental health, emotional availability, cohesion, harmony, warmth, and stable relationships. Failed marital stability is evident through nonverbal messages that include sarcasm and accusations (Kariuki, 2018). According to Kariuki (2018), stable couples should have a 5 to 1 positive to negative messages ratio, which indicates that the frequency of positive messages should be five times that of negative messages.

Gottman's (1998) theory of marital success versus failure further indicates that negative behaviors and the reaction of the partner to such negative behaviors mark the difference between marital stability and instability. The theory indicates that hostility towards a partner's behavior triggers distancing between couples which could end up in separation. Based on the theory of marital success versus failure therefore marital stability is seen as the success of the couples in staying together instead of separating.

According to Kariuki (2018), marital satisfaction is different from marital stability since it is a qualitative evaluation of the marriage relationship which is subjective. Marital satisfaction describes the marriage relationship in terms of happiness, good feelings, and contentment. The theory of marital success versus failure provides a counseling process model that enables the understanding of marital satisfaction (Patton, 2015). A couple's marital satisfaction significantly predicts their marital stability (Yoo, et al., 2014). According to Gottman (1998) as quoted by Kariuki (2018) marital satisfaction is negatively impacted by negative non-verbal communications between partners which alter how the partners view each other.

The belief that marital relationships will never encounter problems is the failure to reckon with the reality of human nature (Chapman, 2015). It should also be noted that some scriptures indicate that there is a likelihood of problems in marriage. Moses reminds us that "man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble" (Job 14:1 KJV). This seems to suggest that man has and will always struggle and have trouble, which could contribute to satisfaction and enjoyment in the married life. Words of affirmation are one of the five basic love languages. The need to feel appreciated is the deepest human need (Wilcox, 2020).

A loving spouse is an encouraging spouse. Encouragement requires empathy and seeing the world from one's spouse's perspective (Chapman, 2015). When couples learn to salvage fragments of happiness out of life's inevitable sufferings, healing begins (Thomas, 2015). A husband is not to have proficiency over his wife as a master would have proficiency over a slave. The prophet Hosea lets us know that God views his people as his wife and betroths them forever (Hosea 2:16, 19, *King James Bible*, 1769/2017) meaning that the infinite tenderness and kindness that God provides is what a beloved wife can expect from the kindest husband (Kostenberger & Jones, 2010).

As with any institution, the order in marriage must be established if an organized structure is to be developed and maintained (Abdelnour et al., 2017). According to the Bible, God designed what Bruze et al., (2015) refers to as the "provision dynamics" which consist of roles for the husband, wife, and children within marriage and family. Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church and died for it. They are to love their wives as their own bodies, which constitutes loving himself, (Ephesians 5:25-28, *King James Bible*, 1769/2017). In the traditional sense, husbands serve as breadwinners (Springer et al., 2019), and convey moral values, discipline, protection, and religious education to the children. Wives are to submit to their husbands recognizing that he is the head of the home just as Christ is the head of the church (Ephesians 5:22-23, *King James Bible*, 1769/2017). They serve to care for their husbands, children and making the home a place of order, peace, and tranquility, operating as the weaker vessel.

Couples that consistently re-visit the "provision dynamics" within the marriage, ensure agreement (Amos 3:3, *King James Bible*, 1769/2017) and enhance satisfaction (Bruze et al.,

2015). Christ's redemptive work on the cross and his resurrection decisively defeated Satan (anything contrary to the will and law of the Lord) and his domain, which comes to steal, kill, and destroy that which honors God (John 10:10, Eph 1:19–20; Col 2:15, *King James Bible*, 1769/2017). Christian couples that are united with Christ believe that they are overcomers yet still engage in spiritual warfare (2 Corinthians 10:4-5, *King James Bible*, 1769/2017) regarding how they relate to one another which can lead to dissatisfying marriages, even divorce (Aman et al., 2019). Byrne and Barling (2017) supported the effectiveness of the provision dynamic as it relates to the wife's role in the marriage relationship through a study using the 9-item scale to measure feelings on job status. A random sample of married professionals of whom responded to a series of questions graded on a scale from one to five, with five being strongly agreed. It was hypothesized that if the husband provides tangible support and respect for the wife's position, manifested by sharing in household duties, there is a lesser likelihood of distress or divorce. Using an actor partner interdependence model and path analyses, data from 342 heterosexual married couples determined that religious communication between partners along with one's relationship with God is a predictor of marital quality and satisfaction (David & Stafford, 2015).

According to Christian beliefs, “marriage [*not cohabitation*] is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled; but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge” (Heb. 13:4, *King James Bible*, 1769/2017). Many couples come to premarital counseling already cohabiting. There is a resounding consensus that cohabitation is gaining popularity and preference over marriage in the United States (Lundberg et al., 2016). Predictably, this growing phenomenon comes with a plethora of negative consequences such as the probability of break-up given there is no assurance of commitment in the relationship (Yoshizawa & Kusaka, 2020).

There is compelling evidence showing that cohabitation is linked to relationship risks (Yoshizawa & Kusaka, 2020). According to Christian beliefs, “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death” (Prov. 14:12 , *King James Bible*, 1769/2017). While the mechanics of cohabitation mirror marriage, contrary to widely held belief, marriage cannot be replicated. This truth is problematic even for Christian couples in the church who rationalize that combining resources through cohabitation is a viable means of exercising good stewardship when it violates God's will and robs a couple of the novelty, and wonder that abstaining affords (Sassler & Lichter, 2020, Yoshizawa & Kusaka, 2020).

According to the Bible, cohabitation does not honor the Lord; it satisfies the flesh. Philippians 4:8, (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017) says "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." The Apostle Paul, under the influence of God, as recorded in Colossians 3:17, (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017), said, “And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.” According to the scriptures, sex is placed solely in the context of marriage.

Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband. Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise, also the wife unto the husband. The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise, also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife. Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that

ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency (Corinthians 7: 1-5, *King James Bible*, 1769/2017).

Numerous studies show that couples that live together before marriage report below-average marital satisfaction and are at greater risk of divorce. Many couples slide into living together as opposed to making a conscious decision about what it will mean for the future of the relationship (Yoshizawa & Kusaka, 2020). Conversely, practicing Christians believe "good understanding giveth favor, but the way of the transgressor is hard" (Proverbs 13:15, *King James Bible*, 1769/2017). This means that in the context of marriage versus cohabitation, the latter seems logical and even attractive given its economical and liberal benefits; however, practicing Christians should understand that cohabitation violates Gods' law and if the choice is made to cohabit despite it, the consequences that follow should be expected. This Biblical principle is solidified in Rosenfeld and Roesler's (2019) research which observed that premarital cohabitation does not have long-term benefits and is associated with negative effects on marital satisfaction (Rosenfeld & Roesler, 2019).

Although the provided evidence examines marital satisfaction based on biblical beliefs, it should be noted that demographic factors such as social-economic status may also contribute to the association between spirituality and marital satisfaction. Middle class and more affluent couples may not generalize to couples living in diverse environments as the dyadic processes for the affluent may be reliably adaptive (Bradbury & Karney, 2020). Marital interaction, communication, and conflict are also significantly relevant to marital satisfaction (Wilson et al., 2019).

A change in thinking has emerged in Western culture that has produced a new ethic. Marriage and family life, in addition to social ethics, is changing at a rapid pace. Traditional ideas concerning marriage that emanate from the Bible are challenged by the new ethic. The formation of socially acceptable civil relationships such as civil unions between gay couples and cohabitation, challenge heterosexual marriages that are supported by the Bible (Vorster, 2016). While the secular orientation of marriage and family can produce satisfaction in marriage, the lack of biblical application during times of despair heightens the propensity for separation and divorce (Rosenfeld & Roesler, 2019).

For 50 years, people who attend church marry at a higher rate than non-attendees and divorce at a lower rate (Bradbury & Karney, 2020). However, the proposed study's focus is on heterosexual couples. Conversely, while the Bible embraces LGBTQ persons into full communion with God based upon the confession of their faith in Him through Jesus Christ (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Mark 8:34-38; 10: 6-9), marriage is the union of a man and a woman with no precedent for same-sex partnerships (Genesis 2:24, 3:16-19, *King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Leviticus 20:13,). Careful consideration regarding having the same religious convictions, cultural content, family relations, goals, and ambitions must be given in premarital counseling (Borowski & Tambling, 2015) to help tailor any complications that "provision dynamics" may employ.

Premarital Counseling

Various researchers have attempted to explain the meaning of premarital counseling (PMC). According to Arafani (2017), PMC is a specialized systemic therapy whose focus is to help couples who seek to enter marriage. According to the researcher, the main goal of PMC is

to equip couples with skill-based training that will prepare them for lifelong relationships and enable them to troubleshoot future problems. Navabifar et al. (2020) defined PMC as an educational, therapeutic, and preventive intervention aimed at eliminating dissatisfaction with marriage. Kariuki (2018) defined PMC as a therapeutic intervention offered to individuals who plan to marry, and which is geared towards enhancing their ability to sustain satisfaction once in marriage. According to Kariuki (2018), PMC is a short counseling and educational program which usually takes four hours every month.

Premarital counseling has a long history, which dates to the 1930s where it was called premarital education (Kariuki, 2018). Merrill Palmer Institute is credited with the development of the first premarital education program in 1932 (Ard, 1955). In 1941, standardized premarital education programs were developed by Philadelphia Marriage Council and in 1977 Wright (Wright, 1977), created a premarital program that focused on equipping and educating couples on relationship skills required for satisfying marriages (Dobson, 2012).

Providing counsel to engaged couples and those contemplating marriage is conducted in hopes of obtaining and analyzing pre-marriage qualitative data to understand and predict marriages of varying degrees of quality based upon relational patterns during courtship (Wulandari et al., 2019). Relationships are strengthened when PMC is offered that focus on boosting collective understanding, honesty, trust, empathy, and coordination of couples' (Shahhosseini et al., 2014) which also serves to satisfy the human quest for meaning (Fowler, 1981). If marital satisfaction is indeed the modal experience in marriage, at the end of the PMC process, constructs that determine the trajectory of the relationship may already in place. Where

couples start, appears to reveal a lot about where they will end up (Stanley et al., 2015, Wulandari et al., 2019).

Traditional PMC can be considered an integral part of a prosperous marriage (Shahhosseini et al., 2014). The counselors' role is to help each person develop a clearer and more realistic perception of who he or she is marrying (Parrott & Parrott, 2015). Honesty, openness, and the ability to discuss issues and request changes without criticizing makes for healthy communication between couples (Nichols, 2007). According to Holman and Linford (2001), when premarital individual and couple interactional factors are improved, marital satisfaction is enhanced.

Arafani (2017) underscored that forgiveness is a key component of PMC. The researcher noted that interpersonal conflict could easily occur in a family and for couples to avoid such conflicts and the physical abuse and violence there is a need for them to appreciate and accept forgiveness. Kariuki (2018); Arafani (2017) support the view that by teaching communication skills and the creation of sufficient awareness regarding the importance of forgiveness, PMC enhances the capability of the couples to diffuse conflicts and avoid them degenerating into verbal abuses. Arafani (2017) also noted that PMC equips couples with problem-solving skills, which decrease conflicts.

Kariuki (2018) also noted that PMC encourages couples to have a conversation on sensitive topics such as sex and money. Kariuki (2018) further argued that couples who receive quality PMC are less likely to encounter psychological health problems and serious relationship issues in their marriage. As argued by Doherty et al. (2016), couples who received PMC develop

clarity and confidence which enables them to overcome potential sources of conflict in their marital life.

The key topics that are addressed by PMC include intimacy which is associated with the partner's responsiveness that results in a feeling of one being cared for and understood (Hawkins II, 2016). Intimacy in marriage life is expressed through genuine warmth, closeness, and connection between couples (Hawkins II, 2016). Marital satisfaction has been associated with satisfying sexual encounters and PMC makes it easier for individuals to understand factors that lead to enhanced sexual experiences before entering marriage (Schmiedeberg & Schröder, 2016).

The other topic is communication, which is seen as important in connecting couples together through shared thoughts, feelings, and experiences. The PMC trains the couples on verbal and nonverbal cues that are important for effective communication. The couples are trained on how to listen, understand, and respect each other. PMC also trains couples to express their love verbally to avoid negative impacts on relationships (Schmidt et al., 2016).

The other topic that is discussed is conflict resolution where couples learn the inevitability of conflicts in married life and the fact that such conflicts sometimes are healthy if resolved (Schmidt et al., 2016). The other topic that couples learn during PMC is parenting where couples get to understand the various parenting styles and the need to avoid conflicts regarding parenting styles and parent-child relationships since such could affect their marital relationship (Fentz & Trillingsgaard, 2017). The couples also learn about finance and how to approach budgeting and help the couple to organize and find a resolution to financial issues before getting married. The other important topic that is taught during PMC is the issue of roles

in marriage with the focus on the wife's responsibilities within and without the home (McGoldrick et al., 2015).

Moharrami et al. (2017) carried out a quasi-experimental study that evaluated the effect of PMC on shyness. In their study, the researchers placed 30 participants that included students from a selected University to an intervention group and a comparison group. The intervention group received eight sessions of PMC while the control group did not receive an intervention. Pretest and posttest analysis was carried out, which revealed that unlike the control group where there was no difference in shyness before and after, the individuals in the intervention group had a significant reduction in shyness. The researchers noted that with reduced shyness individuals can communicate better and express themselves, which is important in enhancing marital satisfaction. Moharrami et al. (2017) further noted marital satisfaction is related to the level of intimacy, agreement, and equality. The researchers further noted that closeness to the spouse and affairs related to children and home have a meaningful correlation with marital satisfaction.

Rajabi et al. (2019) also carried out a quasi-experimental pre-test and post-test study that examined how effective PMC enhances marital satisfaction by reducing idealistic marital expectations. Their study was based on the data that was collected from 32 participants involving single adults who were randomly placed in intervention and control groups. The intervention involved nine sessions of relationship education that lasted for 90 minutes (about one- and one-half hours) and was carried out twice a week. The researchers collected data at the baseline, after the test, and carried out 60 days (about two months) follow up. Rajabi et al. (2019) observed that the participants in the intervention group had reduced idealistic marital expectations following

the intervention. The researchers, therefore, recommended PMC as a valuable tool in preparing couples for marriage.

However, it should be noted that Rajabi et al. (2019) did not specifically evaluate the contribution of PMC to marital satisfaction since the participants were single adults who had no experience in marital relationships. However, expectations have been indicated to have extreme importance in determining marital satisfaction (Karimi et al., 2019). Evidence indicates irrational idealistic and romantic expectations as the main cause of marital dissatisfaction (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2018). Frustrations have been associated with extreme idealistic perceptions that an individual has towards his/her marriage partner (Karimi et al., 2019; Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2018). Such frustrations if not well-addressed results in the deterioration of marital satisfaction (Rajabi et al., 2019).

Navabifar et al. (2020) carried out a quasi-experimental study that involved 30 couples in the premarital phase, which focused on evaluating the importance of PMC that is based on personality types. The participants were randomized into an intervention and control group. The intervention group received ten 90-minute sessions of educational packages. The researchers observed that the intervention resulted in enhanced emotional expressiveness of the participants that suggests that PMC could be important in enhancing how couples express their emotions in marital relationships, which is vital in ensuring marital satisfaction.

According to Sulhani et al. (2019), it is essential to start marriage ties with the preparation of couples on issues related to communication, finances, mental preparation, and knowledge regarding what is required for a successful marriage. Based on a descriptive-analytical study that utilized a descriptive qualitative approach where data were collected using

interviews and documentation, Sulhani et al. (2019) noted that PMC was key in the provision of knowledge skills and awareness among individuals before getting into marriage. However, the researchers however noted that PMC does not prevent problems that might interrupt marriages but leads to improved quality of the relationship between couples through the provision of security and happiness. Sulhani et al. (2019) therefore suggested that PMC is key in enabling couples to stick together despite the interruptions that may occur in marriage.

Marital satisfaction is attained when both partners adapt to the process of conflict resolution to the extent that each partner is satisfied with each other in the marriage (Arafani, 2017; Margelisch et al., 2017). Family of origin, spirituality, values systems, and self-esteem can play a significant role in marital stabilization over time (Baker, 2019; Fonseca et al., 2018; Karimi et al., 2019). CPMC helps acquire the necessary skills to develop a successful marriage (Kariuki, 2018; Navabifar et al., 2020). While each partner may experience satisfaction at distinct levels within the marriage, working to satisfy each other will bring about a successful marriage (Baker, 2019).

Not all studies support the view that PMC is effective in enhancing marital satisfaction. The study that was carried out by Akbari-Torkestan et al. (2017) showed that there was no significant difference in acceptance and commitment concerning the couple's sexual function among those who received premarital education and counseling from those who did not. The researchers based their observations on a clinical trial that involved sixty couples who were randomly placed in an experimental and control groups consisting of 30 couples each. The experimental group received acceptance of committed therapy-based PMC.

Great depth has been afforded by scholars in the interest of assisting professionals administering premarital counseling. Typically based on marital theory and relationships, there is a limitation on specific therapeutic techniques inclusive of biblical intervention. Clergy, mental health workers, and physicians are the three most prevalent entities with clergy performing most of the Biblical counsel. An effective administration of PMC requires knowledge and expertise (Doherty et al., 2016). Clergy and researchers have made known the expectation of seminaries to take on the role of equipping candidates to effectively conduct premarital counseling.

There are diverse types of PMC that include secular premarital counseling, hope focused counseling approach, and faith-based premarital counseling (Baker, 2019) that couples can have before starting marriage. The diverse types of PMC vary based on the skills, education, and topics that couples learn. For the case of secular premarital counseling, the focus is on communication skills, teamwork, stress management, management of expectation and planning, assessment of past experiences and how they relate with the future, strengthening of commitment towards long-term satisfaction, managing of deployment and reintegration, and aspects related to the productive respectful conversation (Baker, 2019). Secular premarital counseling does not involve matters associated with Biblical content. Hope focused counseling approach is anchored on biblical teachings and focuses on forgiveness. The program is made up of a 12-week intervention where couples get to understand the effects of marriage and the need for effective communication and adherence to biblical principles (Baker, 2019; Channing, 2018).

Hope focused counseling approach also incorporates couple therapy and enrichment. Although faith-based premarital counseling is like hope focused counseling approach in terms of reliance on biblical principles, the former is different in that it is majorly carried out by the

clergy and lay leaders (Baker, 2019). The focus of faith-based PMC such as the CPMC is to build satisfying marriages (Baker, 2019). Based on the interview data that was obtained from church ministers and elders, wedded couples, and divorcees in a selected Christian denomination, Bawa (2018) noted that the absence of cooperation between the church and approaches used in PMC forms the basis for marital dissatisfaction. The researcher noted that PMC should be guided by pastors and church lay ministers.

Christian Premarital Counseling

Shearin (2016) carried out a study that sought to examine how religiosity affects marital satisfaction and how partners relate to each other. The researcher based the study on a quantitative correlational approach. Using the approach, the researcher was able to examine whether and to what degree the level of religiosity among married Christian couples in the United States is associated with the likelihood of divorce. Shearin (2016) collected data from 100 Christian individuals using questionnaires. Based on the bivariate correlation and simple linear regression analysis, the researcher noted that the likelihood of divorce is negatively correlated with the level of religiosity among married Christians in the United States. Shearin (2016) further noted that levels of religiosity negatively predict the likelihood of divorce. Based on the obtained findings, Shearin (2016) recommended the inclusion of religious teachings in PMC as a means of enhancing marital adjustment and reducing the likelihood of divorce.

According to Weise (2014), it is important for individuals who want to get married to have a good grounding on spiritual matters and to ensure that their marriage is anchored on God's grace, and to enhance their spiritual growth. Christian PMC (CPMC) is rooted and grounded in biblical principles and precepts affords absolute guidance concerning matters

involving contrary opinions which can lead to physical, distress, emotional distress, and divorce (Cobb & Sullivan, 2015). According to Christian belief, when the Word of God is measured against sin, the Word is absolute "Truth" (Graham, 2016).

Nelson et al., (2011) explored and discovered that couples who acknowledge God as their source and believe marriage to be sanctified unto Him who is present and active in their marriage, through the application of His Word (The Holy Bible), experience higher levels of marital satisfaction. They are enabled by the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, specifically in the face of disagreement. Circumstances, emotions, and decisions are submitted to the counsel of God. This discovery is solidified in Ecclesiastes 4:12 which states, "And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him – a threefold cord is not quickly broken (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017). It is incumbent upon Christian counselors to convey Biblical principles during CPMC in hopes of helping to encourage marital satisfaction (Worthington & Lester, 1990). Secula (2018) collected data using anonymous surveys from 20 participants who were members of a selected church in the USA. The data showed that CPMC is important since it has a significant impact on marital satisfaction and slows the chances of divorce.

Minzenmayer (2018) carried out a mixed-methods study that involved the collection of quantitative and qualitative data from 350 participants. The researcher aimed to determine the relationship between religion and access to PMC. Minzenmayer (2018) pointed out the vital role of religious organizations in the provision of PMC. According to the researcher, religious organizations play a vital role in encouraging members to value and seek PMC. Minzenmayer (2018) also highlighted various constructs associated with PMC that might be related to its

quality and impact. The researcher noted that PMC should encourage participants to attend religious communities but not pressure them. According to the study, PMC that is willingly taken by the couples results in a positive impact.

Baker (2019) conducted a phenomenological qualitative study that sought to explore how Christian PMC contributes to the couples' overall marital satisfaction. The researcher also sought to determine the spiritual benefits associated with CPMC. Baker (2019) based the study on interviews that were collected from 10 heterosexual couples who had received CPMC. According to the researcher, the use of the highlighted methodological approach enabled the collection of information that facilitated the gaining of in-depth knowledge and insights regarding the research topic. Baker (2019) noted that the rich data that was based on the couple's real-life experiences facilitated the development of new knowledge and understanding that provided potential learning for therapists and individuals involved in the implementation of PMC.

Based on the findings, Baker (2019) reported that CPMC boosted marital satisfaction by enhancing oneness and marital roles. The researcher noted that participants acknowledged CPMC to be important in helping them understand how to become one and to appreciate their roles based on God's guidance regarding marriage. The researcher also reported that the intervention helped the couples to understand effective communication while being committed to God first and to each other. They also noted that the intervention helped them to understand the need to have Christ be the center of their marriage, hence the intervention gave them a stronger spiritual foundation.

The church and seminaries that are intended to equip church leadership play an integral role in the health of marriage, family, and society. According to the Bible, the church is charged to "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Matthew 28:19). Equipping Christian couples to attain marital satisfaction through understanding marriage as a covenant relationship between them and God (Felkey, 2016), satisfies an integral segment of meeting the charge. According to the scriptures, the greatest good that marriage is intended to accomplish is the Glory of God. Christ and the Church is a model for marriage (Ephesians 5; *King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Matthew 19). Marital relationships are shaped by two people with two sets of individual characteristics arising from two different families of origins. Personality traits, values, attitudes, self-esteem, and temperament are individually characterized yet, there is an expectation that the two will become one flesh (Ephesians 5:21–3, *King James Bible*, 1769/2017). It is through the application of agape (unconditional) love that harmony is realized in the face of differences. CPMC explores each person's faith and history. It aims to produce a marriage that is Biblical and God-honoring.

According to Christian beliefs, a successful biblical marriage involves both the husband and the wife fulfilling certain roles: "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior." In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself" (Ephesians 5:22–23, *King James Bible*, 1769/2017). After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church" (Ephesians 5:28-29, *King James Bible*, 1769/2017). For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother

and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh" (Ephesians 5:31, *King James Bible*, 1769/2017).

As a Christian, imagine becoming one flesh with a non-Christian raised in an unhealthy environment given his or her family of origin. The Apostle Paul said it best in Galatians 5:17, "For the flesh lusted against the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is against the flesh; these are opposed to each other so that you don't do what you want." To this point, it is of the utmost importance for couples to engage in CPMC where major differences can be recognized and assessed before entering a marriage that God has ordained to last forever. Loving one another until death do you part is comprised of tolerating the intolerable (Nelson, 2011). According to Christian belief, "if one prevails against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken" (Ecclesiastes 4:12, *King James Bible*, 1769/2017).

Evidence however, indicates that some churches do not have a standard approach to CPMC. Tuffour (2017) collected data from pastors of a selected church. The data focused on the marriage preparation programs and best practices. The researcher noted that the pastors lacked assessment tools and did not have comprehensive follow-up plans to determine the success of CPMC. Evidence also cautions about the benefits of the traditional approach to CPMC where the one-size-fits-all criterion is used especially where there are few biblical principles that can help them to overcome challenges in the later stage of their marriage (Shahhosseini et al., 2014). This evidence, therefore, indicates the need to continue the exploration of association between CPMC and marital satisfaction.

According to Stanley (2004), premarital programs run by clergy showed no distinctions compared to skilled counselors in producing positive change in couple interactions or marital

satisfaction. By implication, Stanley (2004), observed that premarital programs run by clergy do not incorporate skilled counselors or in short, clergy is unskilled in premarital counseling. This observation is consistent with a phenomenological study that was conducted at Covenant Theological Seminary where 89 of 99 participants responded that their seminary experience did not equip them to effectively provide premarital counseling service. They further add that formal training was insufficient to successfully guide couples into marital satisfaction according to the scriptures (Buikema, 2001). This knowledge makes empirical research challenging when measured against previous research conducted involving data collection from participants who received Christian counseling from ill-equipped clergy since clergy credentialing is not commonly required.

Could educating couples concerning the principles of the Bible concerning marriage, be the barometer for successful marriages (Ephesians 5:28, 29, 33, *King James Bible*, 1769/2017)? It is difficult for the husband to respond in love when the wife does not show respect and vice versa. This "crazy cycle" is difficult to break given that people are human, operating out of human emotions. When an offense takes place, putting personal needs aside in favor of giving the offender the love or respect needed is a sacrifice many fail to make, even with the best intentions. In the natural, respect is earned; in the spiritual, it is unmerited favor often referred to as grace. With this thought in mind, the question, "What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?" (Thomas, 2015), is certainly worth pondering.

It is evident that PMC has long been used as a means of preparing couples for married life and ensuring that they experience a satisfying marriage relationship (Baker, 2019; Kariuki, 2018). However, evidence indicates that despite couples receiving PMC, experiences of marital

dissatisfaction still exist, which may lead to increased cases of divorce (Arauo & Lima, 2016). Assessed literature indicates that incorporating spiritual teachings in the preparation of couples for married life could promote their spiritual growth and eventually contribute positively to marital satisfaction (Aman, et al., 2019). A gap however exists in the understanding of whether Bible-based PMC such as CPMC help couples to experience satisfying marriages.

Some researchers support the view that CPMC equips couples with skills needed for marital satisfaction while others dispute (Bawa, 2018; Kariuki, 2018; Shahhosseini et al., 2014; Shearin, 2016; Tuffour, 2017). Those in support suggest that CPMC could be effective in enhancing marital satisfaction by equipping the couples with skills such as problem-solving, communication, understanding, role sharing, and expression of love and empathy (Bawa, 2018; Canevello & Crocker, 2010; Shearin, 2016). However, some researchers suggest that CPMC may be ineffective in improving marital satisfaction especially for where the programs are implemented based on a one-size-fits-all criterion (Shahhosseini et al., 2014; Tuffour, 2017).

There is limited literature that explores the long-term effectiveness of marital satisfaction relative to participation in CPMC (Plumb, 2011). The present study identifies the gap and seeks to understand whether engaging in CPMC can be the catalysts to building satisfying marriages that last a lifetime when biblical principles and precepts are taught within the context of covenant matrimony. According to Christian beliefs, God has plans for his children and is faithful to perform them. “For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope,” (Jeremiah 29:11, NLT).

Summary

In this chapter, the reviewed literature provided in-depth insights relating to how CPMC could be beneficial in helping couples have satisfying marriages. The chapter began with the identification of the theoretical framework that guided the study. Based on the discussed theoretical framework, marriage is viewed as a covenant between man and woman where the couples commit to one another. The framework also identifies marriage as being sacred and whose existence is anchored on the unique relationship between God and man. Therefore, the identified theoretical framework allows the assessment of how spiritual growth contributes to marital satisfaction.

The assessed literature pointed out that African American couples experience a high rate of divorce compared to the other demographics in the US. The chapter also described how existing literature views the relationship between religious beliefs on marital satisfaction. Overwhelming evidence from the Bible and research evidence suggests that religious beliefs form the basis for the development of a satisfying marital relationship.

The chapter also examined evidence of the importance of PMC in preparing couples for satisfying marriages. From the assessed literature, it emerged that a gap exists in the understanding of how beneficial CPMC is in helping couples to experience satisfying marriages with some evidence supporting the view that CPMC equips couples with skills needed for marital satisfaction while others dispute (Bawa, 2018; Kariuki, 2018; Shahhosseini et al., 2014; Shearin, 2016; Tuffour, 2017). The identified gap in the understanding of whether CPMC helps couples to experience satisfying marriages formed the focus of this study. Through the phenomenological, idiographic, and hermeneutic methodology of IPA, the present study

explored the association between CPMC and marital satisfaction among Christian, heterosexual, African American couples who received CPMC from credentialed counselors. Chapter 3 provides an elaborate description of the methodological approach that was used in the exploration.

Chapter Three: Method

Overview

The aim of this chapter was to introduce the proposed research methodology for this IPA study to understand how Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, married a minimum of seven years, that received CPMC from credentialed counselors, at two churches located in large Northeastern, and Southeastern states, perceive marital satisfaction. Given the potential subjectivity of a person's spiritual experience, researchers suggest that a qualitative approach to research is more effective because it gathers rich, in-dept data through personal interviews that capture detailed real-life experiences of the individual experiencing the phenomenon (Smith, 2011). The methodological approach is grounded in the philosophical and theoretical traditions of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. This chapter discusses the appropriateness of qualitative research and the distinctive methodological features of IPA needed to answer the research question. The inclusion of methodology, procedures, recruitment study participants, and strategies to ensure trustworthiness, credibility-dependability, confirmability, and transferability are addressed in this chapter.

Philosophical and Theoretical Traditions

Phenomenology

According to Smith (1996), "Phenomenological psychology, developing from Husserl's philosophy, can broadly be said to be concerned with an individual's perception or account of an object or event itself" (p. 263). IPA seeks to understand lived experience by integrating the works of Husserl (1936/1970, 1913/1982), Heidegger (1927/1962), Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) and Sartre (1947/2007).

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the theory and practice of interpretation. It offers essential insights into the theoretical background and analytical processes carried out through IPA. The hermeneutic circle is a concept of hermeneutics and the analytical process of IPA. Smith et al. (2009) wrote:

The hermeneutic circle is the most resonant idea in hermeneutic theory and is picked up by most hermeneutic writers, rather than being identified with one. It is concerned with the dynamic relationship between the part and the whole, at a series of levels. To understand any given part, you look to the whole; to understand the whole, you look to the parts. This has been criticized from a logical perspective, because of its inherent circularity. In analytical terms, however, it describes the processes of interpretation very effectively and speaks to a dynamic, non-linear, style of thinking. (p. 27)

Idiography

Idiography is traced back to the work of Harre' (1993) who explains the importance of idiography to IPA (Smith et al., 2009). Idiography influences IPA through a commitment to the particularities of phenomena, perspective, individuals, and context. Its character emerges through purposive homogeneous sampling and in-depth analysis of single-case analysis, offering "detailed, nuanced analyses of particular instances of lived experience" (Smith et al., 2009, p.37). IPA is an appropriate methodology for this study on Christian Premarital Counseling: A Composition of Couples' Intuition and Understanding of Marital Satisfaction because the advantageous elements of the study quadruple given the bonding relationship that the approach allows for the researcher to develop with their research participants (Alase, 2017).

The analytical process, study couples, methodology, procedures, strategies, credibility, and trustworthiness are primary components of this chapter.

Design

Given the phenomenological nature of the research question, a qualitative research approach was used to explore how Christian, heterosexual, African American couples that received CPMC from credentialed counselors perceive marital satisfaction. Phenomenological and experiential research questions can be answered from a variety of qualitative research genres such as phenomenology, grounded theory, narrative research, case study, and ethnography (Creswell, 2013; Hammersley, 2018). While the research question is suitable within the extensive scope of phenomenological research, the researcher sought to integrate an interpretative lens to conceptualize the individual accounts of each participant. Qualitative methods are designed to discover (McLeod, 2011), explore, and understand inner phenomena (Pistrang & Barker, 2012), and to examine how “aspects of social life are constructed and reconstructed” (McLeod, 2011, p. 17). According to Cook and Sackett, (2018), IPA is more extensively employed in qualitative inquiry to investigate counseling research questions. Contextual meaning-making of individuals related to significant experiences are explored to advance knowledge (Smith et al., 2009; Smith, 2011; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), which makes IPA especially congruent in the exploration of the research question in this study.

Husserl (1931), a philosopher, founded phenomenology as a research methodology for the description and analysis of consciousness through which philosophy attempts to gain the character of a strict science. As postulated in IPA, the benefit of phenomenology lies in the resultant rich descriptions on their own, and as complements to quantitative results obtained by traditional scientific methods (Smith et al., 2009). According to Smith et al.,

(2009), IPA is concerned with the detailed examination of human lived experience (idiographic element) and aims to conduct this examination in a way which as far as possible enables that experience to be expressed in its own terms, rather than according to predefined category systems.

Novice researchers using IPA, can be afforded the opportunity to explore in-depth, the 'lived experiences' of the research participants (Smith et al., (2009). In consideration of a research tradition that is interpretative, IPA as a qualitative approach, embodies all the tools and mechanisms necessary to conduct a rich and 'thick descriptive' research study. It is a 'participant-oriented' approach that allows the participants to express themselves and their 'lived experience' without distortion (Smith, 2011).

This qualitative study, guided by a hermeneutical phenomenological design method, enabled the researcher to gather and analyze themes that emerge from eight Christian, heterosexual, African American couples who received CPMC from credentialed counselors. According to DeFelice and Janesick (2015), researchers who use the phenomenological approach must understand that determining the authenticity of participant responses can be problematic due to biases, agendas, social constraints, and a desire to see themselves in a positive light. Rich valid data is composed when the researcher analyzes and distinguishes erroneous text and accurate authentic text by using their knowledge and expertise.

Research Questions

The overarching research question (RQ) that this study seeks to address is: What are the perceptions of marital satisfaction among Christian heterosexual couples who received CMPC from credentialed counselors? A semi-structured interview format was used to maintain

consistency with the purpose of the study. The overarching RQ was addressed based on the following sub-questions:

SQ1. How do couples who received CPMC define marital satisfaction?

SQ2. How do couples who received CPMC perceive the Bible contribution to marital satisfaction?

Setting

The study was carried out in at two churches located in large Northeastern, and Southeastern states. The settings were selected because they are categorized as mega-churches with an average of 4,000 members and 90% African American. This provides the researcher with the greatest access to participants within the identified population. The churches were also selected because they have an established counseling ministry that provided the researcher with greater access to married members that may have received CPMC from credentialed counselors.

Participants

This study focused on married couples of the African American diaspora. Eight Christian, heterosexual couples, married a minimum of seven years, were selected via a purposeful, convenient, and non-randomized sampling method (Creswell, 2013) to participate in the study. The selection of the identified sample size was guided by the assertion made by Creswell, (2007, 2013) that for qualitative phenomenological studies, having a sample size between five to 20 is sufficient to attain data saturation (the point at which no new information is obtained during the interview process (Polit & Beck, 2012). This number is considered adequate as IPA is more concerned about the detailed accounts of individual experiences rather than the number of participants (Smith & Eatough, 2012). Smith (2007) maintains that reduced participant numbers allow for a richer depth of analysis that might be inhibited with a larger sample.

The researcher used criterion purposive sampling techniques to recruit couples (Creswell, 2007, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). The use of the purposive sampling approach ensured that the recruited couples have the characteristics required to answer the research question. The researcher carried out a purposive sampling approach using the following criteria: (a) must have received CPMC from a credentialed counselor; (b) must be an African American, heterosexual couple; (c) each individual must be a professing Christian; and (d) each couple must be married a minimum of seven years, which according to Kulu (2014), is when cycles of marital dissatisfaction are most noted. Upon receiving IRB approval to collect data, the researcher piloted the interview with a small sample outside of the study sample to ensure clarity of questions and wording, verify the research, assess the relevance of the interview guide, and assess the interviewing techniques of the researcher (Smith et al., 2009).

Procedures

Prior to the recruitment of couples, the researcher sought approval from the Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB approval process included the submission of a complete proposal detailing the procedures that were taken to secure the safety, privacy and rights of couples and security of the data. Privacy and confidentiality of couples occurred using pseudonyms that were provided for each couple. Upon receiving IRB approval to collect data, an email was sent to the Pastor of both churches (see Appendix A) from which the population of potential couples was drawn, to request permission to solicit congregational participation via email and church website solicitation. Once permission was granted, a recruitment letter was posted on the church's websites (see Appendix B) outlining the eligibility criterion to participate in the study with a link to complete a 10-minute Qualtrics online survey. Qualtrics is a demographic survey software tool that consists of 14 core demographic questions

to ensure selection criteria: gender, age, race, religious affiliation, current marital status, length of time married, whether they received CPMC, and credential status of the counselor. Identifying the credential status of the counselor enabled the researcher to determine whether the married couples received CPMC from credentialed counselors. The couples who qualified following the Qualtrics demographic survey (see Appendix C), were emailed a letter of informed consent (see Appendix D). The prospective couples were given one week to read and provide consent by emailing consent to the researcher. The researcher followed up on day three from the stamped date of the letter of informed consent email, as a reminder of the consent due date. Once the couples return the consent form, the researcher scheduled interviews with the couples at a mutually agreed upon time. Once the interviews were scheduled, the researcher commenced the interviews by obtaining the verbal consent of each couple to participate in the study followed by conducting the interview using Zoom Video Conferencing. The interview, per couple, lasted approximately 60 minutes. When the interviews were completed, the researcher transcribed the recordings and began analysis of the data.

The Researcher's Role

Given that the research was carried out based on a qualitative IPA approach, the researcher sought to gain a richer, thicker understanding of individual experiences as expressed by the couples (Matua & Van Der Wall, 2015). Therefore, the researcher was actively involved in the collection of data as the main data collection tool. To accomplish the role of the observer and data collection, the researcher recruited couples and collected data using interviews and analyzed the data using IPA analytics. This method required the researcher to have an open mind and a listening ear. The challenge with the role played by the researcher in this study was the likelihood of the findings being influenced by bias associated with the researchers' perspectives

and personal experiences with the topic of research (Frels & Onwuegbuzie, 2012). To address this challenge, the researcher used bracketing (Dorfler & Stierand, 2020) reflexivity (Lincoln & Gubar, 1985) and methodological and theoretical cohesion (Morse et al., 2002) to minimize bias and bring credibility to the study (Birks & Mills, 2015; Dörfler & Stierand, 2020). The researcher took steps to ensure that the power differentials between the researcher and the couples are minimal (Engel et al., 2017). The researcher took steps agreeing with couples on the interview schedule using informed consent to enhance transparency with regards to the approach used in data collection, storage and the steps taken to protect the rights of couples. These approaches empowered the couples and developed good rapport leading to minimized power differentials, which put the couples at ease and willing to share lived experiences. Additionally, the researcher engaged in self-education through the reading of the existing literature on the topic, to enhance interaction with the couples and the interpretation of the meaning, as advanced by the couples (Amrulloh et al., 2020). Finally, the researcher had an active role in the process which involved a two-stage interpretation or a double hermeneutic (Smith et al., 2009). While couples were trying to make sense of their world, the researcher was trying to make sense of the couples, trying to make sense of their world through the researcher's interpretation of how Christian, African American, heterosexual couples married a minimum of seven years that received CPMC, make sense of the CPMC that they received (Smith et al., 2009).

Data Collection

Allowing the 'lived experiences' of the research couples to be told in the narration of the research study is important (Creswell (2013). In this phenomenological research study, the process of collecting data involves in-depth interviews of eight couples. The selection of the identified sample size was guided by the assertion made by Creswell, (2007, 2013) that for

qualitative phenomenological studies, having a sample size between five to 20 is sufficient to attain data saturation (the point at which no new information is obtained during the interview process (Polit & Beck, 2012). This data collection method encouraged rich, detailed individual accounts of lived experiences which is best suited for IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

Interviews

According to Larkin and Thompson, (2011); Reid et al., (2005); and Smith et al., (2009), the most used interviewing strategy in IPA studies and broader qualitative research genre, is semi-structure interviews. Semi-structured interviews are defined as purposeful for the obtaining of lifeworld descriptions of the interviewee for the interpretation of the meaning of described phenomena (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The interpretative and phenomenological qualities of a semi-structured interviewing strategy with IPA substantiates its usage as a data collection methodology for this study. Semi-structured interviews as compared to more structured interviews give the interviewer a greater chance of becoming visible as a knowledge-producing participant rather than hiding behind a preset interview guide (Brinkmann, 2018). The researcher ensured that the questions included in the guide were appropriate and sensitive to the well-being of the couples. This is important since asking questions regarding marital satisfaction might remind the couples of past painful experiences. Therefore, the wording of the questions needs to be precise. In addition to relying on literature, the researcher also sought expert opinion and guidance. The researcher engaged the supervisor in the formulation process. The researcher also relied on the research ethics approval guidelines. If the wording of the interview questions provoked past or present painful experiences, the researcher was prepared to offer the phone number for the National Hotline for Resources and Anonymous guidance (1-800-799-7233).

Data collection was carried out using online interviews that were conducted using a paid subscription to Zoom Video Conferencing. Couples were asked by the researcher to choose a location during the interview that was free from distraction and provide privacy. The use of Zoom is informed by the fact the platform allows for real-time communication and secure end-to-end encrypted storage of data without the need for third-party software, which is an important security feature (Archibald et al., 2019). Zoom security features only allow authenticated users to retrieve the password protected recordings. Password protection is limited to the researcher. Recordings are stored in the password protected lap-top of the researcher. In-depth independent interviews were conducted with eight couples recruited from two churches that recognize and perform counseling as a prerequisite for marriage. The first step in the collection of the data was for the researcher and the couples to agree on the time of the interviews. The researcher encouraged couples to find a private room to eliminate interference and to have a smartphone or laptop connected to stable internet. A week prior to the interview date, the researcher reminded the couples of the scheduled interviews. The couples were interviewed as couples. Using couple interviews allowed the researcher to identify and interpret interactions between partners such as power dynamics and gender dynamics, which might affect the quality of the relationship. This might not be fully identified and observed when interviewing partners individually (Smith et al., 2009).

At the time of the interview, the researcher commenced the Zoom video conferencing and invited the couples. The researcher reminded the couples of the privacy statement pledged to all users within the Zoom user agreement for which a host participant signature is required. The participant were reminded that the interview was being audio-recorded using Zoom's audio recording option. Couples were also reminded of their right to quit the interviews or skip any of

the questions without any penalty or punishment. The researcher then obtained verbal consent to start asking the questions.

The interviews were commenced with the researcher asking the couples to share their current practice as Christians. This had the potential to provide a benchmark for their level of spirituality and intended to inspire an atmosphere of expression whereby experiences could be openly shared (Merriam, 2002). Couples were presented with open-ended interview questions from the interview guide (see Appendix E), their responses were recorded with the permission of each couple. The researcher was keen not to interrupt the participant's response. The researcher encouraged couples to freely request clarification on any of the questions asked. The interviews continued until saturation occurred, meaning that there was no new information discovered in the data analysis. Each interview lasted 60 minutes.

Interview Guide

The interview guide in this study was used to collect qualitative data that is focused on understanding how Christian, heterosexual, African American couples who received CPMC perceive marital satisfaction. The researcher secured the verbal consent of the couples prior to beginning the semi-structured interviews. The purpose of the study and aim of the interviews was stated by the researcher. The interview questions were formulated by the researcher, guided by the study's research question. The researcher was guided by the opinion of the experts from the field in the development of the interview questions. The open-ended semi-structured interview questions that were used in this study include the following:

1. Tell me about your current practice as a Christian.
2. How do you define marriage in the context of Christianity?
3. What does marital satisfaction look like to you?

4. Tell me about your experience in premarital counseling.
5. What biblical principles were taught in your Christian Premarital Counseling (CPMC) experience?
6. What information did you take away from CPMC?
7. Explain how conflict is addressed in your marriage.
8. What principles learned from CPMC are used to address conflict?
9. Is there anything that you would like to share that has not been discussed?

Questions 1 invited the couples to give their account of how Christianity is practiced.

This question helped the couples to reflect on their Christian life as a couple in a married relationship. Various researchers suggest that spirituality and religion play a key role in the way married couples relate to each other (Aman et al., 2019; Bradbury & Karney, 2020; Cobb & Sullivan, 2015; Shearin, 2016). Having this question first, was important because the couples reflected on their responses throughout the interviews. Question 2 enabled the couples to give their views on marriage from a Christian perspective. This question allowed the couples to share how marriage is viewed from the perspective of being a Christian. According to Shearin (2016), commitment to one's faith appears strongly correlated with commitment to one's spouse.

Question 3 allowed couples to express how they perceive satisfaction in the marriage. This helped the couple understand what each of them expected in order to attain marital satisfaction. While each partner may experience satisfaction at distinct levels within the marriage, working to satisfy each other can bring about a satisfying marriage Baker (2019). Question 4 invited the couple to share their CPMC experience. Various researchers suggest that premarital counseling enables the couples to gain skills and knowledge on how to establish and maintain marital relationship (Arafani, 2017; Baker, 2019; Cobb & Sullivan, 2015; Kariuki, 2018; Navabifar et

al., 2020; Wulandari et al., 2019). The responses to the question gave further insight into the expectations of premarital counseling among individuals who seek to enter marriage.

Question 5 invited the couples to share whether the Bible was used during CPMC. According to Kariuki (2018) and Watson (1913), if couples perceive biblical principles to be rewarding in terms of enabling them to have satisfying marital relationships, they are likely to implement them. Question 6 invited the couples to share what they learned during CPMC. Evidence indicates that the biblical teachings educate and provide guidance on how to address misunderstandings (Arafani, 2017; Felkey, 2016; Wilson et al., 2019). Questions 7 and 8 invited the couples to share their views on whether CPMC has been helpful in handling conflict. Research indicates that premarital counseling enables couples to learn how to manage conflict (Wright, 1977). Question 9 was the final one-shot question (Patton, 2015). It allowed the couple to share information that the researcher did not ask during the interview. According to Patton (2015), it is essential to allow couples to have the last say during a qualitative interview.

Demographic Survey

Demographic information provides data regarding research couples. Determining if research participants are a representative sampling of the targeted population is obtained through the use of demographic surveys. Demographic questions in a survey provide context for the collected survey data and allow the researcher to obtain background information on the prospective study participants (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Obtaining background information enabled the researcher to qualify potential participants based upon the participation criterion. A 14-question demographic survey was distributed to potential participants via the online survey software tool, Qualtrics. Qualtrics uses enterprise grade security features such as: encryption, redundancy, continuous network monitoring, and single sign on (SSO) to ensure confidentiality.

Qualtrics security features only allow authenticated users to retrieve the password protected data. Password protection is limited to the researcher.

Document Analysis

Observing and noting non-verbal expressions are crucial in IPA. They are part of the experiences as well as the interpretation of those experiences by the couples (Smith, 2014). The researcher used focused observation to witness the facial experiences, tonal variations, and body movement of the couples (Smith, 2014). The researcher noted in writing, the research observations during or immediately after the session while the recollection of the researcher was fresh. The digital recordings, in addition to personal detailed notes, were repeatedly reviewed and analyzed to identify data that is relevant to the study. The recordings were transferred to a password secured laptop. The laptop and notebook used for noting, is safely kept in a locked box. The locked box is placed inside of a locked cabinet located in the home office of the researcher.

Data Analysis

The IPA analytical process outlined by Smith et al., (2009) was the basis for the data analysis for this study. According to Smith (2007, 2009) an iterative and inductive cycle is the characterization of the analytic process of IPA. A sequence of eight strategies that are aligned with the IPA data analysis process were used in the study:

1. Reading and re-reading
2. Initial noting
3. Member checking
4. Developing emergent themes
5. Searching for connections across emergent themes

6. Moving to the next case
7. Looking for patterns across cases
8. Writing Up

The researcher transcribed the recording using the transcription feature of secured Zoom Conferencing. The researcher signed a confidentiality agreement form before transcribing the recorded interviews (see Appendix F). Upon transcript completion, the researcher read and re-read the transcribed data against the text data and listened to recordings for clarity. Noting was engaged to identify and organize exploratory comments (i.e.: codes) which involved reading the transcripts and notes to identify words or short phrases that were used to organize and categorize the data. Close attention was given to each line of the transcribed text for the examination of semantic and linguistic content on an exploratory level for the development of emergent themes and connections across themes for the development of meaning units were analyzed (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher was careful to distinguish clearly between what the couples said and the researchers account of it through member checking which was accomplished by sending interview transcriptions to each participant to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences (Flynn, & Korcuska, 2018; Creswell, 2013). There were no edits required by the researcher.

After coding, the codes were assessed and organized for grouping of those that convey related information. The grouped codes were further aggregated to form themes and superordinate themes followed by a write-up and final statement outlining the meanings inherent in the couples' experience. The themes are explained, illustrated, and nuanced using a table of themes as a basis for outlining the meanings inherent in the couples' experience in the form of

the narrative argument interspersed with verbatim extracts from the transcripts to support the case.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research beckons accurate interpretation to ensure its trustworthiness (Morrow, 2005; Creswell, 2013). Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Creswell (2013) tagged four criteria of trustworthiness involved in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The authors believed that there should be absolute reliance that data and conclusions were drawn from the lived experiences of the participants thus legitimizing the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell, 2013). Thus, the researcher explored each criterion and explained how trustworthiness was achieved in this study. A thick description was applied through the practice of understanding behavior patterns within the social and cultural context (Holloway, 1997).

Credibility

According to Morse, (2018), standardized approaches to ensure credibility can sometimes invalidate studies that are philosophically incongruent with the method used to warrant credibility. This study sought to explore how Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, married a minimum of seven years, who received CPMC from credentialed counselors, perceive marital satisfaction through a hermeneutic-interpretivist research paradigm. Methodological and theoretical cohesion were exercised by the researcher to ensure congruence between the research question and the elements of the research method (Morse, 2018). Using methods triangulation, the researcher examined the consistency of the findings from the interviews, interview guide, demographic survey, noting and observation collection methods (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The framework of validity is sometimes rejected on the basis that realistic assumption is reality

external to our perception of it (Keats, 2009). Consequently, to be concerned with "truth' or "falsity" does not make sense. However, the framework of validity is more commonly accepted in quantitative research in the social sciences. To this end, the researcher worked to describe and understand the phenomena of how Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, married a minimum of seven years, who received CPMC from credentialed counselors perceive marital satisfaction, from the couples' viewpoint, recognizing that the researcher has no occasion to judge the credibility of results with any legitimacy. The credibility strategies that are congruent with the interpretive research paradigm of this study include (a) bracketing; (b) reflexivity: and (c) methodological and theoretical cohesion. Couples were allowed to conduct "member checks" to validate the accuracy of shared experiences that were captured by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Bracketing and Reflexivity

Bracketing in IPA is a cyclical reflexive process, mimicking the hermeneutic circle, and is facilitated through reflexive practices (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher's preconceptions are mitigated within a methodological commitment to interpretation (Smith et al., 2009) and there is an expectation that the researcher will bracket their foreknowledge of a phenomenon while simultaneously verifying their interpretations based on the account of the couples (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher engaged in regular reflexive practices using a hermeneutic approach to interpretation throughout the research process. Reflexive journaling was engaged by the researcher to promote reflexivity and bracketing through which, a record providing a rationale for the logistics, methodological choices, and a reflection of the couple's values and interests was gained throughout the study (Husserl, 1931; Morse, 2018).

Methodological and Theoretical Cohesion

Congruence between the research question and the elements of the research method can be attained through employing methodological and theoretical cohesion (Morse et al., 2002). According to Hays et al., (2016), coherence is the justification of trustworthiness criteria and strategies. The researcher carefully considered the theoretical and methodological congruence of the research question with the data collection and analysis procedures. The hermeneutic-interpretivist research paradigm and IPA methodology informed by the philosophical foundation of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography represent the methodological and theoretical cohesion criteria of this study.

Dependability and Confirmability

The researcher has an obligation to ensure that the procedures around the study are logical, recognizable, and reported (Schwandt, 2015). It is important for the researcher to give the reader detailed accounts concerning how the study was conducted so that its dependability can be accurately measured against similar studies that may bear a different outcome (Creswell, 2013). The analysis was checked against the recorded data to determine its strength.

Predispositions and prejudices associated with the researcher was reserved which is known as 'epoche' (Reid et al., 2018). Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria of qualitative trustworthiness were met in the keeping of a reflexive journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability

Describing the research context and emphasis central to the research will give the researcher enhanced transferability. Providing researchers with enough information on the case studied so that the researcher can recognize similarity between the case studied and the case to which findings might be transferred is what is known as transferability (Schwandt, 2015).

According to Creswell (2013), transferability decisions are made by the reader based upon the writers thick, rich descriptions of participants or settings under the study. Considering that on-line Zoom conferencing was conducted, the researcher accounted for and describe changes that occurred in the setting and how, if at all, said changes affected the research approach. With qualitative research, it is assumed that the researcher will bring a unique perspective to the research. To avoid threats to the research, the researcher recognized the degree to which results could be corroborated to ensure findings are sufficiently authentic and trustworthy. According to Creswell (2013), data collection of the researcher's personal notes (noting), and a deep rich depiction of the participants and their personal experience from premarital counseling will allow the researcher to contribute valuable data for further research studies.

Ethical Considerations

This study involved human couples; therefore, the researcher took into consideration the relevant research ethics that ensure protection, privacy, and the rights of couples. Privacy and confidentiality of the couples occurred using pseudonyms that were provided for each couple. Recruitment of couples began once IRB approval was received. Participation in the study were voluntary and this was achieved using informed consent. Couples were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Data is securely stored in a password-protected laptop that is only be accessible by the researcher. The laptop is stored in a locked cabinet located in the home office of the researcher. The notebook used for noting is safely kept in a locked box. The locked box is placed inside of a locked cabinet located in the home office of the researcher. Access to the locked box and cabinet is limited to the researcher. The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks the couples would encounter in everyday life.

Summary

The research methodology that was explored in this phenomenological study was discussed in Chapter 3. Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, married a minimum of seven years, that received CPMC from credentialed counselors, at two churches located in large Northeastern, and Southeastern states, perceive marital satisfaction. The premise of the study was created through the researcher's role and the couple's interview process. Data collection processes and data analyses, inclusive of theme identification developed through participant responses were discussed. The chapter ends with a discussion around the appropriateness of the population, research design, and ethical assurances. The proceeding chapter presents, examines, and assesses the results of this study.

Chapter Four: Findings

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to discover how Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, married a minimum of seven years, that received CPMC from credentialed counselors, at two churches located in large Northeastern and Southeastern states, perceive marital satisfaction. In the current findings chapter, the focus is to present the results of the data analysis that focuses on how Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, married a minimum of seven years, that received CPMC from credentialed counselors, perceive marital satisfaction. This chapter presents findings from responses to the guiding research question: How do Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, married a minimum of seven years, that received CPMC from credentialed counselors, perceive marital satisfaction? Through the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis, eight superordinate themes were identified across all interviews to illustrate how Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, married a minimum of seven years, that received CPMC from credentialed counselors, perceive marital satisfaction.

Participants

Participants and their backgrounds relative to the research question of this study are introduced. Presenting a narrative account of the participants' interpretations identified through the interpretative process of the researcher is the double hermeneutic process that is characteristic of IPA (see Figure 1). Evidence of how the participants perceive marital satisfaction and how the Bible contributes to marital satisfaction is presented by the researcher.

Pseudonyms were used for participant protection and de-identification (see Tables 2 and 3 for Participants Demographic Information). Eligible participants consisted of Christian,

heterosexual, African American couples, married a minimum of seven years, that received CPMC from credentialed counselors.

The study was conducted in two churches located in large Northeastern and Southeastern states of the United States. The choice of the study setting was informed by the knowledge that these regions have mega-churches with over 4,000 members with 90% of the congregants being African American. Therefore, the region provided the researcher with the greatest access to heterosexual African American couples to share their lived experiences and perceptions about marital satisfaction after receiving CPMC from credentialed counselors. The selected church facilities from the larger Northeastern and Southeastern states also have well-established CPMC ministry enabling access to married members that may have received CPMC before getting married. The subsequent subsections detail a rich description of each couple who participated in the study.

John and Shawana

The couple is aged between 55 and 64 years old. They reside in the Northeastern region of the United States. Prior to their church wedding, both received CPMC sessions within their church for five months. All their counseling services were offered by a credentialed counselor. The couple has been married for the last 30 years. The couple has four children and a grandchild. Based on this profile, it may be stated that John and Shawana have relevant experience as an African American heterosexual couple to share their experience about marital satisfaction.

Troy and Anita

The couple is aged between 35-44 years, and both received CPMC before settling down. The couple received counseling support from a credentialed counselor in their church. Currently, they reside in the northern region of the United States. Their marriage has lasted for 10 years,

and they continue to be active church members. Their 10-year experience as a heterosexual couple made them suitable participants in this study to help understand how they perceive marital satisfaction.

Mark and Yolanda

The couple resides in the southern region of the United States. Moreover, they are aged between 25-34 years, with a marital experience of seven years. The couple has a daughter aged four years and continue to be active church members. Their marriage was solemnized in their local church after having attended premarital counseling classes for six months. Therefore, this couple has the relevant marital experience to share and help in answering the study question of how heterosexual, African American couples who received CPMC from credentialed counselors perceive marital satisfaction.

Martin and Cathy

The couple received CMPC in their local church for six months in preparation for their marriage. The counseling support was offered by church mentors and by a credentialed counselor. The couple is aged 35-44 years and their marriage has lasted for the last eight years. The couple also has a son and a daughter and continue to be active members of their church located in the southern region of the United States.

Robert and Melinda

The couple is 65 or older and has been together in marriage for the last 13 years. Before settling the couple received CPMC from a credentialed counselor in their church. The counseling sessions lasted four months. Today, the couple continue being active church members in the northern region of the United States. Their years of experience in marriage were key to their recruitment into this research to explore the formulated research problem.

Glen and Marisa

The couple resides in the northern region of the United States. Their age ranges between 45-54 years old. Having been married for the last 25 years, the couple has four children and continues to be active church members. Importantly, they received CPMC 25 years ago when making their marriage preparations. To date, they continue to observe key lessons learned from the premarital counseling classes, with a credentialed counselor, in their marriage. Their years of experience in marriage make them qualified participants for this study to help understand their experience with marital satisfaction.

Arnold and Cynthia

The couple is aged 45-54 years, and both underwent CPMC in their local church before the wedding. The couple has been married for the last 19 years and currently have three children. The counseling services received in the church were provided by a credentialed counselor. The couple considers their marriage a success partly due to the continued support of their church and mentors. Their insights about successful marriage make them a suitable sample for this qualitative phenomenological study.

Michael and Sharon

Michael is 65 years old, and Sharon is aged between 55-64. The couple resides in the southern region of the United States where they have been members of their local church for the last 13 years. Prior to the wedding, the couple received CPMC from a credentialed counselor within the church. Over the last seven years, the couple has had a successful marriage and is blessed with one child. Being a heterosexual, African American couple with a minimum of seven years in marriage, and having received CPMC from credentialed counselors, the couple was considered to have relevant experience to help understand the formulated study phenomenon.

Results

This current section presents findings from the thematic analysis process. The findings are presented chronologically in the light of the formulated research questions. Theme development is first presented followed by key themes that were used to answer the research questions. The section concludes with interview extracts on data observations.

Theme Development

Transcribed data from the eight interviews was used in the thematic analysis process. Verbiage was used in the data analysis process denoting that the coding was done manually by the researcher. Analyzing themes was conducted using the 8-step IPA analytical process. Step 1 focused on *reading and re-reading* the raw interview responses to familiarize with the data. At this step, all eight interviews were perused individually while highlighting important points and making initial notes to capture the general context of the participants' responses.

Step 2 entailed *initial noting* from the interview responses. In this step, the focus was to observe the facial expressions, feelings, gestures, and how couples reacted throughout the interviews using non-verbal communication. Initial noting enabled observations to be made from the couples using their expressions throughout the interview sessions.

Step 3 entailed *member checking* and follow-up for any further clarification if any insights shared by participants were unclear. Any additional clarification at this point served to enhance the authenticity of the coding process. Member checking in Step 3 were important in ensuring a successful IPA analysis process in Step 4.

Step 4 was limited to *developing emerging themes*. A theme refers to a pattern that captures something fascinating about the research question. Coding enabled the researcher to reduce large interview data into smaller chunks of meaning (Smith et al., 2009). When

generating initial codes, the coding process is determined by the perspective of the research questions. In this study, the overarching research question was created to understand how Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, married a minimum of seven years, that received CPMC from credentialed counselors, perceive marital satisfaction. Therefore, the coding process of raw interview data was performed with this question in mind. As such, this was a theoretical process, rather than an inductive process.

Every segment of each interview that captured something interesting about CPMC and marital satisfaction was coded. Line-by-line coding was performed on every piece of interview text to identify relevant information to answer the study problem. Open coding was used, implying that there were no pre-set codes. Rather, all emerging codes were developed and modified as the coding process was being performed. To identify themes, the generated codes from Step 2 were explored where words, terms, or phrases with similar meanings were grouped. Piles of codes with similar meanings were grouped to form a single theme. For example, several codes related to *reduced risk of divorce*, *better marriage preparation*, and *understanding what God says about marriage* were key emergent themes at this step. In elaboration, the theme of *reduced risk of divorce* was associated with codes like “no breakup” “few cases of separation” “dissolution” “not to split-up” “persist in marriage” and “not set apart.” These codes with similar meanings were collated into a single theme of *reduced risk of divorce*. The same process was applied to other codes from the raw interviews until saturation occurred whereby all the data had been exhaustively searched for relevant themes.

Step 5 focused on *searching for connections across emergent themes*. In this step, the focus was to review the developed themes, modify, and improve on the preliminary themes identified by collating similar codes in Step 4. The potential question considered in this step was

assessing whether the initial codes made sense to ensure themes were coherent and distinct from each other. Searching for connections across emergent themes also ensured that available interview excerpts supported the themes and determined whether any overlapping themes needed to be separated into individual themes.

Step 6 entailed *moving to the next case* to identify whether other participants had shared similar views concerning the topic. Similar views from across the interviews with the eight couples were merged into single themes. The same iterative process was used in each of the interviews until all the raw data were coded and organized into themes.

Step 7 further entailed *looking for patterns across cases* based on the responses from the eight couples. In this step, the final refinement of the identified and created themes was undertaken with the primary focus being to identify the essence of each theme and how it helped to answer the research question or study problem. For example, there was a need to assess relevant information conveyed by each created theme, and explore whether there were subordinate themes, and how they might interact with the main theme. Another focus at this step was to deliberate how the themes relate to each other when answering the primary and secondary research questions.

Step 8 was the endpoint of this IPA analysis process where data findings were reported. The next section details how the main themes emerged from the IPA analysis process and their application to answering the formulated research questions.

The themes identified during the IPA analysis process emerged from the open coding process. Initial codes were generated by identifying main phrases, keywords, or sentences with similar meanings from across the body of the eight interview responses. The identified codes and their rate or frequency of mentions in the body of raw interview data align with the following

keywords or phrases: (1) Christianity being practical in daily lives (41 mentions); (2) marriage in the Christian context (39); (3) lived experience with marital satisfaction (27); (4) experience during premarital counseling (52); (5) Biblical principles during CPMC (47); (6) lessons captured from CPMC (56); (7) addressing conflict in marriage (62), and (8) biblical principles used to address marital conflict (35).

Once the above key phrases, words, or terms had been identified from one interview, the researcher then systematically searched the body of texts from all the eight couples to find all instances of similar phrases, terms, or words. Each time a term, word, or phrase was found from other raw interview texts, a copy of it was made using codes and its immediate context examined. In the process, the emergence of the relevant themes discussed in the subsequent sections was identified by physically sorting the interview feedbacks into piles of similar codes with the same meaning. Table 1 presents the codes and main emergence of themes that were generated from the IPA analysis process.

Table 1: *Themes and their Respective Codes*

No	Codes found in each theme	Theme
1	Praying daily; reading the bible; planning family devotions	Theme 1: Marriage is relevant
2	A formal union; social engagement; contractual and consensual relationship	Theme 2: Christian definition of marriage
3	Family financial status; openness and sociability; marital commitment; and religious beliefs.	Theme 3: Factors influencing marriage
4	learning commitment; knowing other's mutual expectations; bringing up children; gender roles; solving conflicts; spiritual life	Theme 4: PMC adequately prepares couples
5	God's plan of marriage; communication; conflict resolution; bringing up children; honesty; intimacy	Theme 5: Biblical principles taught during CPMC
6	Divorce cases; readiness for marriage; marriage satisfaction; successful marriage	Theme 6: CPMC is essential for Christian couples
7	Right attitude; perseverance; sowing good seeds; communication; seeking counsel; forgiving	Theme 7: Willingness to solve conflict in marriage
8	Right attitude; perseverance; seeking support; the will to sacrifice and seek solutions.	Theme 8: Principles used to address conflict

Research Question Responses

The overarching research question that guided this study was: *How do Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, married a minimum of seven years, that received CPMC from credentialed counselors, perceive marital satisfaction?* The current section presents the data findings from the IPA analysis process. Insights from the IPA analysis process are presented chronologically in line with the formulated research questions. Themes 1-4 help understand SQ 1 while themes 5-8 focuses on answering SQ 2. The key findings with supporting interview excerpts are further detailed in the subsequent subsections.

Secondary Question 1: How Christian Couples perceive Marital Satisfaction

SQ 1 was created to discover the following: *How do Christian heterosexual, African American couples who received CPMC perceive marital satisfaction?* Specifically, SQ 1 focuses on understanding how CPMC contributes to their perception of marital satisfaction (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Data findings from the IPA analysis process identified four themes that related to SQ 1. The four themes are presented and detailed below.

Theme 1: In Marriage, Christianity Should be Practical and Relevant to Everyday Life.

The eight couples were asked to share their views about the following: *Tell me about your current practice as a Christian.* **Findings from the interview responses showed that interviewees desire to ensure that Christianity is relevant and practical to their daily marital lives. For example, John shared that, “In marriage, our Christian faith should shape the way we live.”** Similar observations were shared by Anita who clarified that “Christianity is daily living and practice through meditation, prayer, and Bible reading.” Troy further elaborated the following about Christianity being relevant and practical in daily marriage lifestyle:

On Sundays our pastor shares about Jesus' glory and the cross and the need to love others. The message of life and death, our sins and salvation, and even faith and love do not end in the Church. We do our best to carry it home to our families, and others that we are around. Having a strong spouse like Anita really helps us to remain committed to and grounded in God's Word.

Yolanda also shared similar beliefs like Troy, John, and Anita revealing that, "daily prayer is a requirement for all Christians married or not. Talking to God in prayer helps us as a couple to meet our needs through faith in Jesus Christ" The concept of daily Christian practice was also shared by interviewees like Robert, Melinda, Glen, Marisa, Arnold, and Cynthia. These interviewees clarified that besides daily prayer, being a Christian means embracing practicing family devotion, bible reading, and teaching children. Robert noted that "reading the Bible together keeps us grounded." Marisa was of the view that "Bible reading is a daily exercise that reinforces what we hear during Sunday services and makes us eager to learn more from God." Melinda also emphasized that "we make a practice of sharing our faith with others that we come in contact with, and we teach our kids about the love of God."

Showing hospitality to neighbors and church members was also considered an important practical lifestyle to daily living. For example, Michael clarified that "with the Holy Spirit we have love, peace, joy, and kindness. We share God's love with others at home and when we are out among other people when the Holy Spirit leads us to. " Glen also added that "I practice my faith by spending time helping in my community as a way to demonstrate God's love." Cathy also held that, "being generous to community and strangers, people in general, is a good way of sharing our faith with other people." These findings show that the current practice of Christian involves acts that are practical and relevant in daily living including praying, reading

the Bible, having family devotions, being hospitable to others, teaching children, being generous in one's community, and remaining faithful to God's teachings.

Theme 2: Definition of Marriage in the Context of Christianity Differs Among Couples.

Participants were asked to share their views about the following: *How do you define marriage in the context of Christianity?* Findings showed that couples define marriage differently based on their personal experience and beliefs. Main codes identified from the interview responses included the definition of marriage as a formal union between a man and woman, a legal contract between two people, a social engagement emotionally, legally, and economically, and contractual or consensual relationship. Despite the individual definitions of marriage, the participants agreed that it is a holy union ordained by God where couples make public declarations of commitment and love.

Shawana clarified that "marriage is a formal union created by God to express love and commitment to each other." John shared that marriage "is an interpersonal union that God established for a man and a woman to be solely committed to each other for life." Moreover, Martin was of the view that "marriage is an institution created by God so that a man and a woman can have companionship and demonstrate the love of God by how we live, worship and respect each other." These insights were also shared by interviewees like Melinda who held the view that:

Marriage is a covenant union between God two adults that unites their lives legally in church together until death or the rapture, whichever comes first. In Christ, married couple are obligated to each other socially, spiritually, and morally. In being married, God honors our sex life and expects us to have children and bring them up to know and obey his Word. I once read where traditionally, Christian marriages have been perceived

as having a key role in the preservation of human civilization and social morals which I found to not only be interesting, but true. Robert also held that “marriage is a gift from God and one that couples should not take for granted as it presents the right atmosphere to build a family.” According to Robert, “marriage is a public declaration of commitment and love that is made in front of family and friends in a church ceremony.” Glen believes that “marriage was created by God and having a wedding in a church is very important because it dignifies the union.” Based on the interview responses, it becomes elaborate that marriage is a significant and basic social relationship between a man a woman. As a result, participants hold that this relationship must be maintained and nurtured for the welfare of both parties and society. Importantly, participants believe that marriage is ordained by God, thereby making it the most fundamental and important human relationship considering it offers the primary structure for establishing families and rearing future generations.

Theme 3: Marital Satisfaction is Influenced by Personal, Interpersonal, Spiritual, and Interaction Factors.

The eight couples were also asked to share their experience about the following: *What does marital satisfaction look like to you?* Data findings showed that the couples’ experience with marital satisfaction was defined by key codes like (1) demographic factors like education level, age difference, number of children, and economic situation; (2) interpersonal factors like openness, agreeableness, and extraversion; (3) interactions via marital commitment, communication, and mutual trust; and (4) religious and spiritual issues. Arnold shared that “I consider my marital satisfaction a balance between costs and benefits. I am more satisfied in my marriage because my wife supports me to make things more beneficial.” Sharon noted that:

There is no perfect marriage that is fully satisfactory because individual experience is influenced by many things like money, children, and age. I think couples have to talk and agree on things or agree to disagree and still be okay about it for true satisfaction to be experienced.

Cynthia and Glen remarked that the age of marriage may impact marital satisfaction. According to Cynthia, “marital satisfaction is strong among folks above 30 years compared to younger couples where divorce rates are high.” Glen added that “marrying from same age range might affect satisfaction than having a male partner older than a female partner. From the people that I know, it seems an age difference of more than five years up or down, male or female has a better chance of a successful married life.” Marriage duration is another important demographic factor that might influence positive experiences and contribute to marital satisfaction. Melinda shared that:

I know a lot of people and I have observed that couples in marriages are often more satisfied than those who have been in long-term relationships without being married . Along the marriage journey, Robert and I understand that certain dynamics like raising children, financial problems, relationships with relatives, and when children start their own families, affect marital satisfaction. Being satisfied in marriage depends on how a couple balances these dynamics. Robert learned this the hard way, I am his third wife (they both laughed from their bellies), but we have been married 13 years and are very satisfied.

Education level may also influence marital satisfaction. Robert noted that “marital satisfaction looks like self-respect, respect for one another and the ability to talk things over with an open mind to understand the other persons viewpoint. The level of education plays a big part

in couples being able to express themselves in ways that reach their spouse to the point of understanding.” Anita also observed that, “marital satisfaction happens when couples grow in their profession and make positive economic progress all of which result in a better quality of life.” Troy indicated that, “economic empowerment has a lot to do with being happy or satisfied. Having enough money to provide for family needs makes families happy and satisfied.”

Shawana clarified that “marital satisfaction relates to understanding, communication, and agreement about roles, income, and goals. I’m more satisfied when I know where the family is headed.” Also, Cathy noted that “when Martin and I don’t communicate or interact well, I am not happy. Our poor communication affects me and leads to frustration. I am not satisfied until our issues are resolved and we are on one accord.” Other participants also reported that interpersonal factors are key to having a positive marital experience. For example, Sharon clarified that, “being open and conscientious in marriage makes the whole experience enjoyable and memorable.” According to Marisa:

I enjoy marriage all the time when there is constantly positive and engaging communication. I think that most people experience low marital satisfaction because of the negative behavior like anger, irritability, depression, and other things like that, that they carry with them from life experiences before they met and married. Glen helped me overcome some of these challenges that affect marital satisfaction in most marriages.

Yolanda and John further noted that psychological problems should be addressed to prevent low marital satisfaction. According to Yolanda, “marital satisfaction is a backbone to a successful marriage. For me a couple should work to eliminate mood swings and such, that impacts personal satisfaction with marriage.” John also shared that “being sure about Shawana means that I can trust her and remain committed to building a strong marriage. When I trust my

wife there is no room for negative energy or things like being anxious, looking uncertain, and depressed all the time because this kind of like makes the marriage experience even more negative.”

Spiritual and religious factors may also contribute to marital satisfaction including aspects like anti-divorce beliefs and making marriage public. Robert clarified that “I am more satisfied in my marriage when despite how I feel or what I want to do, I choose to obey God. Instead of giving in to my flesh.” Arnold also indicated that “marriages should persist for better or for worse with the entire experience focused on achieving success throughout life.” These findings show that individual experience with marital satisfaction may be affected by demographic factors like age, financial issues, communication, and psychological factors like anxiety and uncertainty. Addressing these issues would likely increase individual satisfaction in marriage.

Theme 4: Premarital Counseling Contributes to Positive Experience Preparing Couples on Range of Family Topics.

Participants were asked to share their views about the following: *Tell me about your experience in premarital counseling.* Based on interview responses, the participants were of the view that taking part in premarital counseling has a positive experience preparing couples on a range of family topics. Some of the main codes related to enhanced preparations with diverse family-related topics included: (1) understanding the meaning of marriage commitment; (2) identifying life goals as a couple; (3) learning each other’s mutual expectations; (4) agreeing on living arrangements; (5) knowing about having and bringing up children; (6) gender role expectations; (7) ways of solving conflicts; (8) spiritual life, and (9) understanding how to handle parents and in-laws.

John, Troy, Cathy, and Anita shared that participating in CPMC was important as it enabled them to understand the meaning of marriage commitment. John shared that, “before couples may not have shared meaning of what they want in a marriage. Counseling becomes critical in enabling parties to share their views about the planned marriage and their level of individual commitment.” Cathy held that “I had a positive experience in premarital counseling as I got to learn about commitment, while we chose each other, and how to deal with future friendships.” Anita further indicated that premarital counseling gave me a platform to share what attracted me to Troy and what I believe he would help me become.” Overall, participants had a positive experience sharing their views of committing with their couple before settling down.

Learning lifelong goals was noted as another important lesson couples experienced during premarital counseling. Yolanda shared that participating in CPMC was a positive experience that “enabled me to identify what Mark and I sought to achieve together in life.” Michael also shared having a positive experience at premarital counseling sessions that, “greatly helped us set marriage and career goals. We learned how to support and help each other and how to bring up a family.” Robert, Melinda, Glen, and Marisa confirmed the beneficial life lessons they obtained from premarital counseling, largely attributed to planning goals to include their wives or husbands, family, and relatives. For example, Glen elaborated that:

I must say that Marisa and I had a memorable experience during premarital counseling. The sessions equipped us with information about life and being more focused. You no longer plan and schedule activities that only include you but must accommodate your spouse, children, community, and other close friends. An important takeaway was the lesson of planning better for tomorrow through specific goals and milestones throughout the marriage.

The experience of creating life goals was supplemented by getting to learn each other's mutual expectations. Arnold, Cynthia, Michael, and Sharon clarified about having memorable premarital counseling sessions through which they got to know their future spouses better. According to Arnold, "premarital counseling sessions created a safe place to open up to Cynthia and be honest about what I hoped for in our marriage." Cynthia agreed that "there was active sharing of everything with Arnold about hopes and aspirations, and this gave us a chance to understand ourselves, our do's and don'ts in marriage." Michael also recalled having a positive experience during premarital counseling sessions that were central to "understanding and appreciating Sharon's thoughts, her hopes, and expectations." The counseling sessions were also identified as important in facilitating family lessons related to agreeing on future living arrangements. According to Mark:

My experience during premarital counseling was a revelation in terms of how Yolanda and I planned to live together. We got to agree on where we planned to live after having children and examined the potential of our careers to enable us to make shifting decisions. We also got to agree on whether we could continue living close to our parents after marriage or as they got older. I really don't believe there would have been that much transparency before marriage if we had not participated in the premarital counseling sessions.

Learning about having and bringing up children was another important experience for some couples during premarital counseling. Troy and Anita, as well as John and Shawana, recalled their experiences. Troy shared an engaging experience "it enabled me to learn more about Anita and other interesting views about her like when we planned to start a family and how apart we planned the children to be in terms of the age difference." Anita shared about obtaining

Christian lessons and “better personal perception with Troy when discussing the burning abortion question in America and whether it was acceptable after marriage.” John also indicated important experience of following their parents’ approach about child-raising and whether they supported or opposed their views. Premarital counseling was shared to be important in terms of readying participants identifying family values related to shaping their children’s upbringing, discipline, and kinds of expectations that each spouse had about money spent on children like clothes and toys. Cynthia also shared about the positive experience of premarital counseling in terms of proper money management when raising a family. According to Cynthia:

For me, premarital counseling came at an important time to deal with where we had a revealing experience with Arnold concerning how to handle money issues and budget in the family. I remember the lessons we learned on how to ensure proper money management and prevent future financial disagreements that could lead to arguments. In a marriage, couples often have different approaches and priorities with their budget. Our counselor taught us that there should be no secrets or shame around money in a healthy marriage. Proper money management improves child upbringing and family’s economic well-being that are key to a successful marital experience.

Marriage expectations and role beliefs formed part of individual learning experience during premarital counseling. Yolanda held that “premarital counseling sharpened my experience about the general idea of what marriage looks like and what it means to be a wife to a husband who may have very different views from my own.” Shawana also agreed that “in marriage counseling, John and I were able to uncover what we each believed about marriage and starting a family. We were given the opportunity to talk about what we each expected of the other, and beliefs about the structure of the marriage.” Mark added that in premarital counseling, “I was

able to express what my parents modeled about roles in the house, house chores, and working if there are children, and who stays at home.” Therefore, role expectations in marriage were considered another important family lesson experience learned during pre-marital counseling.

Plans for resolving future conflicts also marked an important lesson learning during pre-marital counseling for some participants including Arnold, Cynthia, Michael, Cathy, and Robert. Cathy expressed that “when a couple fails to freely discuss any topic their marriage would likely struggle, pre-marital counseling allowed for the discussion of topics that may never have been discussed openly.” Arnold also clarified from his experience that, “premarital counseling enables couples with a therapist to learn how to communicate better and settle disputes.” Cynthia noted that “good communication alone may not be enough in keeping the marriage healthy. I believe that the chance of long-term success in marriage is doable when couples are taught how to communicate honestly and openly without offense .” Based on these interview responses, participants hold the view that pre-marital counseling offers a learning avenue on how to approach and manage disagreements, in efforts to sustain and achieve successful marriages.

Approach to individual spiritual life was also observed as an important experience during premarital counseling. Robert recalled his experience as being key to understanding his identity concerning “what spirituality meant to me and my spouse.” Mark noted a key lesson on the “kind of participation expected of my spouse and me in terms of spiritual community within the church and at home.” According to Sharon, “part of growing spiritually is knowing how to share important things in your life with others, and the experience learned from premarital counseling equipped me with skills like being honest, open, and genuine with my husband.” Melinda also shared that part of the premarital counseling experience related to engaging with the important experience of whether “children would be allowed to attend religious education or other regular

church services.” Troy also observed key teaching experience on how to facilitate children “to go through religious rituals like baptism, confirmation, and first communion.” These responses focus on individual learning experienced learned during premarital counseling and are closely aligned with individual and family development of spiritual life.

Secondary Question 2: How Christian Couples Perceive the Bible as a Contributor to Marital Satisfaction

SQ 1 was created to understand the following: *How do Christian heterosexual, African American couples who received CPMC perceive the Bible as a contributor to marital satisfaction?* The second research question focused on discovering how couples perceive Biblical context as a contributor to marital satisfaction (Arafani, 2017; Felkey, 2016; Wilson et al., 2019). The current section presents the data findings based on four themes 5-8, identified from the IPA analysis process. The themes relate to the Biblical principles taught during CPMC, the importance of premarital counseling before setting and addressing conflict during the marriage.

Theme 5: Eight Important Biblical Principles Were Taught During CPMC.

The eight couples were asked to share their experience about the following: *What biblical principles were taught in your Christian Premarital Counseling (CPMC) experience?* Findings from the eight interview sessions with the couples showed that eight important empirical principles were taught. The eight principles relate to the following: (1) God’s plan about marriage; (2) gender roles in marriage; (3) couple commitment; (4) importance of communication; (5) approaches to conflict resolution; (6) bringing up children in a Godly way; (7) financial honesty; and (8) intimacy in marriage.

First, God’s plan for marriage was considered an important Biblical principle learned during CPMC. For example, John shared that, “I got to appreciate that God’s plan for marriage

reflects his image in that the Trinity is one yet has three parts, I didn't always understand this. I get an understanding that although Shawana and I are two different people, we become one even though we operate differently, just like in the trinity where God is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. They operate differently but are one." Yolanda added that, "premarital counseling emphasized that when a couple marries, they have to show God's plan of being in a union. His original plan was that husband leaves his parents and joins to his wife and they together, are their first priority. Michael and Sharon shared that God's plan for marriage is to raise Godly children. According to Sharon:

To my understanding which I think is a rather traditional belief, raising children to be Christians is the primary reason for marriage. Today, it really makes me said to know that in many marriages, children are seen as a burden and a killer of joy. Counseling emphasized that God created men to procreate and when couples make up their minds to deliberately not have children, they are failing in one of the spiritual plans that God had for marriage and that is raising children.

Martin and Cathy shared the important role that God had about marriage were to establish his Kingdom. Martin clarified that "the bible clearly states that God blessed marriage with a primary desire of couples to be fruitful and multiply." Cathy agreed that "just as my husband said, God's plan for marriage is to continue reproduction and that, I think, is an important biblical principle we learned when attending premarital counseling sessions." Moreover, some couples like Glen and Marisa were of the view that God's plan for marriage is related to companionship. According to Glen, "God teaches us that two are better than one... most single people are stressed and lonely because they miss that inner desire for personal companionship." Marisa further noted that "God requires couples to be companions where the husband provides,

and a wife helps in supplementing what a husband might lack.” These interview responses further reveal that couples agree that God’s plan for marriage is one of the important biblical principles they learned during CPMC.

Second, gender roles in marriage were also mentioned as an essential biblical principle that couples learned during CPMC. Robert and Melinda shared that God had clear roles for a man and a woman during creation. Melinda believed that “the teaching during premarital counseling emphasized that God first made Adam and later created Eve as a helper. Any Christian believes that God established this order in marriage from the beginning that a man in the family should lead and the wife to offer him her support.” Robert also added that, “the Bible provides clear roles for couples, with men designated as providers.” Troy and Anita shared that in the Bible, God expects a man to love his wife just as Christ loved the Church. According to Troy, “the Bible insists that the love a man shows at home to his wife should be genuine. Jesus died for the Church even with all her sins and shortcomings, a man should follow a similar approach and sacrifice his selfish interests. Robert also added that “a wife is instructed to submit to her husband’s leadership and bring up children in the training and instruction of God.” These views show that gender roles emerge as another important biblical principle that heterosexual African American couples recall from their CPMC sessions.

Third, other couples like Michael and Sharon mentioned the Biblical principle of establishing commitment in marriage. Michael noted that “my biblical lesson during premarital counseling is that marriage to Sharon is just more than my love for her. Instead, marriage is a commitment of this loving relationship as God loved the church and died for it. That is what marriage entails, a binding agreement to love unconditionally.” Sharon also shared that, “we find in the Bible that God hates divorce, but most couples consider it an easy option when things are

not working out to satisfy their desires. Premarital counseling really helped my husband and I understand unconditional love.” Arnold and Cynthia also noted that marriage commitment was an important lesson learned during premarital counseling. For example, Arnold shared that:

It is always easy to be committed to your marriage when everything is going well. The same cannot be said when things seem not to be working out as planned. Commitment creates a sense where a couple remains committed and willing to do whatever it takes to make the marriage work. The commitment fulfills the biblical teaching where God commands that what he has joined together, there should be no man to separate such a union. Things may not always remain rosy, but commitment and communication breathe a new life into it to keep growing. I am not saying that this is easy or that Cynthia and I don't have our moments, but we are committed to the marriage. — (Arnold)

Fourth, communication in marriage was cited as another important biblical principle during premarital counseling. Couples like Troy and Anita, also Martin and Cathy shared that a successful marriage is founded on effective communication. Martin noted that “I will never forget how our counselor told the story of how Paul's letter to Timothy shows that God is a communicator, Christian couples are in His image and must also be communicators.” Cathy agreed that “a successful marriage is all about interacting with your spouse and knowing what to say, how to say it, and when to say it. We were reminded during counseling that the tongue has the power of life and death, what we say affects how we get along.” Anita added that:

At the core of my marriage with Troy is a healthy relationship where we have a clear communication plan. When we first got married, communication was difficult, we really worked hard at applying what we learned in counseling and that remains the backbone to our 10-year marriage.

Fifth, conflict resolution in marriage was also considered important biblical teaching based on the insight shared by Mark and Yolanda. For example, Yolanda elaborated that, “our counselor let us know that differences of opinion can be traced back to the Garden of Eden. I can’t exactly remember how the story goes but basically, God gave Adam rules, Eve broke the rules and when God confronted Adam, he blamed God for giving him Eve. In this present day, we do the same thing, we call it blame shifting. From this God declared there would be conflict in marriage. This truth really resonated with Mark and I. We have gotten better at accepting responsibility for what we do.” Mark also agreed that “conflict is inevitable in marriage but what matters is to be able to put aside any differences and address the problem through positive attitude, accepting rebuke, and seeking help from the church counselors if need be.” These responses further emphasize the importance of premarital counseling through CPMC in enabling couples to understand issues relating to conflict during the marriage.

Sixth, the interviewed couples shared that CPMC was important in facilitating individual understanding on raising children in a Godly manner. Michael and Sharon noted that parents must train their children about God’s word and discipline them appropriately. By contrast, Arnold and Cynthia clarified that through premarital counseling, they learned the need for parents to be a model of Godliness to their children and avoid making them made or as the bible says, provoking them into anger. For example, Michael indicated that “to raise responsible children, a key lesson from the Bible is to teach them scripture and this is how God develops godliness in us and our children. We were told during counseling about Moses asking the Israelites to teach their children in God’s word, and then reference was made to the book of Proverbs where fathers are taught to teach their children about wisdom and God’s word.” Sharon added that

One of my favorite scriptures is Proverbs 22:15. It basically says that children are foolish and correcting them with discipline will save them from trouble. When the children were young, it would pain me to discipline our son, but I did it anyway because I believe what God says. He grew up to be a fine young man.

Arnold also shared that:

Children are more inclined to do what they see rather than what we say so we became bent on becoming role models for them. Cynthia and I pray together, go to church, and read the Bible together. We held tight to a bible principle that was taught during counseling, it was to be imitators of God as loved children. It was explained that the same imitation we develop during the marriage will be imitated by our children. We took that as a charge to be role models before them.

Cynthia further clarified that “what really stood out for me was when Paul directed the Colossians to teach their children using positive values and not to embitter them to avoid discouraging them. I took that to heart and vowed never to do that.” The findings shared by Michael and Sharon and by Arnold and Cynthia show premarital counseling promoted the biblical principle of raising children positively in a marriage. The interviewees agree that a successful family instills Godly values in their children and uses discipline to correct and direct children as they grow.

Seventh, John and Shawana mentioned the need for financial faithfulness in marriage as one of the key Biblical pillars taught during the CPMC sessions. John shared that “in our marriage, we focus to stay a debt-free life and plan for everything that we do as a family. A good budget ensures that we do not fall into a financial trap which is often a reason for divorce and marital conflict.” Shawana also expressed that, “we are always open about our finances and any

money issue is discussed to budget for our immediate needs and savings.” These responses show that being open to each other in marriage regarding finances is important in preventing misunderstandings that often result in relationship breakdown and unforeseen debts.

Finally, Mark and Yolanda shared about being intimate in marriage as a strong Biblical principle between couples. Mark observed that “in a marriage, we have the privilege to grow in intimacy with God by studying his Word and speaking with him in prayer. In Marriage, Yolanda and I remain intimate by communing through sharing our lives, fears, thoughts, and concerns that cultivate our friendship.” Yolanda agreed by stating that “we realize the importance of friendship in our marriage believing that is where true intimacy lies.” Mark and Yolanda noted that marriage presents the most intimate relationship anybody experiences in life. In this case, marriage should be more intimate than just a friendship. Mark added that, “during premarital counseling we were told that the book of Hebrew was good to read to learn about the need for intimacy and friendship in marriage. Bible teachings in Hebrews has cultivated our friendship (soul), spirituality (spirit), and our sexuality (body) throughout the marriage.” Mark and Yolanda believe that lacking these three aspects would imply that couples will not experience the intimacy God desires.

Theme 6: CPMC is Essential for Christian Couples Seeking to Settle.

The eight couples were asked to share their experience about the following: *What information did you take away from CPMC?* Interview analysis identified eight key codes supporting the theme of the primary role that CPMC plays in offering counseling support to Christian couples. The major issues identified included the following: (1) premarital counseling reduces divorce cases; (2) couples better equipped for marriage; (3) a platform to understand what God says about marriage; (4) increases marriage satisfaction; (5) enhances successful marriage; (6) few

couples seek premarital counseling; (7) high divorce due to lack of counseling. The identified issues help understand information that the couples took away from CPMC before marriage.

First, Michael and Sharon held the view that premarital counseling effectively contributes to better understanding among couples and potentially increases commitment while reducing divorce cases. Michael clarified that “our premarital counseling was quite enjoyable and we learned lessons that continue to sustain our marriage today. We are more committed to building a strong bond and ensuring the marriage becomes a success” Similar sentiments were expressed by Sharon in that, “premarital counseling helped us become more satisfied with our marriage. The lessons learned help us identify and manage differences.” Troy and Anita also indicated that good premarital counseling is an avenue to close collaboration, engagement, and communication that are important in a successful marriage. Specifically, Troy elaborated that:

Taking premarital counseling classes has been a plus for Anita and I. Not getting counseling before marriage is like starting a business without making any preparations. The counsel has strengthened our marriage and sustained our happiness. I know of many broken marriages since ours, possibly because church counseling was not part of the marriage preparation. I really believe that premarital counseling helps build stronger, more successful marriages. As a man, I really appreciate the lessons learned. They prepared me to be a God good husband and father.

Second, attending premarital counseling was noted to assist couples to prepare for their marriages more effectively. For example, Glen and Marisa shared that during premarital counseling there is a productive avenue created for learning more about each other like better communication, addressing misunderstanding, and how to bring up children. Glen noted that “the counseling we had taught us how to love and respect one another even during times that we

do not agree. Through counseling, we were able to identify differences in priority and talk them through so that they did not become problems in the marriage.” Marisa shared that “church counseling and mentorship was a big help. It taught us how to respond respectfully and in love to differences of opinion. Those tools will remain in our toolbox until Jesus comes.” These reasons shared by Marisa and Glen further echo the importance of premarital counseling sessions in ensuring a couple gets to have in place better preparation about marriage and how to approach various issues that emerge in the future.

Third, church counseling was considered suitable in giving couples a dimension through which they effectively explore God’s plan for marriage. On the one hand, Arnold and Cynthia agreed that counseling enables couples to subscribe to God’s will about marriage. On the other hand, Robert and Melinda noted that marriage is a way of understanding God’s plan of procreation. Arnold elaborated that “I not only understood about the importance of getting a soul mate during my counseling classes, but also the fact that our marriage is more about fulfilling God’s will.” In addition, Cynthia added that “we attend church regularly and are often reminded about the Christian way of engaging each other, the community, and children.” Similar sentiments were elaborated by Melinda who clarified the following during the interview sessions:

In our marriage, I always remind my husband that church counseling is important in helping us to mature as Christians. Through church support, we continue to learn about God, what God says about marriage, how to build relationships with extended members of our family, and how to nurture Christian principles. It is very difficult to consider another person as kindly as we do ourselves without the help of God’s Word. The

counseling we received was specifically memorable in teaching us to love and respect one another and to raise our children to be good, godly individuals in society.

Four Mark and Yolanda shared that taking part in CPMC lessons equips couples with information related to how to make a marriage union more satisfying. Mark clarified that “church counseling for us was a wonderful way for us to prevent the negative things that come up during the marriage from exploding. The lessons have remained at the heart of our marriage even to date. Continuous support and help from our church help us further focus on improving our marriage.” A sense of purpose often emerges when a couple embraces premarital counseling as noted by Yolanda. That is, Yolanda believes that “church support has enabled us to have a sense of direction and align our needs with those of our community. A clear vision keeps you more focused in life.” These findings show that premarital counseling is central to having a successful marriage life where couples feel satisfied with their decisions.

Fifth, interviewees shared that a more successful marriage is likely to emerge when couples go through counseling. According to Martin and Cathy, “honesty is key to marriage growth as it reduce conflicts and disagreements.” Martin agreed that “we are very satisfied in our marriage, and we believe it is because of the training we received during premarital sessions. Today we are more aware of each other’s strengths and weaknesses that we had not identified before marriage, and effectively tackle them to balance our marital experience.” Through church counseling, Martin and Cathy agreed that their marriage is most successful when they apply the principles learned.” Therefore, premarital counseling was both a success before marriage in terms of making the right decisions, and after marriage to ensure marital satisfaction.

Sixth, despite the perceived success that comes with taking part in premarital sessions, John and Shawana shared potential problems related to few couples seeking church support in

their marriages. John cautioned that “there is an improved opportunity in marriage success when the church supports your union. During our sessions, my wife and I learned a range of lessons like role in marriage, money and finances, parenting, and children upbringing. Most marriages tend to miss these critical lessons as few couples these days tend to avoid help from the church in their marriages leading to misunderstandings and divorce.” Shawana also felt that a lack of premarital counseling in modern times contributes to high cases of separation due to “inadequate preparedness on how to make a marriage a success.” Like views by Martin and Cathy, insights by John and Shawana revealed that premarital counseling contributes to marriage success, satisfaction, and low divorce rates.

Theme 7: Couples Embrace Willingness and Positive Attitude when Addressing Conflict in Marriage.

Participants were asked to share their experiences about the following: *explain how conflict is addressed in your marriage*. The eight couples shared various approaches they use to solve the conflict in their marriages. These approaches include the need to do the following: (1) develop a right attitude; (2) embrace perseverance; (3) sow good seeds; (4) talk to each other; (5) seek wise counsel; (6) seek immediate resolution; (7) be willing to sacrifice; and (8) learn to love and forgive each other. These measures largely contribute to a reduction in marriage conflict thereby ensuring positive engagement among the interviewed couples.

Having the right attitude when problems arise was identified as one of the approaches to resolving conflicts in marriages. Couples like Robert and Melinda, and Martin and Cathy shared the need to have a positive attitude when problems arise in marriages. According to Robert, “our first approach to resolving any misunderstanding is to have a positive attitude about the outcome. We have a view that conflict does not mean breaking up but facing the challenge and finding a

solution.” Melinda agreed that “in our marriage, we have learned to be accountable and when mistakes and challenges come up, we face them with sober minds, we don’t run away from them.” Martin also recalled that:

Reading the Bible gives much-desired direction on the conflict in my marriage. Paul and James taught the need to have joyful expectations during marriage not because we enjoy suffering, but because God’s purpose is fulfilled when mountains of problems are solved. Cathy and I become stronger when we resolve conflicts by developing a positive mental attitude about our challenges.

Persevering during the conflict was also noted as another approach to resolving marital conflicts. John and Shawana shared that as difficult as it can be sometimes, they do their best to endure trials and persevere when there are challenges instead of quitting or brushing it under the carpet. Shawana also indicated that “to solve conflicts we have to persevere because during our wedding one of the vows was to endure for better and for worse. So, this is what we committed to do without being weary because conflicts are temporary.” Therefore, John and Shawana shared that marriage is likely to be successful during conflicts when couples persevere and take necessary steps to solve emerging problems.

Sowing good seeds were identified by other couples as a potential way of resolving conflicts in marriage. Mark and Yolanda shared that having the right attitude when faced with conflict should be supplemented with sowing good seeds to solve the problem. For example, Yolanda shared that, “I understand that what I sow is what I will reap. If I plant seeds of hatred and negativity that is what will come back to me.” Mark agreed that “when my wife wants us to spend more time, to get that she engages in the positive discussion instead of criticizing the situation and always listen. In this approach, the fruit she desires is the same as the seed she

sows, and I am not likely to counter it by being negative.” These responses show that conflict may be resolved by being positive about the entire experience to avoid triggering negative engagement between spouses, a move that could hinder desired outcomes.

Glen and Marisa expressed that during conflicts, they share their problems between themselves before involving third parties. Glen noted that “I share any problem with my wife first as my best friend before opening up to another person. Jesus taught us that if a brother wrongs you, then you first engage them. A similar principle is productive in our marriage where I must show my wife respect first, and it is disrespectful to share it with relatives before we exhaust all avenues we have.” Marisa also added that if a problem spills outside it often creates even more conflict, so we try to handle things first, and involve our closest friends or family if need be. We learned these principles during counseling. I don’t remember the scripture, but it talks about what to do if offended. You go to the person first and if you don’t have any success, then you get two or three witnesses.” These observations show the importance of sharing the problem among couples before opening the entire problem to everyone else.

According to Michael and Sharon, conflict in marriages may also be addressed through seeking wise counselors. The couple believes that challenges that occur in marriages may be addressed via close support of significant others. Michael shared that, “our marriage has been a success because we seek advice from friends and more experienced couple than us. We always get to learn how they approach and tackle similar problems, and this enables us to address issues together.” Other couples like Arnold and Cynthia elaborated that when conflicts emerge, they purpose to address it immediately. Cynthia shared that, “we always attempt to discuss any differences in real time as a way of conflict resolution. Through trial and error, we learned that hiding feelings don’t mean they don’t exist. They come out when it reaches the boiling point.”

These findings further show that couples have various approaches through which they address conflicts in their marriages, key among them seeking advice from others, committing to timely problem resolution, persevering, and having positive expectations.

Theme 8: Principles Learned During CPMC are Widely Used to Address Conflict.

The eight couples were also asked to share their views about the following: *What principles learned from CPMC are used to address conflict?* Insights from the interview responses showed that couples use five principles when addressing marital conflict. The five principles include the following: (1) having the right attitude; (2) developing perseverance; (3) seeking support from wise counselors; and (4) being willing to sacrifice and (5) seeking immediate resolutions. Having the right attitude was an important Biblical principle couples consider when resolving conflict. Mark and Yolanda shared that when faced with marital conflict, couples should have a joyful expectation of God. Mark shared, “an important lesson I have learned in my marriage is that God would not leave you to suffer during conflicts. Instead, any problem is part of growth where we grow in the image of Christ, which is an ultimate goal for our marriage. We have to remain positive always since problems are temporary.” Yolanda also agreed to share that:

In our marriages, many times God uses our spouse as sandpaper where he smooths out areas in our life that fail to reflect Christ. When challenges come, we own them instead of shifting blame. The enemy, the devil is always on his post of destruction, and that is why we must remain focused because conflicts and misunderstandings are a daily occurrence at home, at the workplace, with other family members, and, sorry but even with church members.

Persevering through trials and actively seeking solutions was considered another approach to resolving marital conflict. Couples like Robert and Melinda, Glen and Marisa, and John and Shawana noted the need to always persist through conflicts considering them as trials that strengthen marriages. Robert recalled that “in our marriage, conflicts are part of the vows taken during our wedding. Though painful sometimes, we have learned that trials make us stronger. Conflicts also help me learn more about my wife, her likes, and her dislikes.” Marisa also elaborated that, “I always believe in the bible that problems are part of life. The bible teaches that persevering during problems has one outcome, even in our marriage. That outcome is related to building me and my husband’s character. I don’t mean to sound pie in the sky, but I have been married to John for 30 years and this has been my experience. Shawana also expressed a similar approach to conflict resolution, elaborating that:

Throughout our marriage, problems have always made us stronger. They test our limits and help produce the fruits God wants to cultivate in our marriage. You get to learn how to approach challenges and hurdles instead of quitting as many couples have done. At some point, they say, “That’s enough; I can’t live like this” and they quit. Some do this by divorcing, others by distancing themselves physically and emotionally, and they stop working to fix the marriage. However, the Bible encourages us to press through trials, which includes conflict. To me, this means to bear up under pressure and trust in God to help us through problems.

Seeking support from wise counselors, more successful couples, and close confidants was another approach couples use to handle potential conflict in their marriages. Troy and Anita prefer seeking support from a marital counselor when unable to solve their challenges. For example, Troy shared that, “Anita and I have been able to build the healthy marriage that God

meant for us by being willing to expose our weaknesses and seeking expert help. Jesus teaches us that if approaching each other or someone we are in conflict with does not work, there is a need to bring one or two others to assist. And it always works for us.” Michael and Sharon believe that seeking support from others is a better approach to conflict resolution. Sharon shared that, “when things do not work for us, we consult with senior couples who are church members and family friends. Over the years, we have learned a lot from them, and they always inspire us to be better.” Also, Martin and Cathy believed that close confidants like family friends are important in helping solve potential conflicts that a couple may be unable to resolve on their own.

Willingness to sacrifice and seek immediate resolution was also considered an important approach to managing conflict. Arnold and Cynthia indicated that seeking solutions early when they occur prevents them from becoming long-term embedded obstacles to a successful marriage. Arnold shared that, “even if I am upset about something, I do my best to adopt the teaching by Paul on not letting your anger make you hold on to your problems until the sun goes down or go to bed angry. We agreed early in our marriage that we should get rid of any problem before the day is over.” Cynthia also added that, “conflicts is about forgiving and learning to let go, that way God also forgives and strengthens our marriages.” Therefore, these responses show that solving problems on time is key to successful problem resolution in marriages, especially when such conflicts are resolved promptly.

Data Observations

Important life events related to receiving CPMC from credentialed counselors included marriage relevance, definition of marriage, couple preparation, biblical principles, and conflict resolution. These observations were identified by members who shared about events, speaking

emotively (happiness, contentment, joy, and satisfaction), fluctuations in their tone of voice, stuttering, pausing, repetition, interrupting, agreeing, or disagreeing, digressing from the topic, changing the topic, returning to a topic, lengthy discussion on a topic, talking loudly or quietly, and using humor. Participants also used elaborate metaphors and gesticulations to convey significant experiences throughout their marriage journey. Some of these are illustrated in the extract below where couples discussed their reasons for supporting CPMC for Christian couples. Each provided their own nuanced account but agreed on receiving CPMC from credentialed counselors contributes to marital success. The use of “—” indicates where couples interrupted each other; “[” indicates where participants talk over each other; *italicized* words illustrate the couples’ emphasis on a word; and PI shows lead interviewer facilitating the interview.

Observations from John and Shawana

Interview responses from John and Shawana elaborated their feeling about CPMC and how it influences their perception of marital satisfaction.

John:

To become more committed. You *respect* each other and observe your family roles when bring up children (smiles).

PI:

Is that how it makes you feel?

John:

[Yes, we remain committed to our vows, and everyone meets works to achieve our family goals and dreams]—

PI:

So, CPMC contributes to better experience in marriage and how you interact?

Shawana:

Of course, it does and continues to influence us as a family [smiling]. It is *communication* and bonding that matters and the roles we play towards a strong future [stares at John while laughing].

Observations from Troy and Anita

Findings shared by Troy and Anita revealed that CPMC adequately prepares couples for marital life. Some of the observations are presented below:

Anita:

(... being more talkative than Troy) ... I recommend couples to embrace premarital counselling for *marital success*. It has helped use in how we engage and run things here.

Troy

Oh yes for a support, help, warmth, a successful marriage is how you prepare and remain committed to it. Premarital counselling is definitely key to a *successful marriage*. – (Troy wraps his arms around himself smiling).

Observations from Mark and Yolanda

The response from Mark and Yolanda shows the influence of CPMC on couples when solving marital problems. The couple agreed that premarital counseling teaches perseverance and positive attitude on how to approach daily challenges in marriage.

Mark:

You really get to learn how to remain strong and committed (Kevin demonstrates the strength using locked fists)—

Yolanda:

You real become hardened and acquire life lessons that marriage is about understanding and forgetting each other.

PI:

Mark, would you say?

Mark:

Absolutely. You get to develop the right attitude knowing each passing day you are going to be at loggerheads (surprised face) every now and then. The ups and down of marital life you know (clears his throat smiling)—

Yolanda:

[Pointing at Mark looking shocked and amazed] That's our small secret you just let out (laughing).

Observations from Martin and Cathy

Findings by Martin and Cathy helped understand and appreciate the influence CPMC has in equipping couples with right attitude to solve daily marital problems.

PI:

Is that how you approach conflicts when they arise?

Cathy:

(Being more talkative than Martin) Marriage is attitude and *commitment* to its *success*. Sometimes there is joy, sometimes you are upset, and other times you just feel exhausted (contempt). A single misunderstand is not the end of a marriage just seeking help and support from others and persevering through. —

Martin:

Periodical ups and downs (laughing) are a drop in the ocean in a marriage. You don't call it quits at the slightest provocation.

Observations from Robert and Melinda

Important observations were also noted from responses by Robert and Melinda during the interview sessions. The couple were happy and expressed optimism in how they perceived the importance of Biblical principles during CPMC.

PI:

Would you say CPMC helped you become a better husband and father?

Robert:

Definitely! I get life skills on how to align my responsibilities (nodding head up and down)—

Melinda:

Number one husband in the world (laughing loudly)—

Robert:

(laughing) I got to understand how to tackle her, her likes and dislikes, what makes her mad and what makes her joyful. You get to learn all that as you settle into a long-term commitment.

Observations from Glen and Marisa

Example extract from Glen and Marisa showed the importance of Christian definition of marriage. The couple was happy that marriage as defined in the Bible serves to attach and define the meaning of their relationship. The interview excerpt below presents the observations that clarify the view the couple held towards marriage after receiving pre-marital counseling.

Glen:

Erh, “it’s a social engagement that establishes a formal union.” (Contemplative tone)

Marisa:

(Nods her head rapidly in agreement while staring at Glen).

Glen:

I would agree with premarital counseling as essential in helping appreciate what is, and is not, about marriage. You know why modern marriages collapse? Newlyweds lack exposure and basic foundation about marriage. —

Marisa:

That’s true!

Glen:

(Nods his head in agreement).

PI:

So not receiving premarital counseling means...

Clare:

What is quite clear is that if you don’t know what marriage is, you won’t be aware of key concepts of making it successful... it will collapse and that is why counseling is important.

Observations from Arnold and Cynthia

Interview responses shared by Arnold and Cynthia further highlighted the satisfaction couples have in their marriages after receiving pre-marital counseling. The couple happily shared

that receiving pre-marital counseling from a qualified counselor is a recipe for a successful union. The example below presents interview excerpts shared by Arnold and Cynthia.

Cynthia:

There is a sense of openness and responsibility to be free with each other.

PI:

What you mean is that you got to learn essential ingredients that influence and sustain marriage during your counseling?

Cynthia:

Exactly (nods her head in agreement).

Arnold:

That is right. (Long pause) We got to keep everything in the open. You share your distressing moments, happy times, or other experience as a couple (stares at Cynthia).

Cynthia:

Yeah. It's always close support. You don't want to be an island and explode alone from stress (laughs). —

Arnold:

(Scratches his head) You really learn about unity in marriage.

Summary

The current chapter has presented key findings from the IPA analysis process to help understand how Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, married a minimum of seven years, that received CPMC from credentialed counselors, perceive marital satisfaction. Findings

from the interview responses show that there are various ways through which CPMC contributes to how African American couples perceive marital satisfaction. Participants express that CPMC motivates them to ensure their marriages are anchored on practical Christian living every day. Importantly, marital satisfaction is influenced by personal, interpersonal, spiritual, and interaction factors. These factors include a couple's age, level of education, number of children, a family's economic situation, openness, and sociability, in addition to marital commitment, trust, and communication. Premarital counseling was reported to contribute to positive experiences in preparing couples on a range of family topics. The identified topics include a commitment to marriage, identifying life goals, knowing others' mutual expectations, bringing up children, gender role expectations, and knowing ways of solving marital conflicts.

Data findings also showed that Christian heterosexual, African American couples who received CPMC, positively perceive the Bible as a fundamental contributor to marital satisfaction. Participants shared eight important biblical principles taught during CPMC that they continue practicing in their marriages. These principles include respecting God's plan about marriage, upholding gender roles in a marriage, marriage commitment, amicable approaches to conflict resolution, financial honesty, intimacy in marriage, and bringing up children in a Godly way. Participants also noted that CPMC is essential for Christian couples seeking to marry because it offers essential insights that reduce divorce cases, adequately readies couples for marriage, increases marriage satisfaction, and enhances successful marriage. Moreover, CPMC taught couples how to approach and resolve conflict in marriage through perseverance, developing the right attitude, sowing positive seeds, seeking wise counsel, and willingness to sacrifice. The findings further show that both CPMC and Biblical teachings are central to a successful Christian marriage especially among heterosexual, African American couples.

Chapter Five: Conclusions

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to discover how Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, married a minimum of seven years, that received CPMC from credentialed counselors, at two churches located in large Northeastern and Southeastern states, perceive marital satisfaction. In the current conclusion chapter, key findings from the IPA analysis process are discussed to answer the overarching research question and the secondary questions. The conclusion chapter first presents a summary of the key findings before discussing and interpreting the findings in light of the research questions, literature review, and theoretical framework. Subsequently, the chapter then discusses the methodological and practical implications of this study's findings. Further, the chapter outlines potential delimitations and limitations that might affect the interpretation of the findings. Finally, the chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

Premarital counseling has been reported to positively influence marital satisfaction besides reducing potential causes of divorce among couples (Baker, 2019; Fonseca et al., 2018; Karimi et al., 2019). However, a paucity of research has examined the perception of Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, who received CPMC from credentialed counselors, regarding marital satisfaction in the United States. The current qualitative phenomenological research sought to fill this knowledge gap (Alaf et al., 2017; Baker, 2019). Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the lived experience of marital satisfaction from eight couples who received CMPC from credentialed counselors. Data findings showed that pre-marital counseling was observed to be important for couples seeking marriage and plays an important role in attaining marriage satisfaction. Married couples agreed that access to CPMC before

getting married gave them higher chances of succeeding in their marriages and a positive attitude about the overall experience of marital satisfaction. The couples stated and nodded their heads in agreement with the fact that CPMC is central to a successful marriage.. In line with the formulated overarching research question (RQ), it may be concluded that premarital counseling is essential before marriage for long-term marital satisfaction. These findings are further supported by detailed insights from the secondary research questions.

SQ 1 was created to understand the following: *How do couples who received CPMC define marital satisfaction?* Findings from the interview responses showed that couples were happy and as expressed by their faces, agreeing that CPMC is integral in contributing towards marital satisfaction. The interviewed couples smiled and remained congruent that CPMC contributes to marital satisfaction in various ways. First, couples were satisfied and joyful that CPMC creates a sense of responsibility in marriages where couples become committed to practicing their Christian faith in their marriages. Key among the daily Christian devotions that CPMC emphasizes include the need to attend church, pray daily, read the bible, hold family devotions, show hospitality to others, and remain faithful to God regarding His plan for marriage. Second, couples were satisfied that the concept of marriage is a legal and consensual relationship between a man and woman. Also, participants agree that marriage is a spiritual devotion to sustain and continue with God's creation.

Third, couples were largely happy and maintained smiling faces when sharing that during their CPMC sessions, they learned that marital satisfaction is influenced by various factors. Key factor that couples identified to be important in influencing marital satisfaction include spiritual factors and personal beliefs, marital commitment, communication, and trust. These findings

show that Christian heterosexual, African American couples who received CPMC, have tended to show a strong positive perception regarding marital satisfaction.

SQ 2 was developed to explore the following: *How do couples who received CPMC perceive the Bible contribution to marital satisfaction?* Couples happily expressed positive feelings agreeing that the Bible has a considerate contribution to marital success and subsequent satisfaction. Although wives were more talkative during the interviews, their views did not substantially differ from those of their husbands. Couples expressed in a contemplative tone that attending CPMC plays a fundamental role in imparting important biblical principles that are relevant to a successful marriage. The specific biblical principles couples acquire during CPMC include how to attain intimacy in marriage, practicing financial honesty, and learning how to bring up children in a Godly manner. Further, couples happily narrated with satisfied looks that through CPMC, they learn biblical principles like conflict management, constant communication, marriage commitment, and identifying gender roles in marriage. Considering the acquired lessons, the interviewed couples held that couples should seek premarital counseling to learn how to be ready for a long-term commitment, reduce divorce cases, attain marital satisfaction and success.

In addition, findings also showed heterosexual, African American couples who received CPMC laughed and nodded their heads in agreement that the Bible is an essential in developing a positive attitude among couples on addressing marital conflicts. Through biblical teaching, couples were generally happy and showed warm faces in that they are able to develop the right attitude of facing problems, seeking immediate resolution, showing a willingness to sacrifice, learning to forgive each other, and seeking help from counselors, friends, family, and church when unable to resolve conflicts. Finally, couples were jovial in displaying that the biblical

principles learned during CPMC are still relevant and important when resolving marital conflicts. Key among the identified biblical principles include persevering through trials, developing a positive attitude, and having positive expectations of favorable outcomes. Also, couples seek support and help from other people including close friends, mentors, and counselors. The findings show that couples consider the bible to have a positive effect on their marital satisfaction.

Discussion

The current section discusses the data findings from the interview responses. The discussion is done in light of the research questions, past literature studies on the topic, and the theoretical framework. Data interpretation is first presented in light of the empirical literature before delving into theoretical literature.

Empirical Literature

Findings from the interviewed couples show that Christian heterosexual, African American couples who received CPMC positively perceive marital satisfaction. Also, these couples believe that the Bible is a potential contributor to marital satisfaction. These findings align with past studies in that premarital counseling is likely to contribute to successful marriages while reducing divorce rates. In line with the covenant framework, it may be noted that couples hold the view that the Bible serves to educate them about God's plan of marriage. According to the Bible, the concept of marriage is considered a covenant between a man and a woman, and it involves lifetime commitment. Participants of this study shared that marriage is a vow of permanence for better and for worse, where couples commit to one another in steadfast love (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Matt. 19:6). As such, the church has a task of educating potential couples that marriage should not be entered into ill-advisedly (Kostenberger & Jones (2010).

Instead, adequate counseling through CPMC and by a credentialed counselor should be available to all couples seeking marriage before solemnizing a marriage.

Interview responses also showed that couples believe marriage to be a formal union between a man and woman. The formal union is taken as a legal contract between two people focused on fulfilling God's plan of continuing with his works of procreation. As such, marriage is more than a human agreement between two consenting adults. As noted from the literature, marriage is sacred, intimate, mutual, exclusive, and a solemn promise made before God and the marriage partner (Wilcox, 2020). In marriage, the concept of covenant denotes a unique relationship between God and humanity and is deeply rooted in creation (Vorster, 2016). Emerging relationship from marriage covenant is intended to create a bond of accountability between the couple, church, family members, and society. The spiritual union continues to be experienced through daily actions like prayer, reading the bible, conducting family devotions, and being faithful to God to bless the marriage.

Committing marriages to God serves to address potential problems that arise such as divorce. A growing body of literature shows that divorce is a major concern especially in the US (Schweizer, 2019). Specifically, couples are less committed to ensuring marriages succeed resulting in high divorce rates (Arauo & Lima, 2016; Cohen, 2019). In this study, receiving CPMC helps couples develop a positive attitude towards marriage, teach them how to persevere, and direct them on how to resolve conflicts. These observations align with past studies where establishing an affective bond between couples is a strategy that may be helpful to strengthen and support the resignification of their identity (Arauo & Lima, 2016). These observations show a positive implication that Christian counselors must ensure they educate couples on how to identify marital problems and formulate solutions to resolve conflict (Arauo & Lima, 2016).

Timely resolution of marital conflict ensures couples leave no room for temptation that may contribute to physical and emotional separation and subsequent divorce.

Interview responses showed communication, coordination, trust, and open engagement contributes to marital satisfaction. These constructs are largely acquired during CPMC, and they serve to prepare couples for long-term marital commitment. The findings echo past findings where couples who do not receive CPMC are at the risk of divorce especially in the early years of marriage (Baker, 2019; Kariuki, 2018). Through CPMC, there is a reduced number of divorces largely attributed to enhanced communication between couples, with limited conflicts, and mutual commitment to solving conflicts (Moeti et al., 2017). During CPMC, couples also appreciate God's plan for marriage where divorce or separation are considered nonideal in the sight of God (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Malachi 2:16). From the current findings, it becomes evident that CPMC may be essential in ensuring marital success as couples learn about the importance of commitment in marriage, communication, trust, and conflict resolution which are key to reducing separation and divorce while ensuring marital satisfaction.

Marital satisfaction is strengthened and promoted by religious commitment and religious practices like reading the bible together, praying, attending church services, and teaching children how to be Godly. Both are vital for a happy satisfying married life (Aman et al., 2019). The quality of marital commitment indicates the level of happiness and satisfaction of the individuals in their marital relationships. Contrary to behavioral models of marriage predictions, difficulty in changing negative communication between spouses, if changed, does not necessarily lead to more satisfying relationships, nor is it necessarily a predictor of distress (Bradbury & Karney, 2020). Insights from the interviews showed that marital satisfaction may be influenced by demographic factors like age of couples, level of education, and financial position in the

house. These findings have also been reported in the literature where social-economic status may affect marital satisfaction (Bradbury & Karney, 2020). Considering various dynamics might affect marital satisfaction, there is an ever-growing need to promote and facilitate premarital counseling for Christian couples.

During premarital counseling, couples access counsel in hopes of obtaining relevant information on how to build a successful marriage through trust, communication, forgiving, and timely conflict resolution. These findings reflect past studies where marriages are strengthened when premarital counseling is offered with a focus on boosting collective understanding, honesty, trust, empathy, and coordination of couples' (Shahhosseini et al., 2014). These approaches serve to satisfy the individual desire for marital satisfaction and serve to determine the trajectory of the relationship (Stanley et al., 2015, Wulandari et al., 2019). As such, receiving CPMC should be considered an integral part of a prosperous marriage where the counselor helps couples develop a clearer and more realistic perception of who they plan to marry (Arafani, 2017; Parrott & Parrott, 2015). These findings further show that churches should continue offering CPMC to couples and those who contemplate marrying to facilitate marital satisfaction.

Theoretical Literature

Insights from the interview responses add key theoretical findings to premarital counseling literature. In line with the Behavioral Family Counseling Theory, couples who undergo CPMC acquire important biblical principles that shape their marriages both in the short-term and in the long-term basis. As evident from the interview basic behaviors like church attendance, daily prayers, reading the bible, planning family devotions, and remaining faithful to God are primary tenets that influence couples to create successful marital experiences. The findings echo past literature findings in that Behavioral Family Counseling Theory help

understand how a change in individual behavior influences their success in marriage (Baker, 2019; Kariuki, 2018; Mortazavi et al., 2020).

Besides showing a positive change in individual behavior, the Behavioral Family Counseling Theory strongly advocates that couples are likely to perceive biblical principles to be rewarding in terms of enabling them to have satisfying marital relationships. As a result of the expected rewards, they are more likely to practice and implement biblical principles learned during CPMC in their marriages (Kariuki, 2018; Watson, 1913). In this study, couples shared that they learned different biblical principles they put into practice daily and that the principles have been used to resolve marital problems. These principles include respecting God's plan about marriage, outlining specific gender roles for couples, showing commitment to marriage, financial honesty, and bringing up children in a Godly way. Therefore, these findings contribute to the extant literature by showing that incorporating biblical principles during CPMC strengthens a couple's intuition and understanding of marriage, an understanding that could lead to marital satisfaction.

Data findings confirm that in line with Behavioral Family Counseling behavior is learned and people have the capacity to internalize information regarding rewarding interactions. As applies to marriage, the findings emphasize that couples are likely to show suitable actions in marriage after being reinforced with relevant biblical teachings. Watson (1913) argued that when individuals are provided sufficient motivation, they act in a predictable reinforced manner. In this study, couples are more likely to implement appropriate behavior like marriage commitment, perseverance, open communication, forgiveness, and show optimism during conflict considering these behaviors are more rewarding in terms of ensuring marital satisfaction and long-term success.

Based on the Behavioral Family Counseling Theory couples who undergo CPMC before marriage potentially learn new and rewarding behaviors through counseling (Kariuki, 2018; Metcalf (2011). As such, these findings confirm that through interventions such as premarital counseling, couples acquire appropriate strategies of how to grow their marriages, while avoiding maladaptive behaviors that result in conflict. As previously noted, adaptive behavior allows individuals to adapt positively to various situations. Adaptive behaviors include showing the right attitude, sowing good seeds, learning how to talk to each other, seeking wise counsel, and showing a willingness to sacrifice to achieve a successful marriage. By contrast, maladaptive behavior is a detriment to the well-being of marital satisfaction (Metcalf, 2011). In marriages, maladaptive behaviors may result in a lack of trust, poor communication, unforgiveness, and unwillingness to resolve conflict.

Findings from this study show that Behavioral Family Counseling Theory is relevant in understanding how couples might benefit from CPMC in attaining marital success. Through this theory, researchers position themselves in identifying important constructs that are likely to influence marital satisfaction. Specifically, the theory helps couples understand how communication, trust, forgiving, understanding, and empathy contribute to marital satisfaction (Baker, 2019; Navabifar et al., 2020). Therefore, couples are likely to consider the fact that CPMC promotes relevant biblical concepts that serve to enhance the couple's marital satisfaction. Providing couples with quality and effective consultation on different marital experiences and equipping them with God's plan to address marital challenges largely contributes to marital satisfaction (Brand et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2020). Based on the findings of this study, it may be concluded that Behavioral Family Counseling Theory serves to create appropriate behavior change among couples, and effectively readies them for marital satisfaction.

Implications

The current section discusses the implications for practice based on the obtained findings. Insights from the interview responses with the eight couples have important implications in theoretical terms, empirical, and practical approaches. The implications align with the focus on various stakeholders, such as counselors, ministers, policymakers, administrators, teachers, and parents. Subsequent sections further present the implications for practice.

Theoretical Implications

Findings from this phenomenological study have important implications for theory. Specifically, the findings show that Behavioral Family Counseling Theory largely helps in understanding how premarital counseling may contribute to marital satisfaction. Key focus includes adaptive behavior change by embracing strategies that reinforce positive behavior in marriages (Kariuki, 2018; Watson, 1913). However, the Behavioral Family Counseling Theory is largely limited to examining behavior change among individuals. The lack of unified theoretical constructs makes it difficult to understand specific factors likely to influence marital satisfaction. As such, the theoretical implication of this study is to expand research on this topic and explore potential behavioral constructs that should be incorporated into CPMC for couples and individuals contemplating marriage. Having a unified framework of behavioral constructs could facilitate the current understanding of key factors churches, couples, and individuals should consider in attaining marital satisfaction.

Empirical Implications

Current findings also have potential empirical implications. Past studies show that there is a paucity of research that has examined whether the incorporation of Biblical principles into the fabric of CPMC will strengthen a couple's intuition and understanding of marriage, thus

leading to marital satisfaction (Alaf et al., 2017; Baker, 2019; Mortazavi et al., 2020; Schweizer, 2019). Insights from this study contribute to filling this knowledge gap by showing that the period before marriage is critical in determining the success of a planned marriage. Specifically, access to CPMC is essential in allowing couples seeking marriage the opportunity to learn more about each other and make informed choices regarding the planned marriage. The findings of this study further show that premarital counseling programs have positive outcomes on subsequent marriage success, family life, and satisfaction.

Availing CPMC would potentially help address the growing problem of increasing cases of divorce across the United States in the past three decades (Alaf et al., 2017; Baker, 2019). High divorce cases and the growing number of single parent-led families among African American couples further contribute to concerns about the success of CPMC (Arafani, 2017; Margelisch et al., 2017; Tuffour, 2017). Studies show that high divorce rates among heterosexual African American couples are largely due to marital dissatisfaction (Mortazavi et al., 2020; Schweizer, 2019). Reducing these concerns may be addressed effectively through premarital counseling where couples learn the importance of conflict resolution, communication, trust, and commitment in their marriages (Alaf et al., 2017; Baker, 2019; Mortazavi et al., 2020). Insights from this phenomenological qualitative study reveal overall satisfaction in marriage increases among Christian, heterosexual, African American couples upon receiving CPMC from credentialed counselors.

Practical Implications

Practical implications of this study may be understood in light of various stakeholders including counselors, ministers, policymakers, administrators, teachers, and parents. As applies to counselors, they should facilitate CPMC during premarital counseling to identify potential

triggers and causes of divorce and separation. Identifying key triggers like lack of communication, trust, and commitment could enable them to teach couples about appropriate approaches to conflict resolution using various biblical principles. As applies to policymakers in church, there should be heightened support for CPMC with church guidelines and legal requirements mandating members, couples, and individuals who aspire to marry in the future, to seek premarital counseling before solemnizing their weddings. Teachers, ministers, and administrators should provide a conducive learning environment within the church for CPMC implementation. In the process, there will be change agents who champion the need for CPMC practice in church to ensure a positive culture of marital counseling before the wedding and after marrying. Availing counseling services after marriage would help ensure couples are aware of how to solve conflicts that emerge later in life. Finally, parents should encourage their children to participate in CPMC and lay the foundation for them to seek Godly ways of marriage. The literature shows that there is less success in marriages where couples do not attend CPMC. Therefore, parents should ensure that they inform their children about the importance of premarital counseling before they marry, while emphasizing its impact on marital satisfaction.

Delimitations and Limitations

There are potential delimitations and limitations in this study that should be taken into consideration since they affect results interpretation. Delimitations are characteristics that limit the scope of the study and serve to define the boundaries of research (Bryman, 2017). In this study, the research focus was delimited to Christian heterosexual couples only. Thus, the findings may not apply to non-Christian couples or individuals in civil marriages, same-sex marriages, polygamy, or polyandry marriages in the United States. Second, the study was delimited to African American couples with the assumption that this ethnic group often

experiences high divorce rates and has a high number of single parent-led families (Alaf et al., 2017; Baker, 2019). As a result, the findings may not apply to other ethnic or racial groups in the country including whites, Latino/Hispanics, or natives.

Third, the study was also delimited to two churches located in Northeastern and Southeastern states that are predominantly African American. Insights from this study may not be transferable to other church denominations with different premarital counseling plans that may be different from churches in the same region. These delimitations align with the problem space identified from past literature and the knowledge gap existing in past studies regarding the experience of Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, who received CPMC from credentialed counselors (Brown, 2019). Being a new research topic, the literature asserts the need to explore the experience of heterosexual African American couples with CPMC and how it contributes to marital success and satisfaction (Baker, 2019; Mortazavi et al., 2020). Delimiting the study to this scope made it possible to have a manageable problem and study scope, with a specific focus on the United States. Since the study is delimited to the United States, the obtained information will likely apply to CPMC and heterosexual African American couples in the country. Besides these delimitations, there are also potential limitations that might affect the findings.

Limitations are inherent to the method and design used, which the researcher has no control over, such as bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018). First, this study was largely limited to qualitative research methods where interviews are the primary data collection instruments. As a result, the obtained information from this study only captured participants' opinions, feelings, and perceptions about CPMC. Furthermore, the collected insights based on interview sessions did not capture numerical data and statistics on the topic making it difficult to capture key trends

about African American couples' experiences. Second, another limitation drawn from this research is the small sample size of eight couples who were identified to take part in the interview sessions. Considering that the participants were interviewed as a couple, there may be potential bias in their responses due to groupthink and social desirability bias to give a similar response. Finally, interview responses may be prone to subjective bias based on the individual experiences of each couple. As a result, it becomes difficult to make systematic comparisons since the marital experience of each couple may differ substantially across families.

Recommendations for Future Research

The limitations and delimitations identified in this study form the backbone of the key recommendations for future research. First, this study used interviews to collect non-numerical data related to participants' opinions, feelings, and experiences about the topic. Future research should consider additional data collection methods like focus group discussions, field observations, archive data, and additional survey questionnaires to corroborate the findings of interview responses. Second, all information related to experience with CPMC was collected from heterosexual, African American couples. Future research should triangulate the source of information and include counselors, church leaders, and close family members to further corroborate current findings.

Third, the current study findings may be improved in the future using a large sample size of heterosexual, African American couples from across the United States. Such an approach would collect a nationally representative sample to understand key trends and statistics related to marital satisfaction among African American couples who received CPMC. As such, the findings would be more generalizable to this population. Importantly, supplementing interview data with

focus group discussions and additional survey questionnaires can help the researcher triangulate data thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the results.

Summary

This qualitative phenomenological study attempted to discover how Christian, heterosexual, African American couples, married a minimum of seven years, that received CPMC from credentialed counselors, perceive marital satisfaction. IPA analysis from the semi-structured interviews revealed that couples positively perceive marital satisfaction after receiving CPMC. The findings align with past literature that couples who receive premarital counseling are more likely to be satisfied in their marriages than those who do not. The findings may be explained in light of the Behavioral Family Counseling Theory where adaptive behavior change contributes to marital success. By contrast, maladaptive behavior would largely have a negative outcome on marital success. The lack of a universal premarital conceptual framework, however, necessitates the need for further research on the topic to identify specific biblical constructs to include in CPMC sessions for Christian, heterosexual African American couples.

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Tables

Table 2

Participants Demographic Information

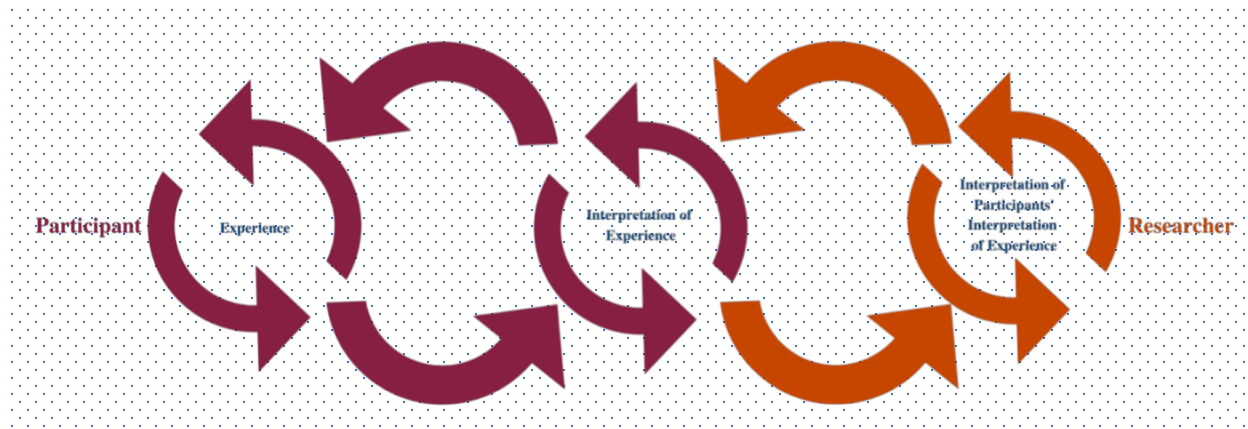
Couple # (Pseudonyms)	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	CPMC Received?	Credentialed Counselor?	Years Married	Christian?
1. John	55-64	M	African American	Y - Both	Y - Both	30 -Both	Y - Both
Shawana	55-64	F	African American				
2. Troy	35-44	M	African American	Y - Both	Y - Both	10 - Both	Y - Both
Anita	35-44	F	African American				
3. Mark	25-34	M	African American	Y - Both	Y - Both	7 - Both	Y - Both
Yolanda	25-34	F	African American				
4. Martin	35-44	M	African American	Y - Both	Y - Both	8 - Both	Y - Both
Cathy	35-44	F	African American				
5. Robert	65 or older	M	African American	Y - Both	Y - Both	13 - Both	Y - Both
Melinda	65 or older	F	African American				
6. Glen	45-54	M	African American	Y - Both	Y - Both	25 - Both	Y - Both
Marisa	45-54	F	African American				
7. Arnold	45-54	M	African American	Y - Both	Y - Both	19 - Both	Y - Both
Cynthia	45-54	F	African American				
8. Michael	65 or older	M	African American	Y - Both	Y - Both	7 - Both	Y - Both
Sharon	55-64	F	African American				

Tables

Table 2

Participants Demographic Information (continued)

Couple # (Pseudonyms)	Relationship Status	Times Married	Age(s) of children	Employment Status	Highest Level of Education
1. John	Legal Heterosexual Married-Both	1	21 or older - Both	Employed 40+hours	Graduate
Shawana		1		Employed 40+hours	Bachelors
2. Troy	Legal Heterosexual Married-Both	1	6-12 -Both	Unemployed looking for work	High School
Anita		1		Employed 40+hours	Graduate
3. Mark	Legal Heterosexual Married-Both	1	0 -Both	Employed 40+hours	Bachelors
Yolanda		1		Employed 40+hours	Bachelors
4. Martin	Legal Heterosexual Married-Both	1	13-20 -Both	Employed 40+hours	Bachelors
Cathy		1		Employed 40+hours	Masters
5. Robert	Legal Heterosexual Married-Both	3	21 or older -Both	Unemployed not looking for work	Graduate
Melinda		1		Unemployed not looking for work	High School
6. Glen	Legal Heterosexual Married-Both	1	21 or older -Both	Employed 40+hours	High School
Marisa		1		Employed 40+hours	Some College
7. Arnold	Legal Heterosexual Married-Both	1	13-20 -Both	Employed 40+hours	Graduate
Cynthia		1		Employed 40+hours	Graduate
8. Michael	Legal Heterosexual Married-Both	2	21 or older -Both	Unemployed not looking for work	Bachelors
Sharon		2		Employed 40+hours	Bachelors

Figure 1**Double Hermeneutic Process Model**

Appendix A: Permission to Recruit Congregants

Dear Sr. Pastor:

As a graduate student in the School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, I am researching as part of the requirements for a Doctoral of Education in Community Care and Counseling degree. The title of my research project is Premarital Counseling and Christianity: A Composition of Couple's Intuition and Understanding as it relates to Marital Satisfaction, and the purpose of my research is to explore the merits of biblical intervention in premarital counseling and its effectiveness in the promotion and enhancement of marital satisfaction in Christian marriages.

I am writing to request your permission to contact members of your church to invite them to participate in my research study. Couples will be asked to contact me to schedule an interview. Couples will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and couples are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to xxxxxxxxxxxx

Sincerely,

Sheila D. Salley

B.S.-Psy., MBA, Doctoral Candidate (ABD), Liberty University

Appendix B Recruitment Letter

Dear Recipient:

As a graduate student in the School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctoral of Education in Community Care and Counseling degree. The purpose of my research is to explore the merits of biblical intervention in premarital counseling and its effectiveness in the promotion and enhancement of marital satisfaction in Christian marriages, and I am writing to invite eligible couples to join my study.

Couples must be African American, must have received Christian Premarital Counseling (CPMC) from a credentialed counselor; must be married a minimum of 7 years; must be a heterosexual couple, and each individual must be a professing Christian. Couples, if willing, will be asked to participate in semi-structured interviews and review the transcript of your interview. It is expected to take about 1-3 hours to complete the procedures listed. Participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying, information will be collected

To participate, please click on the below link to answer the demographic survey questions:

https://qfreeaccountsjc1.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_bI9ZJBYY3BQGGGO

If you met the criterion listed above, and are eligible to participate in the study, a Letter of Informed Consent will be sent directly to you via the contact information that you provided in the survey questionnaire.

Sincerely,

Sheila D. Salley

B.S.-Psy., MBA, Doctoral Candidate (ABD), Liberty University

XXXXXXXXXX

Appendix C: Demographic Questions for the Research Study

The following questions will be sent to prospective couples via the Qualtrics link below:

https://qfreeaccountssjc1.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_bI9ZJBYY3BQGGGO

Qualtrics is an online survey software tool that uses enterprise grade security features such as: encryption, redundancy, continuous network monitoring, and single sign on (SSO). The questions are as follows:

1. What is your gender?
 - Female
 - Male
 - Other
2. What is your age range?
 - Under 18
 - 18-24
 - 25-34
 - 35-44
 - 45-54
 - 55-64
 - 65 or older
3. Which ethnicity do you identify with?
 - African American
 - Asian
 - Native American
 - White
 - Other
4. Did you receive CPMC? If yes, were faith-based principles integrated?
5. Did you receive CPMC from a credentialed counselor?
 - I did not receive CPMC
 - My counselor was credentialed
 - My counselor was NOT credentialed
 - I do not know if my counselor was credentialed
6. How many years have you been married to your current spouse?
 - 6 or less
 - 7-15
 - 16-24
 - 25 or more
7. Are you a Christian?
8. Which of the following situations best describes your current relationship status?
 - Legal Heterosexual marriage
 - Legal Same Sex marriage
 - Widowed
 - Divorced
 - Separated

- Legal domestic partnership or civil union
 - Single, but cohabitating
 - Single, never married
 - Other
9. How many times have you been married?
- Once
 - Two
 - Three
 - Four or more
10. Do you have children? If yes, what are their ages?
- No children
 - 0-5 years
 - 6-12 years
 - 13-20 years
 - 21 or older
11. Which of the following categories best describes your employment status?
- Employed, working 40 or more hours per week
 - Employed, working 1-39 hours per week
 - Not employed, looking for work
 - Not employed, NOT looking for work
 - Disabled, not able to work
12. Highest level of education?
- High school
 - Some college
 - Associate degree
 - Bachelor's degree
 - Graduate degree
13. Please provide your name and contact information?
14. Please provide three different dates and times that you will be available to answer the interview questions?

Appendix D: Letter of Informed Consent

Title of the Project: Premarital Counseling and Christianity: A Composition of Couples' Intuition and Understanding as it relates to Marital Satisfaction

Principal Investigator

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a Christian, African American, you must be married a minimum of 7 years; you must be a heterosexual couple and each individual must be a professing Christian. 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 to explore your views regarding the influence Christian premarital counseling has on marital satisfaction. The study will focus on the merits of biblical intervention in premarital counseling and its effectiveness in the promotion and enhancement of marital satisfaction in Christian marriages.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

1. Participate in online interviews that will be conducted using Zoom Video Conferencing and will be audio recorded. This will take 1 hour.
2. Review the transcript of your interview. This will take 1-2 hours.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

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

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. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential using pseudonyms and interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then deleted. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

- The recorded data can be shared in case of a court order asking for disclosure of the information.

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

Couples will not be compensated for participating in this study.

What are the costs to you to be part of the study?

To participate in the research, you will need to pay for Internet access

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 or your church. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time 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 contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

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

The researcher conducting this study is xxxxxxxxxx You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at xxxxxxxxxx. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, xxxxxxxxxx

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, xxxxxxxxxx, or email at xxxxxxx

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 the document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher/study team using the information provided above.

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix E: Interview Guide

Please take your time and respond honestly to the following questions:

1. Tell me about your current practice as a Christian?
2. How do you define marriage in the context of Christianity?
3. What does marital satisfaction look like to you?
4. Tell me about your experience in premarital counseling.
5. What biblical principles were taught in your Christian Premarital Counseling (CPMC) experience?
6. What information did you take away from CPMC?
7. Explain how conflict is addressed in your marriage?
8. What principles learned from CPMC are used to address conflict?
9. Is there anything that you would like to share that has not been discussed?

Appendix F: Transcriptionist Confidentiality Agreement

I _____ will keep all information obtained from the research study in strict confidence. I understand and acknowledge I can be held legally responsible if confidentiality is breached on my behalf.

Transcriptionist Signature

Date

Researcher Signature

Date

Appendix G: IRB Approval Letter**[External] IRB-FY21-22-165 - Initial: Initial - Expedited****D**

do-not-reply@cayuse.com

Fri 10/8/2021 10:16 AM

October 8, 2021

xxxxxxxxxx

Re: IRB Approval - IRB-FY21-22-165 Premarital Counseling and Christianity: A Composition of Couples' Intuition and Understanding as it Relates to Marital Satisfaction

Dear, xxxxxxxxxxxx

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This approval is extended to you for one year from the following date: October 8, 2021. If you need to make changes to the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit a modification to the IRB. Modifications can be completed through your Cayuse IRB account.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

xxxxxxxxxx

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office