

**THE AFRICAN AMERICAN NUCLEAR FAMILY: INVESTIGATING THE
HEALTHY HABITS OF SUCCESSFUL LONG-TERM MARRIAGES IN THE
AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY**

by

Derrick L. Smith

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

School of Behavioral Sciences

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2022

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study sought to understand what contributed to the success of long-term marriages in the African American community. Long-term marriage was defined as those lasting 20 years or more. The family systems theory developed by Dr. Murray Bowen guided this study. The study employed a phenomenological approach to qualitative inquiry. Due to the national health crisis, all interviews were conducted through a Zoom conferencing platform. Nine married couples who have been married for at least 20 years or more participated in the study. The following criteria had to be met to participate in the study: race, length of the marriage, and religious importance. Data collection methods included interviewing, direct observation, and journaling. The researcher analyzed data using Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological data analysis. Four major themes emerged from the data: collaboration, communication, commitment, and religiosity.

Keywords: nuclear family, African American, marriage, infidelity, close relationships, communication

Dedication

This research is dedicated to the cause of Christ, God's plan, and His vision for marriage. Marriage is no easy feat; however, it is a worthy journey honored by God. The Bible declares, "For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh" (King James Version, 2017, Eph 5:31). I undertake this journey with great pride and strict adherence to His will concerning my life. It is my prayer that I make Him proud.

To my wife, Albany, I thank you for supporting me in this endeavor to better myself for our sake. Most would not understand the sacrifice it takes to love a doctoral student, but you have done so with grace and beauty. You have always kept me focused and provided verbal and emotional support throughout this tedious journey. You have provided insight from a woman's point of view of what it means to be married to a man with more ambition than time. You are truly my rib and my rock; I love you dearly. Taylor, my boy, thank you for teaching me what it means to be a father and the measure of a man. To our newest addition, Kaelyn, you have come and completely turned our world upside down! There is no limit to my love for you.

Finally, I dedicate this research to all the married couples continuing the fight in the pursuit of a God-centered marriage. Let us continue to set an example of what the realities of marriage encompass. It is not what we see on television, nor what is read in books and portrayed on social media. Always remember that God is for you, that His love and mercy cover you, and He will always keep you.

Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken. (King James Version, 2017, Eccl 4:9-12)

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Chapter One includes the highlighted steady decline of marriage amongst African Americans. This study was necessary to further understand the decline in marriage and areas to improve it. Furthermore, this chapter discussed those who have endeavored to weather the marital storms of life. The study's problem statement identified a gap in research related to healthy, successful marriages in the African American community. Finally, the chapter concluded with the research questions that grounded the study.

Background

Historically, marriage has been a foundational component of society. Researchers have fervently made the case for the necessity of marriage. They based their claim on the belief that the institution of marriage has less of a hold over American men, women, and children than it did earlier in the last century (Wilcox et al., 2005). Those seeking to conduct archival studies regarding marriage and divorce patterns often have issues locating accurate records. This is partly due to many of the 18th-century churches' marriage records being lost or destroyed. Ruggles (2016) reported that only fragmentary data about American marriage patterns before 1850 can be obtained. Studies based on 18th-century marriages posit that the age of first marriages may have averaged 23 for women and 25 for men (Haines, 1996; Ruggles, 2016). As an integrated and functional unit of society, the family has captured researchers' attention and imagination (Sooryamoorthy, 2012).

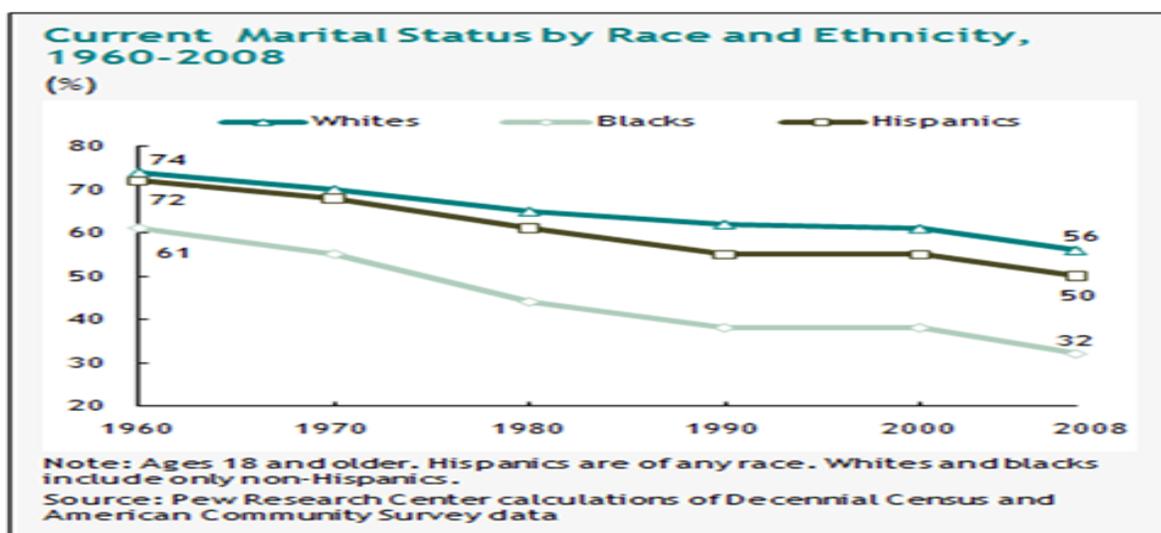
The drastic change in the rise of cohabiting couples has caused many family researchers to abandon the sociological study of early marriage instead of explaining why people are not marrying in early adulthood (Uecker & Stokes, 2008). Evidence suggested

neither the African heritage of Black people nor centuries of American slavery had prepared them for the marriage-centered family arrangements of mainstream society (Hill, 2006). The lack of marriage preparation may lend itself to the cause of the rise in divorce.

According to Long (2010), divorce among African Americans exceeded 50%. However, a 2016 study discovered that divorces had stabilized at around 42% of all African American married couples (Swanson, 2016). While researchers and therapists alike scramble to uncover the source of this statistic, the fact remains marriage in the African American community has steadily declined over the past 20 years (Kiecolt et al., 1995). Though its direct cause is unclear, studies revealed the decline began in 2008 (Long, 2010). The trend (depicted in Figure 1) shows a decrease in African American marriages from 60% in 1960 to 30% in 2008 (Pew Research, 2010). The census estimated only 32% of Black adults were married in 2009 compared to 51% of adults from all races (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The sex ratio influenced many aspects of male-female relations, including marriage, divorce, fertility, sexual behavior, and gender roles (Heer & Grossbard-Schechtman, 1981).

Figure 1

Current Marital Status by Race and Ethnicity



One reason is women outnumber men. Studies depicted 90.5 Black males per 100 females due to factors such as mortality, morbidity, imprisonment among men, and increased longevity for women (Marks et al., 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Compared with White women, African American women were 25 % less likely to have been married and about half as likely to be currently married (Besharov, 2000). Previous studies revealed the average Black woman spent 16 years married during a 73-year life span; however, their White counterparts typically spent 33 years married out of their 77-year lifespan (Jaynes & Williams, 1989). This 17-year difference increased from an 11-year difference based on 1955 to 1960 rates (Jaynes & Williams, 1989). African American women are half as likely to marry as Whites; they are more than twice as likely to divorce (Besharov & West, 2000). One reason cited is education, as people without a college degree are less likely to achieve economic security. These individuals may feel they do not need marriage, and those who do marry are more likely to divorce (Raley et al., 2015). Other studies reported Black men are more likely to marry outside of their race than Black women (Batson et al., 2006; Crowder & Tolnay, 2000; Sailor, 2003), adding to the lack of African American marriages.

The lack of marriage in the African American community presents problems for single mothers and single women (King, 1999). Many people struggle with marrying amid grandiose expectations and societal viewpoints about what marriage should resemble. What is being portrayed on television may corrupt the true nature of marriage (Morgan et al., 2009). The repetitive lessons displayed on television from infancy can become the basis for a broader worldview, making television a significant source of general values, ideologies, perspectives, and specific beliefs (Morgan et al., 2009). The portrayal of marriage on reality television can misconstrue the image of the God-ordained institution marriage was meant to be. This illusion

can cause some to opt for luxurious homes and cars rather than finding a partner to share the rest of their lives and fulfill God's vision. A study conducted by Barr and Simons (2012) uncovered that the expectation to marry a romantic partner was linked to one's school, work-related experiences, and partner.

Social

The problem of marital declination affects everyone on a grand scale; children fare better when parents work to maintain their marriage (Anderson, 2014). The example of the relationship between their parents helps children learn to form close relationships. Those dyadic interactions that reflect a high degree of interdependence manifest infrequent, strong, and diverse interconnections maintained over an extended period (Kelley et al., 1983). The foundational setting of marriage operates as an incubator for the success of five primary institutions: family, church, school, marketplace, and government (Maripedia, 2017). Marriage is also attributed to having better overall health. Those who marry are known to be happier and healthier than single people (King, 1999). Studies on heart attack patients uncovered that married people were 14% more likely to survive and spent less time in the hospital than single people (Shmerling, 2016).

Children also suffer from broken marriages. As of 2019, 15.76 million children (about the population of New York) lived in mother-only homes, whereas 3.23 million children (about the size of Arkansas) lived primarily with their fathers. These numbers differ from those of the year 1970, in which only 8.2 million children were living in single-parent homes (Statista, 2019). Studies show that an African American child is three times more likely to be born out of wedlock than a White child. On average, Black children will spend only six years in a two-parent family, compared to 14 years for a White child and 13 years for a Hispanic child (Bumpass & Lu, 1999).

As a result, the nuclear family has weakened because it is essentially an institution of faith and cannot be controlled by litigation and public law (Zimmerman, 1972).

Marriage is no longer the honorable and fruitful institution God intended. God commanded Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (New International Version, 2011, Gen. 1:28). The joining of man and woman in holy matrimony is meant not only to affect them but also to impact the world in which they live. The decreasing numbers in marriage have shocked the economy and community, adding a measure of compendiousness to why social conservatives have been sounding the alarm for some time about the social consequences of the decline of marriage and the rise of unwed parenting for children and society at large (Hull et al., 2010).

Theoretical

Though marriage is a complex, interwoven system in society, researchers believe that every marriage goes through stages: romantic love, disillusionment, distraction, dissolution, adjustment with resignation, or adjustment with contentment (Larson, 2003). The key to a successful, long-term marriage is somewhere between dissolution and adjustment with contentment. Although the research on marriage centers on the issue of divorce, not all marriages end this way. Though there has been a steady decline, African American marriages still make up 29% of the total married population in the United States (Black Demographics, 2016). However, few studies exist to tackle healthy marriages in the African American community. These couples have beaten the odds, and this undertaking intends to learn what they have chosen to do that is different from their predecessors.

All relationships require maintenance. While therapists attempt to navigate the ebbs and flows of marriage and mitigate the divorce rate, the fact remains that the most effective tool and

prevention method that assists in achieving marital stability and longevity is marriage counseling (American Psychological Association, 2014). Studies show that marriage counseling and other initiatives can make a lasting difference in helping married couples stay together (Johnson, 2012). While researched-based marital education programs are effective in helping couples stay together and making unhappy marriages more satisfying (American Psychological Association, 2014), African Americans, especially men, are typically reluctant to seek out therapy. This reluctance is partly due to the traditional masculinity norms, which contribute to men's under-utilization of health care services (Hankerson et al., 2015). Most men do not consider treatment since many families do not discuss this in everyday life (McGoldrick et al., 2005). Those individuals seeking counseling for the first time typically experience nervousness and anxiety during their first session (Cepeda-Benito & Short, 1998). The fear and preconceived notions of the counselor's intentions can inhibit treatment progress of marital issues.

The glue that holds a marriage together lies in what is commonly known as attachment theory, making a person feel safe, secure, and protected, developed by British psychoanalyst John Bowlby in 1958. This theory is related to a construct known as family systems therapies. Family systems theory is an approach that views the family as a complex system of interconnected members who each have profound impacts on the views, attitudes, and behaviors in the family (Gurman & Kniskern, 2013).

This research study added to the studies already completed. The intent was to provide a view of the nuclear family from an African American perspective. Many studies have delved into the world of marriage; however, few studies have isolated African American couples and their successful marriages. The writer sought to add to the lack of research and provide insight that may help future researchers and counselors alike.

Situation to Self

As a pastoral and marriage counselor, I have concluded that many couples are not staying married due to the lack of examples and false expectations of what a marriage should resemble. This view directly correlates with epistemological assumptions as they encompass people's subjective experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I have often wondered why many couples divorce while others make marriage look easy. I have spent time speaking with couples after worship services, and I have asked the following question: How did the two of you manage to stay married? I have received varying answers from prayer to, "he does his thing, and I do mine." However, I have not received a definitive answer that has satiated my desire to know more about lasting marriages, which has prompted a desire to research the trend of successful long-term marriages in the African American community.

Many couples do not make it in marriage due to many factors, including infidelity. Infidelity causes a breach of trust that many simply cannot forgive. While I believe couples should handle infidelity with forgiveness and not divorce, it should not be tolerated as something that just happened. Couples must set boundaries in marriage and enforce them. In that way, many of the issues and trauma that infidelity can cause can be mitigated, helping couples maintain a stable union.

A couple's attitude often disrupts and undermines decision-making and conflict resolution. Attitudes serve as the primary basis for evaluating options (Sanbonmatsu, 2014). If one has a "let's work it out" attitude and the other an "it'll work itself out" philosophy, there will be no resolution, and no decision will be made. The relationship may find itself in more trouble with perspectives like this. The negative attitude places the partner on the defense and can subsequently lead to stonewalling. Couples who survive have decided on an effective plan of

communication. The most successful couples have a well-defined routine, which adds balance and allows them to circumvent marriage problems in a mature and loving way. The key to a successful marriage is finding that balance and applying it to the marriage. Much of this balance lies in the way couples share their feelings. Stable and happy couples share more positive emotions and actions than negative ones (Poulsen, 2008). To understand this delicate balance, I decided to study those couples who have adopted healthy habits which have aided in their marriages lasting 20 years or longer. The intent was to uncover what they had discovered, and in the process, help other couples with this research.

Problem Statement

The problem was that over the past 20 years, marriage in the African American community has steadily declined (Kiecolt et al., 1995). The problem has been perpetuated by studies that purport that the declining marriage rates present a problem for African American women. This problem hurts single mothers and single women, which mars the future of marriage, leaving the younger generation without a positive example of healthy marriages (King, 1999). The lack of healthy examples of marriage can cause many new couples to model erroneous behavior. Perhaps there is a better source of wisdom that would allow the younger generation to see what marriage is and how beautiful it can be. Many studies focus on the decline of marriage; Reeves and Pulliam (2020) suggested that marital dissolutions result from income rather than education. In contrast, Garrison (2007) cited cohabitation as the catalyst for the decline. These studies surpass those which focus on couples who have beaten the odds and made their marriages last a lifetime. This problem has prompted the researcher to conduct a phenomenological study to ascertain the secrets of successful, long-term marriages in the African American community.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand what contributed to the success of long-term marriages in the African American community. The researcher defined long-term marriages as those lasting 20 years or more. The theory that guided this study was family systems therapies. Dr. Murray Bowen developed this theory, viewing the family as a complex system. The members of a family are interconnected, having a profound impact on views, attitudes, and behaviors (Gurman & Kniskern, 2013).

Significance of the Study

African American marriages serve as a protective factor for individual psychological well-being, evidenced by married African Americans experiencing higher levels of well-being than unmarried African Americans (Vaterlaus et al., 2017). It was this thought that has prompted this study. While many studies on African American marriages abound, a search returns very few results for studies about the habits of successful, long-term African American marriages. This research was important because if there was to be any proper understanding of marriage in its totality, one could not leave out a populous such as African Americans.

Satisfying marriages typically exhibit high levels of positivity, empathy, commitment, acceptance, love, and respect (Leigh & Clark, 2000). Understanding these habits or qualities could provide researchers and therapists with a deeper understanding of the inner workings of marriage and assist in the creation of new models of counseling theories. This study allowed therapists to interact better with their clients to understand what was genuinely required for couples to make it to the golden years of marriage.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were as follows:

RQ1: What is it like to be Black and succeed in marriage?

RQ2: What factors contribute to failing marriages in the African American community?

RQ3: What role does having a healthy married couple to model play in the success or failure of marriage?

RQ4: How does socioeconomic status factor in the decision to marry?

RQ5: How important is religion to the success or failure of marriage?

Definitions

1. *Marriage* - The personal association between a man and a woman and a biological relationship for mating and reproduction. The union of a male and a female for production and care of offspring and reproduction (Sills, 1972).
2. *Infidelity* - Having an affair, extramarital relationship, cheating, sexual intercourse, oral sex, kissing, caressing, emotional connections that are beyond friendships. This can also include friendships, internet relationships, and pornography use, among others, and has been defined as involvement in romantic relationships outside of one's active, committed relationship, resulting in the sense of relational betrayal (Chuick, 2009).
3. *Close Relationships* - Dyadic interactions that reflect a high degree of interdependence manifest infrequent, strong, and diverse interconnections maintained over an extended period (Kelley et al., 1978).
4. *Communication* - The process of transmitting information and common understanding from one person to another (Keyton, 2011).
5. *Nuclear Family* - A biological phenomenon of primate human society. It is not an adaptive form in an evolutionary series of human development nor a functional aspect of the industrial society. Rather it is practically universal in human time and social space. Its

nucleus is a unit of husband, wife, and children. Its regular form is often misarranged by death, desertion, or lack of progeny, but its modal type is most constant. Under all conditions, it tends to have dependent-aged parents of the husband or wife in the household and sometimes more distant relatives. These semi-extraneous elements are there more from necessity and filial piety than for any other reason (Zimmerman, 1972).

6. *African American* - People with ancestry from Sub-Saharan Africa who are residents or citizens of the United States (Livingston et al., 2013).

Summary

The researcher sought to answer the question of what makes a marriage successful. This study specifically focused on the healthy habits of successful, long-term African American couples. For this study, a qualitative inquiry was conducted using a phenomenological approach. The researcher interviewed nine couples whose marriages spanned 20 or more years. The researcher sought to understand what methods these couples have employed over the years to keep their marriages vibrant and healthy. No marriage is without its challenges; however, this study did not focus on why many couples are avoiding marriage. Most research on the association between marital quality and subjective well-being has focused on adverse outcomes, typically, depressive symptoms (Carr et al., 2014). However, many couples are beating the odds and making their marriages last. These couples prove that a long, happy, and healthy marriage is still possible. While therapists attempt to navigate the ebb and flow of marriage and how to mitigate the alarming divorce rate, the fact remains that one of the most effective tools in achieving marital stability and longevity is marriage counseling. Research revealed that marriage counseling and other initiatives could make a real difference in helping married couples stay together (Johnson, 2012). It was the intent that through this research, therapists

would be better equipped to interact with their African American clients and have a better understanding of what is required of couples to make it to the golden years of marriage.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This review provided an overview of the state of marriage in the African American community and what couples are doing to contribute to the success of long-term marriages. Emphasis was placed on the decrease in marriage and the benefits of marriage. The goal was to discuss the gap in research that leads to what makes a marriage successful among African Americans. Learning more about the success of marriage requires looking at the decision-making processes, conflict resolution techniques, and the role of communication in a healthy marriage. The intent was to provide as accurate an overview as possible while adding to the research on this topic. Many studies have delved into the world of marriage; however, few studies isolate African American couples and their successful marriages. The writer sought to address the lack of research and provide insight that may help future researchers and counselors alike.

Theoretical Framework

Often touted as the American Dream, marriage is seen as the goal among men and women. It is thought that to be happy, one must get a good education, marry the person of their dreams, and live happily ever after. Marriage is defined as the personal association between a man and a woman, and it describes the biological relationship for mating. Furthermore, it involves the union of males and females for reproduction and care of offspring (Sills, 1972). Research shows that marriage in the African American community has steadily declined over the past 20 years (Kiecolt et al., 1995). Research suggests that the percentages of Black marriages

began to drop in 2008 (Mouzon, 2014). In 1960, the marriage rate was 61%; however, by 2008, that number plummeted to 32% (Mouzon, as cited in McClure & Harris, 2014), depicting a 29% decline in African American marriage rates. The reasons for this decline vary according to several opposing theories. The theories of Guttentag and Secord (1983) and those of Heer and Grossbard-Schechtman (1981) argue that the sex ratio influenced many aspects of male-female relations, including marriage, divorce, fertility, sexual behavior, and gender roles. An imbalanced sex ratio can lead to fewer married couples contributing to low numbers.

Further research showed that the declining marriage rates present a problem for African American women in that it affects single mothers and single women. As a result, there has been a rise in chronic stress with African American women, as marriage promotes and enhances emotional, physical, and psychological health (King, 1999). This phenomenon also mars the future of marriage in that it leaves the younger generation without a positive example of healthy marriages (King, 1999). Marriage requires support to remain healthy and successful. Couples who have support fare much better than couples without support facing opposition to their union; social support aids them with weathering challenges (Potter, 2020).

In their attempts to understand marriage and family constructs, therapists rely on a theory known as family systems therapies. This theory views the family as a complex system; the members of the family are interconnected and therefore have a profound impact on each other's views, attitudes, and behaviors (Gurman & Kniskern, 2013). Given the importance of family in a person's life, it seems practical to use such therapies (Garland, 2012). Family systems therapies include the structural family therapy approach. This approach considers the behaviors, attitudes, relationships, and patterns of interaction as the members of the family demonstrate them during a session (Gurman & Kniskern, 2013). By observing these attributes and interactions, the therapist

can discover and assess the family structure and discover the subsystems that are often present with families. Such a therapy aims to identify the dysfunctional patterns of interaction in the family and change them, changing the structure rather than changing individuals on their own (Gurman & Kniskern, 2013).

Another approach based on family systems theory is strategic family therapy, which investigates the functions and processes present in families (e.g., the patterns of problem-solving or communication). It may utilize such techniques as reframing to achieve the needed change in these functions and processes (Gurman & Kniskern, 2013). Strategic family therapy is a type of family therapy that addresses minor problems, which typically ends within a shorter period than many other types of therapy. The family systems therapy approach acknowledges the significant impact of the family on an individual, on their development, on their attitudes and behaviors, and attempt to influence the relationships and family structure if these become dysfunctional (Garland, 2012). These approaches appear adequate when one's problems stem from the family, which might usually be the case due to the significant role that the family plays in an individual's life (Garland, 2012). This theory could be the benchmark in understanding the inner workings of marriage as it relates to long-term stability.

Marital success is a result of personal support. It is an assessment of a sense of belonging, knowing that one has a place within a particular network and that its members are accessible for support. Researchers link the accessibility of network members, particularly friends, to feelings of personal well-being and marital satisfaction (Willits & Crider, 1986). A sense of belonging can contribute to a positive self-concept, which is associated with greater marital quality (Bryant & Conger, 1999).

The Science of Marriage

While marriage is a spiritual formation, it is as much science as it is religious. Several theories and notable figures abound, attempting to define the parameters of marriage and its meaning. For some, a new kind of marriage has emerged, one that can promote self-discovery, self-esteem, and personal growth like never before (Finkel, 2018). The knowledge of this new kind of marriage could inspire one to research further into the mystery of marriage and attempt to uncover the science behind its effectiveness.

Attachment Theory

The success of some African American marriages may attribute itself to a theory known as attachment theory. British psychoanalyst John Bowlby originally developed attachment theory. He defined it as a specific and circumscribed aspect of the relationship between a child and caregiver that makes the child safe, secure, and protected (Bowlby, 1984). Attachment theory is comprised of a behavior system linking a child to its attachment figure. Bowlby (1984) postulated that when a child feels as if their attachment figure is nearby, they are more apt to be themselves and explore their environment. If the attachment figure is not around, the child becomes self-conscious, anxious, and begins to show signs of distress (Bowlby, 1984).

In the context of marriage, this could explain why many couples tend to stay together longer than others. Studies have shown that the experiences of early relationships create active internal patterns in childhood, which affect future knowledge and relationships (Bell, 2012). Married couples view their spouse much the same as a child views a caregiver. Once the spouses form the attachment, they are identified as attachment figures. Spouses begin displaying the learned relational patterns to implement Bowlby's attachment behavior

system. Each of them feels safe when the other is around, they form contact and share new experiences. Furthermore, there is a period of infatuation with the other person, and insecurity develops when the other person is out of sight. A study of 146 couples concluded that attachment style and lifestyle factors could predict marital satisfaction (Mohammadi et al., 2016). Thus, the more attached a couple feels, the better and more secure the relationship appears, leading to a sustained union.

Related Literature

In searching for the healthy habits which lead to success in African American marriages, it was necessary to examine the challenges faced by married couples. Challenges threatening marriage included family development, infidelity, and an unhealthy sexual relationship in the marriage.

Declining Marriages

Marriage as an institution has declined while our awareness of marriage's individual and societal benefits has grown (Lichter et al., 2002). The litany of issues facing marriage varies in scope and severity. African American women are half as likely to marry as Whites; they are more than twice as likely to divorce (Besharov & West, 2000). Many studies have investigated the decline in African American marriages; however, few have focused on why some marriages succeed. For instance, Kiecolt and Fossett (2010) argued that marriage has declined amongst African Americans due to the imbalanced ratio of Black males to females. Others cite the nearly 40% increase in cohabitation rates among younger adults between 1990 and 2000 (Lichter et al., 2010). One other crucial factor is stress. Counselors and researchers alike have sought to uncover the effects of stress on a marriage. Researchers understand marital stressors by looking at them through a prism highlighting the intersection of gender and race (Johnson & Locosco, 2014).

Research demonstrates that each gender and race handles stress differently. How a couple handles stress can have either an adverse or a positive effect on marriage.

Other research purports that marriages decline due to socioeconomic status, suggesting that economic instabilities undermine long-term relationship success (Hurt et al., 2014). While the reasons for divorce and those surrounding the decision not to marry vary, the declining marriage rates present a problem for African American women. This trend affects single mothers and single women. The issue of declining marriages can produce chronic stress in African American women, as marriage promotes and enhances emotional, physical, and psychological health. Also, the future of marriage may be marred by removing positive examples of a healthy marriage for the younger generation (King, 1999). In a 2010 study, Dzara proposed that a lack of a healthy sex life contributes to the failure of a marriage, linking the couple's sexual relationship to whether they stay married.

Benefits of Marriage

Research has shown that marriage has many benefits for the health of each spouse. Married individuals tend to be happier and healthier than single people (King, 1999). Married individuals enjoy a higher quality of life than those who remain single. Married couples also experience more significant mental health quality than singles. Marriage offers protection against mobility limitations and mortality among healthier men (Friedman et al., 2018). A recent study of 25,000 people in England found that among people having a heart attack, those who were married were 14% more likely to survive, and they were able to leave the hospital two days sooner than single people having a heart attack (Shmerling, 2016).

Marriage increases economic resources (Waite, 2009). The benefits of economic stability help to alleviate the stress of life's unexpected events. When a couple has more financial

resources, it can help meet their established goals in a shorter amount of time. Having a partner to talk through the hardships and tough decisions can help reduce stress. When there are two non-disabled people in communion, experienced depression can lessen (Waite, 2009).

African American Marriages

Research demonstrated that the marriage rate for African Americans is lower than White Americans and has declined in the past few decades (Dixon, 2009). As of 2016, African American marriages made up 29% of the total married population in the United States (Black Demographics, 2016). While this number provides some semblance of hope for African American marriages, one must also consider that 50% of them were either not married or have never been married in the same report (Black Demographics, 2016). This report showed that Blacks were more likely to be separated, widowed, or divorced. The report also indicated that 4% of Blacks were separated, 6% were widowed, and 12% were divorced (Black Demographics, 2016). The reasons for this varied among couples; however, many African American couples tend to report lower satisfaction, and higher rates of violence than couples do from other racial groups (Broman, 2005). Overall, research revealed that African Americans are the least likely to marry; they do so much later in life and are least likely to stay married (Dixon, 2009).

These statistics lead one to question what is happening to marriages in the African American community. Research would suggest that little is known about marriages and marital relationships of African Americans beyond the demographic information gleaned from the census reports (Bryant et al., 2008). Some studies have tried to understand why African Americans decide to marry. An analysis of 52 Black men uncovered those men usually look for five factors when deciding to marry: wife's characteristics, spirituality, desire to be together, readiness to marry, and encouragement from others (Hurt, 2014). By contrast, single African

American women posit that their family structure, career and education goals, race, location, and standards influence their perceptions of forming and obtaining intimate relationships (Henderson, 2014).

Many African American men choose to marry based on what type of husband their father was. Many men remember their father's teachings and the moral values instilled in them (Wallace, 2007). Research showed that African American men reflect on their father's role in the marriage when they decide to marry. They noted the significance of their father being present in the family, persevering in the marriage, contributing to the union, and avoiding cohabitation and premarital sex before marrying all play a role (Wallace, 2007). Since the provider role is still considered the most significant role for men in American families, males who have difficulty fulfilling this role will experience significant stress and anxiety (King, 1999, as cited in Blankenhorn, 1995). African American women look for and require stability in relationships. According to a 2009 study conducted by Burton and Tucker, fear of uncertainty, instability, financial insecurity plays a pivotal role in preventing African American women from marrying. Still, other studies posited that there is a link between African American young adults' school- and work-related experiences and their union-formation expectations (Barr & Simons, 2012). These areas can serve to predict the stability and quality of African American marriages.

For all the issues facing marriage, many African American marriages are thriving against all odds. For African Americans, as for all groups of Americans, marriage matters. The single most important thing is that marriage improves the well-being of African American women, men, and children (Blackmon et al., 2005). Happily married couples are healthier and tend to be more satisfied with life (Beach et al., 2003; Carr et al., 2014). Carr and Springer (2010) have also documented the effects of marriage on spouses' physical and emotional well-being. In a study of

71 African American couples married between 15-60 years, virtually the entire sample (99% of husbands and 97% of wives) reported that they believe that they are about as happy or happier than most married couples (Phillips et al., 2012). There are still some happy, successful African American marriages in society, which gives hope for the future of African American marriages.

Family Development

In the 21st century, it is paramount to understand the role of the family in society. According to the definition of the term provided by the Merriam-Webster (n.d.) dictionary, family serves as the basic social unit, which traditionally is comprised of parents and their children. These people are considered a group regardless of whether they live together or not. Such a family (children and parents) is also called “the nuclear family” and serves as the core for the extended family, including other relatives. It is crucial not to utilize the definition of family as everyone living in the same household. Although this definition may include individuals who share a living place (e.g., people renting a room), it excludes kin members who live in other places or are temporarily away (Sharma, 2013). Families share an interconnectedness of faith, trials, successes, and failures; members add much value to one another's life (Balswick, 2014). Families and their relationships play a crucial role in shaping an individual's well-being across the course of their lives, building upon the human development that takes shape as individuals evolve through the matrix of the family life cycle (McGoldrick et al., 2015).

The Family

A family is defined to include a parent and children embedded in a social context. In other words, families form the smallest social units, play the most significant role in human development, and give us a sense of identity and belonging (McGoldrick et al., 2015). Our human experience is usually framed by the interlocking nature of kinship networks and the

nature of individual trajectories in the context of culture, social trends, and temporal motion (McGoldrick et al., 2015). Our lives tend to develop in the context of social and cultural systems, family past, the current, present tasks, and the future. Therefore, family life embedded in the social context is primarily the natural framework within which our understanding of human development and identity needs to be focused. Everyone is born into families, which forms the world's first experience, sense of belonging to a certain group, and early relationships (McGoldrick et al., 2015).

Further, it is essential to understand that we grow, develop, and eventually die in families' context. Our lives are usually linked to family systems. A family usually includes people with a shared history and an implied collective future. They involve a dynamic structure consisting of various generations connected by historical and emotional, legal, and blood ties (McGoldrick et al., 2015). The relationship between the children, parents, and other family members involves various transitions in life. A family is a system but usually differs from other systems because they incorporate new members by adoption, marriage, commitment, and birth. Members can leave the family only by death (McGoldrick et al., 2015).

Family Roles

Roles and duties play a vital role in the success of healthy families. Research has shown that establishing family roles is essential since it is directly connected to the family's ability to deal with routine life, unforeseen challenges and crises, and unusual changes occurring in the family (Erdogan et al., 2019). Specifically, family roles are the individuals' current behavioral patterns to accomplish family needs and functions. Every family member tends to occupy specific roles, including siblings, parents, grandparents, children, and grandchild. Along with this, each family member must play several family roles for a complete and functioning family.

For instance, parents are expected to teach, provide, and discipline their children. On the other hand, children are expected to honor and respect their parents, as stated in the Bible. The scriptures remind children to “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you” (New International Version, 2011, Ex. 20:12). Family members usually take traditional roles as they age, including becoming parents, grandparents, and spouses. Therefore, individuals' functions tend to increase based on their family stage and age (Erdogan et al., 2019).

According to Erdogan et al. (2019), family members usually have affective and instrumental roles to accomplish. Everyone serves an essential role in the maintenance of healthy family functioning. The instrumental roles are primarily concerned with physical resources, such as food, shelter and clothing, family management, and decision-making. On the other hand, influential roles usually encourage family and emotional support (Peterson & Green, 2009). However, both roles are critical in a functioning family. It is also appropriate for families to consider each role's accountability and allocation to realize their developmental goals. Role allocation refers to assigning duties and responsibilities within a family, allowing for proper functioning (Erdogan et al., 2019). The allocation of these roles and responsibilities is critical to a family's success.

One significant characteristic of a healthy family is assigning roles without overburdening some members (Marks et al., 2009). Role accountability is a sense of responsibility for family members to complete specific tasks within their assigned roles (Lamb, 2010). Healthy families have some procedures in place to help ensure that necessary functions are accomplished. For example, in healthy families, parents usually understand their responsibility in disciplining their children (McGoldrick et al., 2015). Hence, whenever there is a

need to instill discipline among the children, they usually do not hesitate since they know that not fulfilling their roles would lead to children's behaviors and potentially disrupt the family's ability to function. Donnelly et al. (2016) argued that various roles have a family setup despite the changing family roles. However, studies have established the following categories were essential roles for the family: support and nurturance, resource provision, management and maintenance of the family system, and life skill development (Donnelly et al., 2016; McGoldrick et al., 2015).

Supporting and nurturing other family members is a primary affective role that incorporates warmth, reassurance, and support for a family (Donnelly et al., 2016). Such roles include comforting children after having had a bad day in school or members of the same family supporting and comforting each other after a loss, such as losing a loved one (Donnelly et al., 2016). One of the most important roles of a functioning family includes providing resources, including money, shelter, food, and clothing. It plays an instrumental role in the development sustainability of the family (McGoldrick et al., 2015). The role of managing and maintaining the family system involves numerous tasks, including decision-making, maintaining appropriate roles concerning friends, neighbors, and extended families. It also includes leadership and handling family finances (McGoldrick et al., 2015). Other tasks involve enforcing behavioral standards and maintaining discipline. A significant component of the family revolves around life skill development. These skills include but are not limited to the educational, social, physical, emotional, and development of adults and children. Such roles may consist of parents aiding children in making it through school or helping them decide their career growth (McGoldrick et al., 2015).

Marriage and Family Development

It should be stressed that throughout history, many children appear to have been born and raised in families made up of married parents (Brown, 2010). Within marriage, a proper atmosphere suitable for raising children is created. The mutual help and support that the spouses provide for one another play a crucial role in the ability of the parents to supply the children with the attention, care, and material resources that they require. Parent support helps these individuals grow into adult members of society (Brown, 2010; Goldberg & Carlson, 2014). Therefore, the institution of marriage serves as the glue that binds people together, making them better able to provide proper care for their children. There is a constant societal need for new members lending to its proper functioning, development, and replacement of those members of the workforce who have retired.

It is vital to consider the roles that men and women play in the family (Marks et al., 2009). It is believed that traditionally, upon getting married, husbands served as the individuals who provided for the family. In contrast, wives served as those who cared for the household and raised children (McGoldrick et al., 2015). Although they still exist, these roles are no longer as strict as they were in the past (Brown, 2010). Nevertheless, each family member is encouraged to do what they can for the family, whether providing money, looking after the house, or caring for the children. In any case, marriage strengthens the couple's ties, thus permitting them to create a stable social unit (Brown, 2010).

Marriage Impacting a Child's Future Relationships and Behaviors

It is also pivotal to highlight that the living arrangements of people who have children together have become increasingly unstable and varied. For instance, many are divorced and

separated. The child often stays with the mother with minimal assistance from the father, which leads to additional difficulties for the mother and decreased care and attention for the child (Brown, 2010). In addition, one of the parents may remarry, and then the child might live with their parents and stepparents. In some cases, this helps the child gain a loving family again; however, in some instances, it does not (Brown, 2010). The various living arrangements, divorce, and remarriage have resulted in considerable scholarly and political debate; opinions and theories support both the new and the more traditional approaches to family and marriage (Brown, 2010).

With attachment theory, the parent-child relationship influences thermoregulation, food intake, tactile stimulation, imitation, and emotional attunement (Schuengel et al., 2009). Once a child experiences separation from the parent, the result is a complete withdrawal of all these regulatory influences, which implicates children would have to fall back on alternative self-regulatory processes (Schuengel et al., 2009). Father-child attachment security has influenced numerous child outcomes, such that securely attached children show fewer behavior problems, greater sociability, and more reciprocated friendships than those in insecure relationships (Brown et al., 2012). Research suggests that young boys without a father in the home experience more frequent occurrences of acting out and falling behind in school, whereas girls are more likely to become depressed (Consentino, 2017). These assertions point to the importance of the father-child relationship, and it alludes to the fact that a successful future depends on children having secure relationships with their fathers (Consentino, 2017).

Cohabitation has also become a matter of attention from scholars, and it often precedes marriage but does not always end in it. In addition, some couples may live together for prolonged periods, bear children, and only then get married (Brown, 2010). Several factors determine

whether a cohabitating couple will get married. These factors include the life stage of the couple, the economic benefit of marriage, and the personal background of the couple (Jarnkvist, 2018). Marriage allows couples who have been living together to create a stable unit, thus serving as the foundational component of their family (Manning, 2015).

Families are embedded in family networks, which may have varying characteristics. These characteristics affect the amount, quality, and frequency of support provided by the family network members to one another (Brown, 2010). As previously mentioned, the instability of a family might hurt the efforts related to raising children. The divorce or separation of parents may leave the children without the attention of one of their parents. Studies related to this problem discovered a link between the instability of the family and some difficulties that children may experience or demonstrate, such as behavioral problems and maladjustment issues (Goldberg & Carlson, 2014). With a married couple, the child can see and learn how couples behave and learn these experiences to implement them in their future lives. In contrast, the child might not have a good example of a marriage relationship in a single-parent family environment. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that a proper, stable, and supportive family is paramount in shaping a child's future behaviors and relationships with others.

Sexuality and Family Development

It is imperative to understand that human sexuality is related to procreation. It is a critical element of human life and an integral part of what we do and who we are (Molina, 1999). The family serves as a natural environment for practicing sexuality and procreation (Ebrahim, 1982). It allows two individuals to create a union where a child can be produced. The mutual support and assistance spouses offer one another permit them to obtain the necessary resources for bearing children and supplying them with the conditions they need to be productive members of

society (Goldberg & Carlson, 2014). Having one's spouse as the sole sexual partner and not engaging in sexual conduct with other individuals also decreases the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases (Appunni & Ningpuanyeh, 2015). The practice of sexuality in the family with one's spouse is usually viewed as the standard in modern society (Goldberg & Carlson, 2014).

Family as a Determining Factor for Children's View of Sexuality

It is important to note that the family is one of the key factors influencing how children view sexuality. The communication between children and their parents about sexuality provides children with key knowledge about this topic. It is paramount that parents offer their children information regarding overtly sexual behavior. Doing so provides them with awareness about sexuality and decreases the possibility that they will engage in sexual conduct without knowing the risks related to it (Pain, 2020). According to Mmari et al. (2016) and Goldberg and Carlson (2014), the authors suggested that adolescents from families comprised of married biological parents were less likely to engage in risky sexual conduct than those who live in single-parent families. This statistic was also true for individuals who live with a parent and a stepparent. The lack of education about sex from parents can underscore the importance of marriage and family for the well-being of children.

Marriage and Parenting

A critical component of a successful, healthy family is understanding the importance of active parenting. Active parenting has a tremendous effect on family development. Family systems theory defines a family as a complex, dynamic, and integrated system in which every member is impacted by other members (Gurman & Kniskern, 2013). Therefore, parenting style has a pivotal impact on the development of children (Riggio, 2014). Children learn copious

amounts of information about the world at the beginning of their lives; the immediate environment in which they learn most of this information is with their family. Goldberg and Carlson (2014) noted that the relationship between parents and their children, to a considerable degree, dictates what children will learn and what behavioral and thought patterns they adopt themselves. Further, the quality of the relationship between parents and children also profoundly impacts the future decisions and behaviors of these offspring in the future and their relationships inside the family. Parents need to be properly prepared to bear and raise children, educate them, and establish proper relationships with them (National Academies of Sciences et al., 2016).

The Lasting Impact of Parenting on Children

The parenting style practiced in a family has a significant impact on the children; the effect is long-lasting, whether the parenting style is positive or negative. Positive parenting allows children to grow in a harmonious environment, providing them with the care they require and meeting their needs while also not “spoiling” them (Cherry, 2020). This approach allows children to grow into productive members of society, become more successful in their lives, and start happy families themselves. There is an undeniable link between parenting styles and happy, capable, and successful children (Cherry, 2020).

On the contrary, negative parenting, such as the abuse or neglect of children, often may cause significant long-term problems for children as they grow up. These behavioral problems can contribute to numerous failures and even psychological issues. Children raised in abuse may suffer from various mental disorders, such as depression, and might not recover from them or achieve remission for prolonged periods (Opondo et al., 2016). In their adult years, they frequently may find that their abuse as children may prevent them from achieving their goals. Children who suffer from abuse and neglect may learn these behavioral patterns themselves and

might find it difficult to establish meaningful relationships with friends or start healthy families of their own (Opondo et al., 2016).

Therefore, it should be noted that the parenting styles utilized in the family toward their children profoundly influence their offspring's lives. Thus, spouses must adopt and utilize effective parenting styles and practice them with their children to prevent them from suffering severe problems later in life (Opondo et al., 2016). In addition, the children's future success and the relationships between the parents and their children are significantly dependent upon the quality of the interactions between them. The studies show that children do better when their parents stay together (Musick & Meier, 2010; Parke, 2003; Rowe, 2020). A longitudinal study conducted over 12 years across 151 neighborhoods uncovered that the children of parents who reported they loved each other either "some" or "very much" stayed in school longer and married later. Moreover, these marriages tend to last for longer periods (Brauner-Otto et al., 2020). A child's home environment tends to be happier when their parents report loving each other, so the children may be less likely to have a negative view of marriage. Children may also view their parents as role models and seek similar marriages as they get older (Brauner-Otto et al., 2020).

Factors Affecting Marriages

This section of the review detailed many of the challenges married couples face. The intent was to reflect upon those challenges faced by African American couples and understand how they overcame them in their marriage and beat the odds. While many of these challenges are similar, they look different depending on the type of couple. African American couples face a myriad of challenges. For instance, many couples suffer from a lack of options in the job market, resulting in financial issues. Additionally, in the United States, 43.7% of non-Hispanic Black women reported experiencing violent victimization from an intimate partner as opposed to

34.7% of White or 37.1% Hispanic women (Sabri et al., 2016). Much of the violence experienced by these women is sexual. Though financial disagreements are stronger predictors of divorce (Dew et al., 2012), research shows women who survive a sexual assault by intimate partners may, in turn, lash out at future partners, which can result in a decrease in their interest in sexual activities (O'Callaghan et al., 2019). These issues can ultimately affect marriage rates.

Devaluing Men

One area of concern was devaluing or emasculating men in marriage. Society teaches boys how to act, think, walk, and talk like men from childhood. Many of them are instructed in the ways of manhood by their own fathers' examples. They are taught not to cry, make excuses, suck it up, and keep going. Much of how men are perceived in society is based upon a concept known as gender schemas, or the cognitive systems of associations that categorize and guide gendered beliefs, expectations, and behaviors (Abrams et al., 2018). Acquired from cultural sharing groups, gender schemas and related beliefs interact to produce men's gendered perceptions (Levy & Fivush, 1993).

Society perceives Black adolescent males as threatening, underachieving, and hyper-masculine. These ideas are reinforced through media outlets and psychological research that portray them as monoliths rather than heterogeneous groups with multiple intersecting identities (Buckley, 2018). Many black males struggle to find their place in society. These young men of color tend to engage in "hypermasculine" behavior marked by aggression and women mistreatment (Rios, 2011). As a result, young men respond to racism and class subordination by asserting masculine domination over others (Connell, 2005).

Traditional roles in marriage portrayed men as the primary breadwinner and providers for the family (Helms et al., 2010). As men were accustomed to being the provider, society currently

poses a threat to their role in the family. Consequently, losing this role can be intricately tied to masculine identity issues. Moreover, when a husband is unemployed or underemployed, it can threaten his perception of masculinity (Meisenbach, 2009). While it is true that today's changing demographics and shifting social norms often call for alternative, nontraditional enactments of gender, work, and family to survive (Petroski & Edley, 2006), many men have begun to feel devalued in the home and society alike. In a study of 155 black men, 32.5% of participants reported that Black women had more opportunities than Black men. A significant minority felt that Black women were, in part at least, responsible for the low status of Black men (Cazenave, 1983). These men blamed women for why Black men are kept down and devalued in society, which has led to a growing distrust and hatred among Black men and Black women (Cazenave, 1983). This perception may be why many men feel their masculinity is under attack (Weir, 2017).

Men are increasingly likely to believe that their gender identities, their sense of being as a man, and what masculinity and manhood mean to them are under attack (Cassino, 2020). Much of the issue revolved around dual-income homes. Research has uncovered that marriages in which wives earn between 50% to 69% of total couple earnings were at higher risk for divorce (Schwartz & Gonalons-Pons, 2016). Gone are the days in which men were respected as the heads of their families. Replacing this ideology is the notion that most women can do all the things a man is capable of and, as such, they do not need a man (King, 1999). The perceived loss of respect has led to men attempting to compensate for the lack of status in the home (Cassino, 2020). If a man cannot do what he believes men are "supposed to do," such as protect and provide for their family, they begin to question their identity or feel that others may be questioning it (Cassino, 2020).

Divorce

As the family matures, things continually change. However, family is the one thing in life that is permanent. One cannot choose their family, only with whom they associate themselves. The Bible makes a profound statement, “Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up” (New International Version, 2011, Eccl. 4: 9-10). Children benefit from stability and are often traumatized due to constant changes in their environment. In 2009, the national divorce rate was 9.7 per 1,000 women aged 15 and over and 9.2 per 1,000 men aged 15 and above (Copen et al., 2012).

Parents who continually move into and out of the household disrupt support systems and family routines, resulting in severed emotional attachments (Price, 2017). Many of these families suffer financial loss and separate; the children typically remain with the mother. Unfortunately, women historically earn less than their male counterparts (Black et al., 2008). Divorce can sometimes leave mothers struggling financially. This phenomenon is especially true for those who were stay-at-home mothers. According to Anderson (2014), 32.2% of single-mother families who lived in poverty during the first two months of 2009 continued to live in poverty 36 months later. Children of single mothers are less likely to experience financial upward mobility and stability. For those reasons, families must do all they can to stay together.

Much of what is known about Black marriages is compiled from the decline and demise of marriage in the African American community. The U.S. Census Bureau (2002) noted that over 80% of Americans will eventually marry at some point in their lives. While it is easy to pick apart marriages, it is more beneficial to understand the necessity and impact of marriage for all (Bryant et al., 2008). As marriage confers numerous psychosocial and economic benefits, there is

merit in studying the characteristics of African American marriages that stand the test of time (Phillips et al., 2012).

Children who come from broken homes have significant issues forming meaningful relationships in their adult lives. Research on the intergenerational transmission of divorce has demonstrated that, compared to offspring of non-divorced parents, children of divorced parents have more negative attitudes towards marriage as an institution. Moreover, they are less optimistic about the feasibility of a long-lasting, healthy marriage (Whitton et al., 2008). If feasible, couples should attempt to solve their marital issues for their children if for no other reason. Couples must allow their children to see them work out their differences. Children can learn valuable life skills like negotiating and solving problems effectively (Conflict Management for Parents, 2021). Children in families dealing with issues such as domestic violence and abuse are not afforded the same opportunities.

The issue some couples face is that they do not typically consider the child's point of view when considering divorce (Trautner, 2017). Parents tend to focus on their spouse's happiness or approval rather than their children's needs (Whitton et al., 2008). They do not realize the trauma they are causing their children by breaking up the home and moving on to different relationships. Each time the child meets their parent's new potential romantic partner, the emotional attachment phase begins all over again (National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health, 2015). If the relationship does not last, the child is forced to deal with a semblance of divorce again. This endless cycle only serves to harm the child in the end.

Infidelity

Research has shown that 21.6% of marriages end due to infidelity, making it one of the leading causes of divorce (Scott et al., 2013). Infidelity is defined as involvement in romantic

relationships outside of one's active, committed relationship, resulting in the sense of relational betrayal (Chuick, 2009). Infidelity includes such things as extramarital affairs, including but not limited to sexual intercourse, inappropriate conversations, oral sex, pornography, and inappropriate touching (Chuick, 2009). Many do not see infidelity in the same light. A study of 358 college students determined that females typically construe more things as infidelity than males (Thornton & Nagurney, 2011). Infidelity commonly affects the non-offending spouse in one of three ways: cognitively, emotionally, or behaviorally with the most impactful being cognitively (Rodriguez et al., 2015). Estimates of marital infidelity among American couples range from 26% to 70% for women and from 33% to 75% for men (Eaves & Robertson-Smith, 2007). This range is due to the discrepancy in methodology, sample surveyed, and the definition of adultery (Eaves & Robertson-Smith, 2007). Infidelity results in a breach of trust, and the "victim" in the scenario will never forget what happened.

One act of infidelity can lead to jealousy, leading to the spouse suspecting negative behavior from their partner (Knopp et al., 2017). Individuals who catch their spouse in the act can suffer from obsessive thoughts and flashbacks (Zur, n.d.). The replaying of those images in their minds can cause significant trauma from which they may find it difficult to recover, leading to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (Campbell & Renshaw, 2018). Research shows individuals can control obsessive thoughts, but flashbacks are involuntary. These vivid images can unexpectedly recreate traumatic moments (Glass, 2004). According to traditional psychiatric thinking, one pathological aspect of extreme jealousy is not jealousy itself. It is the illusion that a loved one has committed infidelity when none has occurred that can put a strain on a relationship (Buss & Abrams, 2016).

Among the myriad of mental health issues infidelity can cause, damage to one's self-esteem seems to be at the top of the list. Often, the parties being cheated on are inundated with thoughts of not being good enough, causing them to blame themselves for what happened. This guilt places more responsibility on their shoulders for the relationship's success (Zur, n.d.). In this stage, the non-offending spouse will begin to make statements such as, "Maybe if I were more adventurous in the bedroom, my husband would not have cheated," or "If I do this, maybe she will stop seeing that other person." Self-esteem is a critical factor in how a person deals with stressful situations; the research shows that those with high self-esteem recover faster, while those with low self-esteem experience greater stress severity (Juth et al., 2008).

People who view themselves as worthy and confident in their own identity can often find the positive amidst the negative. Those with low self-esteem tend to only focus on the negative aspects of each situation. After a partner's infidelity, noninvolved partners with low self-esteem may be unable to muster the personal resources to cope with or manage the infidelity-related stress, intensifying the affair's impact (Shrout & Weigel, 2020). Therefore, their negative self-perceptions might heighten the stress from infidelity and exacerbate their mental health symptoms. Thus, the mental health consequences of infidelity might hinge on the noninvolved partner's self-esteem (Shrout & Weigel, 2020). The cognitive effects of infidelity can lead to animosity, anger, and bitterness.

Among other issues, infidelity can also cause significant health issues such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders, low self-esteem, guilt, and substance abuse (Russell et al., 2013). It has also been linked, in some cases, to heart problems as well as broken heart syndrome (Watson, 2017). While it is true that infidelity is a leading cause of divorce, studies show that 21.6% of polled divorced individuals cited infidelity as the cause (Amato & Previti, 2003). Many couples

still find a way to make their marriages last beyond the pain of infidelity. The apostle Paul gives believers a strong command. He said, “So ought men to love their wives as their bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church” (King James Version, 1769/2017, Eph 5:28-29). When partners take the time to think about the effects of their choices, they tend to make better decisions (Bruch & Feinberg, 2017).

Communication

One of the most critical components of a healthy, thriving marriage is communication. Communication has a lasting impact on how partners view their relationship (Lavner et al., 2016). Proper communication also helps create an environment of mutual trust and respect (O’Daniel & Rosenstein, 2008). The more positive the environment, the healthier the marriage. Research has shown a couple's environment can affect their relationship's success and satisfaction (Vanover, 2016). Keeping marital love vibrant and healthy requires couples to put aside their differences. Couples who are happy tend to do things differently from those experiencing trouble (Karney, 2010). This approach also includes the way couples communicate. The longer the couple has been married, the more effective they tend to be with communication.

The way marital stress affects a couple depends upon how well they can communicate (Lavner et al., 2016). Couples must learn to listen to each other, as effective communication leads to marital closeness. Conversely, low levels of effective communication can undermine a relationship (Lavner et al., 2016). The ability to communicate lends itself to self-worth, allowing each partner to express themselves in the marriage. Couples learn to make better decisions together while asserting themselves where necessary. The most desirable family relationship

processes occur when family members are connected while maintaining their sense of self (Yoo, 2013).

Communication is an essential factor in any relationship, especially an intimate one. Low levels of effective communication may undermine the relationship (Lavner et al., 2016). It is of the utmost importance that couples learn to communicate effectively to achieve marital success (Lavner et al., 2016). Couples need to take steps to enhance communication in their relationship. For starters, taking note of their behavior in the relationship can lead to individuals taking more responsibility for their actions (Firestone, 2013). It is imperative that couples at least try to work towards a goal. Improving communication within the relationship might involve the individual trying to be more understanding and their partner becoming a better listener (Hira & Overall, 2010).

The ability to make decisions as a couple is paramount to marital success, showing that the couple can work as a team, compromise, and focus on a specific goal. Usually, when a couple cannot make decisions together, it is due to a lack of agreeance on a particular viewpoint. This is frequently the case when making financial decisions and raising children (Ward & Lynch, 2019). The inability to make cohesive decisions can result in unnecessary arguing and increase relational stress. Couples can improve decision-making by sitting down and talking things through with each other (Ward & Lynch, 2019). Couples should endeavor to stick to the facts when making decisions. A level of trust is needed when couples learn to make decisions together, adding a sense of responsibility in the relationship and a sense of security. When relationship partners rely on each other for information and decision-making, they no longer need to know everything; they simply rely on one another (Ward & Lynch, 2019).

Dealing with conflict is something all relationships must learn to navigate successfully. No couple is drama-free, and all should get used to this relational axiom. Couples should endeavor to deal with conflict by exercising patience and understanding their partner's concerns (Overall & McNulty, 2017). Conflict resolution is an act in which listening to understand is better than listening to respond. Another way to help mitigate conflict is to recognize what causes conflict. Familiar sources of conflict involve unmet expectations, intimacy, time spent together, financial difficulties, discrepancies in inequity and power, domestic and family responsibilities, parenting, jealousy, bad habits, and more (Overall & McNulty, 2017). Couples must understand these triggers and work together to overcome them.

Intimacy

The term intimacy refers to the experience of being close with one's partner, centered on trust and respect (Yoo, 2013). Subsequently, lack of intimacy has been linked to marital distress (Yoo, 2013). Although some couples do not place much importance on intimacy in relationships, relationships cannot survive without intimacy, given that intimacy allows couples to develop the bond necessary to thrive in a healthy relationship (Kardan-Souraki et al., 2015). There has been little research centered on attachment and defining intimacy. Many studies have been completed; however, they all end with the same conclusions. More research is necessary on forming intimacy and attachment theory (Cassidy et al., 2013; Papp et al., 2013; Van den Broucke et al., 1995).

Research has identified several distinct types of intimacy: emotional, psychological, physical, sexual, temporal, communicational, social-recreational, aesthetic, spiritual, intellectual, and total (Kardan-Souraki et al., 2015). There is no denying the importance of intimacy in relationships. Intimacy is touted as one of the main components of most theorists' hierarchy of needs (Schaefer & Olson, 1981). When there is a lack of intimacy, the relationship begins to

experience difficulties. When the couple begins to experience these challenges, it is usually due to a change in their partner's intimacy levels and the passion demonstrated toward them (Aykutoglu & Uysal, 2017). When intimacy is not present, couples often begin to feel the pangs of disparity and seek other ways to fill this void. At this point, many couples usually begin to believe that the relationship is beyond repair and start the discussions around separation (Stritof, 2020).

The goal of intimacy is to provide a satisfying experience within the relationship. When partners are satisfied, the relationship thrives. The experience is delightful and gives the partners a sense of purpose (Michael & Spiegel, n.d.). Thus, partners are provided a lasting experience that leads to happy, healthy marriages. Couples can rectify the breakdown of intimacy within the relationship by improving communication and problem solving, thereby boosting spousal intimacy and strengthening the bond (Kardan-Souraki et al., 2015). Communication is one of the most critical factors in creating and maintaining intimacy in relationships (Kardan-Souraki et al., 2015).

Intimacy is an important component in the success or failure of the marriage. Research suggests that since humans are social beings, there is an intense need for deep relationships that provide support, room for growth, and fulfillment. These close and caring relationships are linked to health and well-being at all stages of life (Feeney & Collins, 2015). These qualities make the family the staple that it is today (Howe, 2001). It can be deduced that intimacy is based on a person's experiences, and it is important to understand how intimacy develops. Seeking to explore this phenomenon has helped researchers understand the disruption in marriage and close relationships. This disruption was evidenced in Fraley's study of more than 21,000 participants. The study showed that attachment could help predict personality by studying intrapersonal and interpersonal outcomes of relationships (Fraley et al., 2011). This theory can help substantiate the claim that it is possible to adopt some of the traits of individuals we are closest to.

The relational structure hinges on two necessities – trust and intimacy, an area in which women tend to struggle (Ubando, 2016). When couples start a relationship, they must learn how each other operates. Greater intimacy lends itself to a greater understanding of the parties involved and a better experience overall. However, many couples are marred by past experiences, which makes it hard for them to thrive in a new relationship. The ins and outs of intimacy are often learned through childhood experiences. Children who were raised in hostile environments can often have problems forming healthy relationships in the future (Michael & Spiegel, n.d.). Growing up in a hostile environment can create significant barriers when engaging in close intimate relationships. The person carries those memories into the new relationship expecting it to mirror what they were accustomed to; often, this can cause the person to unknowingly exhibit the same traits they witnessed as a child.

Many couples assume that intimacy will automatically be present in marriage (Schaefer & Olson, 1981), which often leads to a false sense of hope and a distorted view of what it takes to have a successful marriage. At first sight of trouble, the couple may find it easier to break up than to work through the issues. This decision is rooted in the erroneous assumption that they would have a natural intimacy that is not present in the relationship. These experiences with others allow a person to create a prototype of themselves and others (Fraley et al., 2011).

Dara's study proved that 13.8% of couples would experience some form of marital issues by their 1900th day of marriage (Dzara, 2010). It is unclear what causes this disruption. However, it is safe to say that a lack of intimacy in one of these six areas: conflict resolution, fairness, communication, economic well-being, satisfaction with love, and emotional intimacy can be the culprit (Dzara, 2010). Many researchers have studied the effect upon relational satisfaction due to intimacy, or lack thereof. Most couples have relegated intimacy to sex (Helgeson et al., 1987).

Typically, when the sex does not meet standards or is non-existent, the intimacy fades, the relationship grows stale, and the partners become dissatisfied with the relationship (Stulhofer et al., 2010). A study found that sexual boredom had a drastically negative effect on relationship intimacy (Stulhofer et al., 2010).

One must note the prevalence of sexual assault and molestation within the African American community. Research shows that for every Black woman who reports rape, at least 15 Black women do not report. One in four Black girls will be sexually abused before the age of 18, and 35% of Black women experienced some form of contact with sexual violence during their lifetime (Barlow, 2020). These staggering statistics point to another issue impacting intimacy within African American marriages. Childhood sexual abuse is known to influence adult sexual risk behaviors and the quality of their intimate relationships (Testa et al., 2005). Those who survive child sexual abuse often find it difficult to establish meaningful interpersonal relationships (Hall & Hall, 2011). Women typically find it challenging to decide to remarry as they may struggle to find safe partners (Testa et al., 2005). The resulting experience is also likely to contribute to relationship instability (Testa et al., 2005).

Though elevated levels of intimacy can denote a healthy relationship, intimacy should not be used as a basis to predict relational satisfaction. Satisfaction occurs when couples adjust to each other and have a mutual understanding in the relationship. It is shaped through positive and negative experiences shared in the relationship and by fulfilling each other's needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). There are instances of couples faking intimacy in the hopes of pleasing their partner, which has been identified as a frequent practice among women (Jackson & Scott, 2007). This practice also proves that the level of assumed intimacy does not indicate relationship satisfaction. Individuals who experience a fear of intimacy often develop a wall between themselves and their

partner, making the formation of intimacy challenging to achieve. Relationship satisfaction tends to decrease when there is a fear of intimacy present in one of the partners (Sobral et al., 2015). The fear of intimacy leads to a lack of intimacy, resulting in the relationship's failure (Vangelisti & Beck, 2007).

Sex

What is known about sex and marital satisfaction is derived from the study of sexual scripts. Sexual scripts are the approved norms regarding sexuality that individuals embrace, internalize, and endorse through a process of socialization, known as the sexual script theory (Rutagumirwa & Bailey, 2018, as cited in Simon & Gagnon, 1986). The theory states that sexual scripts are inherently embedded in a cultural context. Cultural norms provide guidelines for proper behaviors, emotions, and cognition for men and women in sexual experiences (Rutagumirwa & Bailey, 2018, as cited in Simon and Gagnon, 1986). Children learn sexual scripts such as gender roles and sex in marriage. These behaviors are then carried into adult life, taking root in later relationships.

For years, sex has been considered a critical factor in marital stability. Though sex is essential in a marriage, is it the glue that holds a marriage together? Research links sex to emotional satisfaction and physical pleasure, couples with greater sexual frequency are less likely to divorce or break up (Kornrich et al., 2014). Sex is vital; many couples can quell the onslaught of marital woes such as stress and even the high divorce rate through a healthy sex life (Stritof, 2019). Sexual frequency has been linked to a couple's happiness, enhanced brain function, better physical fitness, improved immune function, and lower pain levels. Sex may also help promote weight loss (Stritof, 2019). A review of 1706 articles, using a keyword search, found that some aspects of relationships, such as commitment, preserve the pillars of marriage in

critical situations. Conversely, other aspects, such as intimacy, can help construct marital identity and satisfaction (Karimi et al., 2019).

Just because a couple has a great sex life does not mean their marriage will last. A study of 3,207 respondents concluded that marriage was not a determinant of sexual satisfaction (Kislev, 2019). It is understood that sex alone does not make for a good, healthy marriage. There is a downside to the fun times. It is common for couples to stay in violent relationships because of sex. Researchers have concluded that sexual coercion is one form of intimate partner violence that may be especially salient in young adult populations (Copp et al., 2015). Sex is also used to elicit the desired behavior in which partners withhold sex as a means of punishment or issue it as a reward. The research supports the notion that some women exchange sex for men's participation in household chores or withhold sex when men do not participate in household labor (Kornrich et al., 2013). Using sex as a means of manipulation is a form of operant conditioning, whereby behavior is controlled by its consequences (Staddon & Cerutti, 2002). This leads to partners increasing behaviors linked to favorable outcomes and decreasing behaviors that lead to unfavorable outcomes (Hogan & Baucom, 2017). Consequently, if the behavior is desirable, the partner can have sex; if not, sex is withheld until the desired outcome is achieved.

Sex before marriage is becoming increasingly acceptable in modern culture. The research shows that Americans are now more likely than ever to enter marriage with a full history of sexual experimentation and high aspirations for sexual pleasure (Elliott & Umberson, 2008, as cited in Giddens, 1992; Rubin, 1990). The need for sex, coupled with the fear of rejection from one's spouse, can cause some to seek sexual pleasure outside of marriage boundaries. A study suggested that one of the most robust sets of correlates for divorce is premarital sex and

cohabitation with partners other than their spouse (Alvare, 2012). In a study conducted of 1621 respondents, problems due to extramarital involvement were strongly related to marital disruption, even holding constant marriage quality (DeMaris, 2013).

Extended Family

Research has also indicated that the extended family may have a bearing on marital success (St. Vil et al., 2018). Often, relationships formed with in-laws have either a positive or a negative effect on each spouse. For instance, one spouse may have the best relationship with their partner's parents and family; however, the same may not hold for their partner. In most instances, this causes undue stress on a marriage, leading the couple down the path to divorce. Extended families can provide much-needed support to a marriage, including financial, emotional, and practical support (St. Vil et al., 2018). The relationships between the partners and their families have different connotations for each partner. One study shows that men in good standing with their wives' parents were more likely to enjoy a long-lasting marriage (Daly, 2014). That same study noted that a wife's relationship with her husband's parents is a bit more complicated and less indicative of overall marital happiness (Daly, 2014). It is possible that the successful forming of a relationship with the in-laws can provide a long-lasting and satisfying marriage.

Gauging Marital Success

Marital success is defined as satisfaction, commitment, and stability (Bryant & Conger, 1999). Despite the staggering divorce statistics, some couples enjoy happy, healthy marriages and are beating the odds. These marriages go against the grain of what society says marriage should resemble. Often, healthy marriages do not incorporate a lovely home or expensive cars. Instead, it is about finding ways daily to compromise and commit to living a happy life together.

According to a recent study, successful couples trust and consult with one another, are honest, believe in God, make decisions together, commit to each other, and have friendly relationships (Asoodeh et al., 2010). Traditional couples and non-traditional couples differed only in family management procedures (Asoodeh et al., 2010).

Much of this family management comes with spending time together and enjoying activities (Flood & Genadek, 2016). It is essential to find pleasant, shared activities, even rituals in marriage as shared time is important for marital well-being (Flood & Genadek, 2016). These rituals refer to the repetitive and rewarding activities that spouses do together and are impossible to do alone. Every couple creates their universe or system of habits. They need each other to satisfy sexual needs, discuss everyday happenings, share recreation and leisure activities, and be intimate to whom one can reveal one's hopes and fears, worries, and jokes (Maatta & Uusiautti, 2012). A true resource in marriage is when one thinks that they are essential to the other and that the spouse is important to oneself (Maatta & Uusiautti, 2012).

If one understands how the bonds in romantic relationships form, we cannot overlook the importance of commitment. Commitment is the cornerstone of human social life, leading to predictable behavior in the face of fluctuations in their desires and interests (Michael & Pacherie, 2014). Commitment leads to a state of interdependence in relationships and builds trust in each partner (Stanley et al., 2010). A study revealed that securely attached individuals experience high levels of mutual trust, attachment, and satisfaction, yet worried and avoidant attached individuals tend to have low levels (Morgan & Shaver, 1999). Individuals who are secure and worried attached feel much more intimacy, passion, and attachments in their romantic relationship than avoidantly attached individuals (Caki et al., 2015, as cited in Buyuksahin, 2006).

In the United States, there are 2,236,496 marriages at 6.9 per 1,000 total population (Centers for Disease Control/National Center for Health Statistics, 2017). It is widely accepted that every marriage merges the Big Five personality traits. The Big Five personality traits are regarded as stable and have relatively stayed the same over time, based on The Five-Factor Model (FFM) developed by Raymond Catell in the 1940s (Costa et al., 2019). The five personality traits of the FFM are neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Glynn, 2019). Couples who are happy in marriage are individuals who have learned to embrace each other's weaknesses while harnessing each other's strengths (Glynn, 2019). The couples who stay the happiest overall are the ones who change their beliefs about what is important in their relationships, deciding that whatever aspects of the marriage have declined must not be so important after all (Neff & Karney, 2003). Mutual respect is also a factor in determining a marriage's success. Therapists widely accept the idea that a marriage with space for multiple voices suggests a profoundly different concept of respect than the one implied by the notion that women should not answer back to their husbands (Hirsch, 2003). Many successful marriages understand the importance of adhering to their partners' boundaries. They understand that healthy boundaries can be the difference between a healthy, happy relationship and a toxic, dysfunctional one (Selva, 2020).

Marital Expectations

The research is clear that marital expectations can present problems when they do not add up to the reality of what marriage truly is. If the expectations are unrealistic, partners can potentially set a bar their spouse can never reach (Birditt et al., 2017). However, marriage can descend into chaos if expectations are too low or non-existent. Marital expectations must be balanced across the spectrum, not too high or too low. People with low expectations tend to be in

relationships where they are treated poorly, and people with high expectations tend to be in relationships where they are treated well (Gottman, 2018). Unmet expectations can lead to tension in marriage, which has unique implications for divorce (Birditt et al., 2017). A 2017 study found that a couple's expectations can drive their decision to remain married. The study revealed that people base their commitment to a relationship more on their expected future satisfaction than on their current satisfaction with that relationship (Baker et al., 2017).

A couple's expectation of marriage, particularly those surrounding their spouse's behavior, is influenced by sources such as movies, novels, and their parents' relationships (Dixon et al., 2012). Many of these expectations are unrealistic, comprised of myths, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors concerning a range of romance-related subjects from courtship rituals to sexual encounters (Galician, 2004). Unrealistic expectations can hurt marriages in that the commitment level is directly tied to the unrealistic expectations of what marriage should be. Research posits that individuals may base their commitment to a relationship on their expectations regarding the likelihood that they will be satisfied in the future rather than whether they are satisfied currently. Such expected satisfaction is based partially on current satisfaction but should also reflect additional factors relevant to the future (Baker et al., 2017). Successful, long-term African American couples may have adopted the principle of a good-enough marriage (Gottman, 2018). In a good enough relationship, people have lofty expectations based on how they are treated (Gottman, 2018). The emphasis is not on what they should have; rather, it is on how they treat each other. These couples have discussed what expectations they have for a close relationship and marriage, thus allowing them to see whether they are genuinely compatible and able to compromise (Gallimore et al., 2006).

Learning from Past Mistakes

How couples deal with their issues is paramount to marital success. Among the most crucial is the ability to learn from their past mistakes. Many couples have brutalized their marriage by making illogical decisions, using devastating words, rejecting their partner, and failing to let go of old habits (Farrel & Farrel, 2000). The issue occurs when a spouse continues to display the same habits and behavioral traits that caused their marital issues initially. Genuine reconciliation and lasting satisfaction take place when a spouse not only admits and accepts responsibility for their wrongdoings but also makes the necessary changes to keep problems from resurfacing (Eaton, 2017). For example, if a husband had a gambling issue that almost cost them to lose their home, the hope is that the husband no longer gambles in the future. The hope is that the husband takes those funds that were funneled into gambling and places them into a savings account, setting the marriage up for financial success.

What should be understood is that there is no such thing as a perfect couple. All couples make mistakes; however, successful couples learn from these mistakes and move on. This behavior denotes a level of maturity that allows trust to begin to take form. Studies show that when we take the time to acknowledge that we have messed up, we should mindfully search ourselves for the potential roots of our blunder. In taking the time to “check ourselves,” we build greater self-awareness and cultivate the ability to choose wisely in the future (Eaton, 2017). The result is a couple that is built to last a lifetime.

Religion and Marital Success

Research shows that religion can significantly impact marriage and its success. A study found that 27% of African American men base their decision to marry off their relationship with God (Hurt, 2014). The connection to religion runs deep within the African American community.

Many couples value marriage's sanctity and tout their spiritual responsibility to God as motivation to stay married (Hurt, 2014). Religion plays a role in the way couples communicate with each other (David & Stafford, 2013). The research shows that one's relationship with God is important to marital quality. This relationship appears to manifest itself in religious communication between partners, which is directly linked to marital quality (David & Stafford, 2013).

Studies have identified a positive association between marital satisfaction, religion, and spirituality (Fincham & Beach, 2008; Mahoney, 2010). Furthermore, a Pew Survey on religion found that 92% of Americans believe in God or a universal spirit, and 60% believe in a God with whom a personal relationship is possible (Pew Forum for Religion and Public Life, 2008). Deep religious conviction aids in steering couples in the right direction along the path to marital success with higher levels of shared religious beliefs between spouses. These shared religious convictions about the sanctity of marriage and religious beliefs concerning lifelong marriage are linked to better marriage outcomes (Mullins, 2016).

Family as a Unit Ordained by God for Building His People

Religion and spirituality have played a pivotal role in forming the family social institution. It is important to stress that the notion of family was built based on the words of God found in the Old Testament. "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him'" (New International Version, 2011, Gen. 2:18). Therefore, Eve was created to assist Adam, and they were created as the first family. From this act, the notion of the family takes its origins. A marriage is a union of individuals who come together, sharing their successes and failures, and assisting each other throughout their lives. In addition, religion is one of the key factors considered when seeking a potential spouse (Braithwaite et al., 2013). Religion

plays a critical role in many individuals' lives. As a result, when selecting a spouse, people prefer that their partner share the same religious beliefs.

Religion Fashioning the Lives of Children

Another aspect that makes religion important for family life is how children learn to behave and act (Brown, 2001). Studies suggest when parents share strong religious beliefs and teach their children to believe in God and follow His will, this leads to positive effects regarding these children's behaviors and attitudes as they grow up (Brown, 2001). It is known that there exists an association between greater religiosity and spirituality of children and making good decisions throughout their lives (Brown, 2001). For instance, when children learn more about God they are better monitored by their parents. They are also more prone to be engaged in behaviors that promote their health and avoid behaviors that have an elevated risk of causing adverse effects (Brown, 2001; Pain, 2020).

It is noteworthy that adolescents' religious and spiritual beliefs also influence their chances of engaging in sexual intercourse while being minors. For instance, in religious families, children are less likely to participate in such high-risk activities as premarital sexual practices, have sex at an early age, and have sexual contact with strangers (Cotton & Berry, 2007). There is also a relationship between the religious beliefs of children (or lack thereof) and the contraceptive practices employed by them (Cotton & Berry, 2007). Children's religious attitudes and beliefs can cause significant changes in their lives, further increasing the importance of religion in the family's life. Teaching children about religion and providing them with guidance to form their spiritual beliefs properly can have critical effects on the key decisions they make throughout their lives.

Beating the Odds

Many couples are shying away from marriage due to the ever-climbing divorce rates. Most research on the association between marital quality and subjective well-being has focused on adverse outcomes, typically, depressive symptoms (Carr et al., 2014); however, there are many couples who are beating the odds and making their marriages last. They are standing the test of time, and this is where the gap appears in the research, which could help explain the writer's notion that many marriages are succeeding due to the fear of becoming a statistic. The literature gap is evident; many researchers only focus on quantitative data concerning the number of divorces and marital stressors present in each marriage.

However, there is a concerning lack of research and investigation into how the small percentage of marriages can last. Researchers are not asking probing questions regarding what couples are doing right. How did those couples manage to last 20 or 30 years without engaging in divorce? Living amongst a generation that does not value marriage or the boundaries that marriage requires must be arduous. While they should be the example, these couples have become the forgotten and displaced portion of the research.

Many couples have mastered the art of conflict resolution in their marriage and have found ways to mitigate the daily issues that blossom into significant problems. The couples who are staying married for 20 or more years have learned how to take their marriage in stride, choosing which issues warrant argument and letting others play themselves out to solve the problem. It is highly plausible that these couples have learned to simply mind their marriage and not look at others and their situations to gauge their own. They tend to talk openly and spend a few minutes each day discussing profound or personal subjects to stay connected to their partner over the long term (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Summary

In marriage, love is the ultimate glue that holds a couple together. Nothing is more robust or more time-tested and truer. Couples must adopt the principle of agape love, God's unending, never-ending love for His people. This is how spouses should cleave to each other. No matter what happens, they are in it for the long haul. No place in the Bible is this principle more pronounced than in the unlikely couple of the prophet Hosea and his wife Gomer, a known promiscuous woman and whore. The Bible declares that God commanded Hosea, "Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes" (New English Translation, 2005, Hos 3:1). This instruction caused Hosea to question the Lord's reasoning for commanding him to marry a woman of such low character.

Likewise, many couples do not understand why they married their spouse. Couples must remember their vows, particularly the part that says for better or for worse. It is easy to love a person and be committed to the relationship when things are going great, but what happens when the "for worse" part rears its ugly head? Couples should remember that not every day will be sunny and that they will eventually face some storms. However, just as God loved humanity enough to send His son to die, even though they were not worthy of His sacrifice, spouses should also love each other through all their flaws.

While the divorce rate is high, there is hope for marriage in the African American community. Couples learn what it takes to stay married through the "for better or for worse" portion of their wedding vows. The notion that over 40% of all first marriages, 60% of second marriages, and 73% of third marriages in the United States end in a divorce must be challenged. Research must also shed light on couples who are not divorcing (Crowley, 2020). These couples

are a beacon of hope in this murky world of marital stressors, presenting an alternative image to couples around the world. The literature depicting these couples is scarce, and the couples' stories fly under the radar. Many therapists cannot pinpoint why some divorce, and some choose to stick it out until the end.

Couples should endeavor to learn from each other and their past mistakes. These couples set themselves up for marital success and set the tone for other marriages to follow. More emphasis should be placed on the ability of couples to commit and grow together. Researchers should learn what makes a healthy couple and what makes their marriage work.

Marriage presents a myriad of challenges for couples. Challenges can include sickness, tragedy, financial strain, communication barriers, loss of employment, changing bodies, rearing children, and parents' loss which can make marriage hard to manage. It is safe to say that there is no such thing as a perfect marriage; Dr. John Gottman purports that couples should strive for a good enough marriage versus one that is perfect. It is evident that lasting marriage results from a couple's ability to resolve the inevitable conflicts in any relationship (Gottman, 1994). Couples who learn to navigate conflict learn to embrace compromise. These couples tend to fare well overall. These couples experience a greater understanding of each partner's boundaries, which garners a new level of respect for their spouse and marriage institution.

There is a process to success in marriage (Asoodeh et al., 2010). That process includes learning to properly parent, understanding what it takes to communicate, facing the looming cloud of divorce, and understanding the role of religion and its impact on marriage. Couples must learn to value each other again (Carr et al., 2014). They should use sex as a tool rather than a weapon, if for nothing else, for the sake of their children. Today, many couples are shying away from marriage due to the ever-climbing divorce rates. Most research on the association

between marital quality and subjective well-being has focused on adverse outcomes, typically, depressive symptoms (Carr et al., 2014); however, some couples are beating the odds and making their marriages last. The key to this study was understanding how they are achieving longevity and happiness in their marriages.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

A qualitative phenomenological study was conducted to understand what contributed to the success of long-term marriages in the African American community. According to prior research, marriage in the African American community has steadily declined over the past 20 years (Raley et al., 2015). Long-term marriage was defined as a marriage lasting 20 years or more for this research. There have been studies focused on the declination of marriage (Aughinbaugh et al., 2005; Lundberg et al., 2016); however, there was a lack of research dedicated to the success of African American married couples. There was a wealth of knowledge in this sample base, and this research sought to provide counseling professionals with a first-hand, in-depth look at what makes a successful marriage.

Design

The study was designed to be qualitative. Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on a distinct methodological approach to inquiry that explores a social or human problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture; analyzes words; reports detailed views of participants; and conducts the study in a natural setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research uses philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks nestled within four different views: ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

These assumptions help with research direction and focus on goals and outcomes. They also serve as the basis for the evaluative criterion used by researchers to make research-based decisions. Qualitative research is often criticized as biased, small scale, anecdotal, and lacking rigor; however, when it is carried out properly it is unbiased, in-depth, valid, reliable, credible,

and rigorous (Anderson, 2010). Qualitative research uses five distinct approaches to research: narrative, phenomenology, case study, ethnography, and grounded theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher chose the phenomenological approach to qualitative research to conduct this study.

Phenomenology

This qualitative study used the phenomenological research approach. The phenomenological method was initially utilized in the philosophy field by Husserl (Heppner et al., 2016). Others would eventually expound upon the theory that incorporated the phenomenological views within the disciplines of sociology and psychology (Heppner et al., 2016). Phenomenology is defined as a study that describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). It seeks to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to describe its universal essence or nature of a thing (van Manen, 1990). The phenomenological approach was best suited for this study as it studied the real-life subjective experiences of currently married couples.

Phenomenological studies involve collecting data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon and developing a composite description of the essence of the experience for all individuals, consisting of what they have experienced and how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). There are four philosophical perspectives in phenomenology: a return to the traditional tasks of philosophy, a philosophy without presuppositions, the intentionality of consciousness, and the refusal of the subject-object dichotomy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher employed the transcendental method for this research, using an epoche approach. Epoche means that the research emphasized participant experiences, which allowed the researcher to set aside prejudgments and open the interview with an unbiased, receptive presence (Creswell & Poth,

2018; Moustakas, 1994). For the research design to meet the qualifications to be considered a transcendental phenomenological study, the research began by identifying a phenomenon to study. The researcher then bracketed out his own experiences with the phenomenon. Following this, the researcher analyzed the data, reducing the information to significant statements or quotes, combining them into themes that aided in creating a textural and structural description of the participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study explored the phenomenon with a heterogeneous group that varied from three to four individuals to 10 to 15 (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Questions

The following research questions framed this study:

RQ1: What is it like to be Black and succeed in marriage?

RQ2: What factors contribute to failing marriages in the African American community?

RQ3: What role does having a healthy married couple to model play in the success or failure of marriage?

RQ4: How does socioeconomic status factor in the decision to marry?

RQ5: How important is religion to the success or failure of marriage?

Setting

Due to the current national health crisis, the interviews conducted in this study were primarily conducted through Zoom conferencing and phone calls. The participants attended the interviews from their homes, and the researcher facilitated the interviews from his office. The participants in this study were not limited to one area. The researcher recruited multiple couples from varying states.

Participants

Nine married couples who had been married for at least 20 years or more participated in the research study. The participants were selected based on specific criteria: age, marital status, gender, socioeconomic status, race, length of the marriage, and religious importance. These participants were selected based on meeting the criteria listed. The researcher sent out invitations to potential participants by speaking at local churches and posting on social media. The researcher garnered support for the study by leveraging current relationships with married couples and asking if they would like to participate in the study. The researcher also sent recruitment letters via email and social media (see Appendices E and F).

Sampling

Qualitative research uses only a sample or a subset of an identified population for a chosen study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, this researcher employed a purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling is one of qualitative research's most common sampling strategies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposive sampling requires the researcher to remain reflexive and make decisions in response to empirical findings and theoretical developments that occur in the study (Guetterman, 2015). The researcher's intent was not to generalize from the sample to a population but to explain, describe, and interpret the phenomenon (Maxwell, 2013). This method grouped each participant according to the prescribed criteria relevant to the research questions. The sample size for this study was fixed and allowed for maximum utilization of the resources, time available, and the study's objectives. This sampling method was best suited for this study since it did not target large groups of individuals; instead, it focused on a set number of couples who met the criteria listed.

Procedures

Once potential participants were identified, an email was sent to them containing the required consent form, which included a description of the research study, research procedures, risks, benefits of participation in the study, participant rights, and confidentiality protection (Nusbaum et al., 2017). Couples who signed the consent form became participants in the study and received more details about the interview process and procedures along with a copy of the Interview Protocol. Recruitment and interviews with participants were concluded when data saturation occurred; this process is achieved when the information received from the interviewees becomes redundant (Merriam, 1998). Nine participant couples married at various points over the 20-year mark were interviewed.

Each of the couples interviewed volunteered to participate in this research study. Couples were required to complete the following protocol:

1. Agree to an interview consisting of 22 questions.
2. Agree to participate in a 30- to 60-minute interview individually.
3. Agree to participate in a 30- to 45-minute interview with your spouse.
4. Agree to provide the name and contact information of a counselor, pastor, or family member closest to you. This person identified will be contacted for an individual interview to provide additional insight into your marital relationship.
5. Provide any artifacts or documents that may help answer the research questions.
6. Agree to review the transcribed information to verify accuracy.
7. Answer any additional follow-up questions for clarity via email or telephone.

The data collection process (interviewing, transcribing, and member checking) took two days to complete, ensuring each couple fully understood what was required. Next, the couples

chose to either participate or decline participation in the study. Interviews were conducted via Zoom conferencing; the Zoom platform also allowed the researcher to record each interview simultaneously. Interviews were then uploaded into an application called Otter.ai. The application works in conjunction with all mobile devices. No information about the interview questions was disseminated during this portion of the study.

The Researcher's Role

My work as a pastor, pastoral counselor, and chaplain has provided me with a glimpse into the challenges marriages face. While the intent has always been to help marriages stay together, unfortunately, some of those marriages ended in divorce. However, some marriages decided to change the unhealthy behaviors and work to resolve the conflict in their marriage. Furthermore, my experience as a conference speaker has allowed me to impact hundreds of marriages throughout the years.

Part of the spark for this research spawned from me not being exposed to marriage as a child. I was raised in a single-parent home without the benefit of having both parents in the house. This situation made me want to know what it would be like to be married and have my own family. More importantly, I wanted to learn how to stay married to ensure my children never grew up without either of their parents. Furthermore, seeing married couples in church, I began to wonder how they had managed to stay married for over 20 years. I started asking questions, which assisted me in developing the research questions in this study.

Finally, my marriage motivated me to complete this study. Taking notice of how my wife and I treated each other and how we interacted with our children and other couples spurred me to want to study marriage. I wanted to know what it would take for us to stay married for the long haul. I consider my marriage to Albany one that is not perfect, but perfect for us. We are stable,

and I genuinely believe we will be married until death does us part. However, I often wonder what has made our marriage successful? Was it our method of communication, or did we find our groove and decide to enjoy the ride? Was it our Christian upbringing or our strong sense of family values? Having been married for 12 years, I believe we have merely scratched the surface of a lasting marriage.

Reflecting on my marriage and others, I began asking myself: Why is the divorce rate for African Americans so high? Why are some couples seemingly happier than others? What are the building blocks of marriages that have lasted longer than 20 years? What are they doing differently? Marriage is a process; longevity does not simply happen overnight. Couples must want to be together to be successful. Seeking to understand these lived experiences, I decided on a phenomenological qualitative study that would assist in uncovering those habits which have led to success in marriage for some African American couples.

Data Collection

Although the primary means of data collection in phenomenology research is through interviews, various other data collection methods such as observations, audiovisual material, documents, and reports were also employed. For this study, the researcher functioned as the key instrument in data collection and interpretation of its findings. The researcher employed three data collection methods: interviews, archival records, and observations. Each married couple was interviewed once, and if further information was needed, each couple was interviewed for a second time. With permission, the researcher gained access to diaries and letters written between the couple to ascertain their relationship's success and pitfalls.

Interviews

This researcher interviewed each of the nine couples individually. It was anticipated that most of the couples would come through the local church with which the researcher was closely affiliated. Due to COVID-19, the researcher interviewed each couple via Zoom. The couples were asked a series of open-ended questions to collect the necessary data for this study. These questions were divided into three sections: demographic, marital expectations, and marital satisfaction. The interview consisted of 23 open-ended questions with several probing questions. The researcher designed the questions to trigger higher-order thinking skills. These questions were designed to encourage participating couples to assess their marriage compared to others. Each interview was scheduled to last 1 hour but varied depending on the length of the answer.

During the interviews, the researcher attempted to break the ice through introductions. The researcher introduced himself then had the couples present themselves. There was a small talk session to get the couples to relax, which enabled them to speak more freely about their relationship and its origin. The couples were allowed to sign the disclosure agreement, sent via email, which detailed the possible risks and compensation for participating in the study.

During the initial stage, the researcher explained what the study entailed and what he was attempting to uncover through the research, then thanked the couple for their participation. The researcher also commended the couple on making their marriage last. Each interview was recorded and transcribed for analysis. Additionally, the researcher took notes based on the participants' body language and behaviors during the interview. Each interview had two parts; the participants were interviewed separately and then brought together with only the main research questions posed. Each couple was offered the option of having an in-person interview or a Zoom conference to minimize exposure due to the current health crisis. Each couple was

assured their information would be stored on the researcher's computer for five years, which only the researcher had access to and then destroyed. Couples were also assured that their names would not be mentioned in the final publication.

Document Analysis / Archival Records

The nature of this study required the use of a semi-structured interview procedure in conjunction with document analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). With the participants' permission, the researcher collected and viewed copies of documents such as marriage records to establish the amount of time the couples were married, letters written between the couple, and diaries kept by one or both partners. These documents were necessary to ascertain their relationship's successes and pitfalls as well as to establish a timeline of when their marriage transitioned from romantic love into the adjustment with contentment phase (Larson, 2003). The researcher made every effort to incorporate primary, as opposed to secondary sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Observations

An important data collection approach in qualitative research is observation involving the systematic collection and examination of behaviors in a social setting (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). With the couples' permission, the researcher observed their habits and interactions with one another. Each couple was observed separately and jointly.

Data Analysis

This study was collective and built on the data from each research question (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher then conducted a technique known as horizontalization. This process involved the data being analyzed to highlight significant statements, sentences, or quotes to understand the experienced phenomenon for each participating couple (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher developed clusters of meanings from each of the statements. Clustering allowed

the researcher to divide each statement into themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). From these emerging themes, the researcher developed the textural and structural descriptions of each experience, which allowed the researcher to report the essence of the shared experience. (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, the researcher explained the essence of the experience in written form, which included an introduction to familiarize readers with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Data obtained from the joint interviews consisting of both spouses and the separate interview sessions were recorded. This data was then uploaded into an application and transcribed into transcripts verbatim. Each couple was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity (Saunders et al., 2015). While analyzing the transcripts, common speech patterns known as embolalia (meaningless filler words, phrases, or stammerings such as um, hmm, you know, like, okay, and uh) were found and edited out of the transcript (Nordquist, 2019). The researcher reconciled the written transcripts with the audio to confirm accuracy. The analysis consisted of reading the transcripts to uncover emerging themes as generative guides for writing the research study (van Manen, 1990).

Epoche

For this process, the researcher set aside his presuppositions and biases to view the phenomenon of long-term marriages with a fresh and objective perspective (Moustakas, 1994). In the phenomenological approach, epoche is utilized to bracket one's experiences to understand the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994). It was helpful for the researcher to keep a journal of personal thoughts and feelings while conducting interviews.

Phenomenological Reduction

Once the information was received from each of the participating couples, the researcher attempted to reduce the data into significant statements and themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This process required graded reflection, reduction, and reflection (Moustakas, 1994). For reduction to be successful, the researcher had to reduce the language of the interviews to describe the participants' inward consciousness and their actions (Moustakas, 1994). The successful reduction resulted in developing both a textural and structural description of the participants' experiences, focusing on how they experienced the phenomenon in terms of conditions, situations, or context. Lastly, the researcher combines both textural and structural descriptions to uncover the overall essence of the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Trustworthiness/Validity

Many frameworks have been developed to assist researchers in establishing rigorous credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability standards. These frameworks are put in place to ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Shenton, 2004). This qualitative research was conducted using a phenomenological approach, meaning the validity of this research was based upon a set parameter of criteria to ascertain the information's validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher used member checking, transferability, and prolonged engagement to ensure the collected data was valid. The participants reviewed the data, analytic categories, interpretations, conclusions, and offered corrections. This process assisted in increasing the study's reliability because it allowed the researcher to examine the overall accuracy of the study and verify data results. Next, the researcher applied the research results to other couples, increasing the study's reliability by allowing the researcher to gain generalizability of the data. This process increased the study's reliability by allowing the researcher to learn the

inner workings of each couple's relationship and build trust with the participants. The research was limited in scope to the view of African American married couples.

Member Checks

To establish the validity of the answers, the researcher employed member checks. Member checking is used to maintain validity in qualitative research (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The researcher interviewed those closest to the participating couples, including the couples' pastors, marriage counselors, children, or close relatives. Each couple was asked to sign a release of information form (see Appendix A) before the researcher spoke with individuals who would like to participate. After signing the release of information form (see Appendix B), the participants selected were asked a series of follow-up questions (see Appendix D) regarding the couple and their relationship. Conducting the member check interviews assisted the researcher with establishing the credibility of the results.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the degree to which the research represents the research participants' actual meanings or "truth value" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It ensures that the study measures or tests what is intended (Shenton, 2004). Participants will review the data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions to give more credibility to the study's findings and offer any corrections needed. Any potential researcher bias was clarified, the researcher employed member checking to confirm the validity and reliability of the information provided. This process increased the study's reliability because it allowed the researcher to examine the overall accuracy of the study and verify data results. The researcher enlisted the aid of peer reviews through the dissertation committee during the proposal defense. The researcher also conducted member checking by interviewing a person of the couple's choosing who is familiar with their

relationship to validate the information. Lastly, the researcher had the couples read through the transcripts to ensure the accuracy of the information.

Dependability and Confirmability

The researcher intended to establish consistency and reliability in the research findings (Moon et al., 2016). The researcher established dependability by providing a detailed account of the methods and procedures utilized throughout the investigation (Shenton, 2004). The researcher utilized video interviews for the dependability of the information. This process increased the study's reliability as it allowed the researcher to learn the inner workings of the couples' relationships while building trust with each participant. This procedure allowed the researcher to demonstrate that the results were linked to the conclusions in a way that can be followed and replicated (Moon et al., 2016). The researcher employed the established coding methods outlined by Yin (2015).

Confirmability refers to the researcher's role in ensuring that the work's findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the participants rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). The researcher sought to establish confirmability through external audits conducted by the dissertation committee members. The researcher provided detailed information concerning any biases, values, and experiences. The researcher also provided reflexivity with detailed field notes through journal entries throughout the study before and after each interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study also included verbatim transcriptions of each interview, data samples collected directly from archival records, and the case subjects' cognitive representations.

Transferability

Transferability, also known as external validity, is defined as the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations (Shenton, 2004). Transferability is a critical component of the qualitative inquiry as it provides a glimpse of the possibility that what was found in one context applies to another context. The researcher attempted to create a rich, thick description that allowed readers to transfer information to other settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Utilizing cases from other married couples beginning at the 10, 15, 30, or 40-year mark can help increase the transferability of the results to larger populations of marriage counselors. Therapists can also use the findings of this study to apply research results to other couples seeking counseling for their marital success.

Ethical Considerations

Before recruiting participants or conducting interviews, the researcher sought the university's Institutional Review Board's approval. All personally identifiable information was concealed, and each couple was assigned a pseudonym (i.e., Couple 1, Couple 2), ensuring their anonymity. Participants were informed of the general purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of their participation. The researcher attempted to garner information regarding each couple's cultural and religious background to respect certain practices. All data was stored securely for five years (American Psychological Association, 2010).

The researcher endeavored to avoid bias. To accomplish this goal, the researcher enlisted the aid of others to assist in coding data. As previously stated, the participants were allowed the opportunity to review all the results. Finally, the researcher enlisted the assistance of academic peers to review the data to assist in locating any gaps or missing information that may have occurred. No participants experienced any adverse risks from participating in the study.

Summary

A qualitative phenomenological study was conducted to understand what contributed to the success of long-term marriages in the African American community. Long-term marriages were defined as marriages lasting 20 years or more for this study. Qualitative research is an inquiry process based on a distinct methodological approach that explores a social or human problem. Qualitative research uses philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks nestled within four different views: ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological. The unit of analysis when using the phenomenology method is usually the “lived experience” of a human participant, and the level of analysis is individual within-group (McCarthy, 2015).

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the study must begin by identifying a phenomenon to study. The researcher bracketed out his own experiences with the phenomenon. The researcher then analyzed the data, reducing the information to significant statements and combining them into themes. This process allowed for developing a textural and structural description of the participants’ lived experiences. The procedure directly correlates with epistemological assumptions, encompassing people's subjective experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenological studies involve the study of the shared, lived experiences of multiple individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although the primary means of data collection in phenomenology research is through interviews, various other data collection methods such as observations, audiovisual material, documents, and reports were also employed. Nine couples who have been married for at least 20 years or more participated in this study. The researcher sent out invitations to participants by speaking at local churches and social media. Most of the participants were recruited through the local church, where the researcher is closely affiliated.

The couples were asked a series of open-ended questions to collect the necessary data for this study. The researcher applied the research results to other couples, increasing the study's reliability and allowing for the generalizability of the data. The study was limited in scope to the view of African American married couples. This qualitative study encompassed the necessary components to help make marriage successful in the African American community despite discouraging divorce rates.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This phenomenological study aimed to understand what contributed to the success of long-term marriages in the African American community. This study addressed five research questions. First, what was it like to be Black and succeed in marriage? Second, what factors contributed to failing marriages in the African American community? Third, what role did having a healthy married couple to model play in the success or failure of marriage? Fourth, how did socioeconomic status factor in the decision to marry? Finally, how important was religion to the success or failure of marriage?

This study used a sample of nine couples who had been married for at least 20 years. The participants underwent a joint interview consisting of 22 open-ended questions. The researcher wanted to understand what methods these couples employed over the years to keep their marriages vibrant and healthy. Complete data were available for all nine of the participant couples.

Organization of Chapter

This chapter presents the research findings. This chapter provided a portrait of each couple and described the themes which emerged during data analysis. This chapter included participant statements and responses, which helped the researcher conclude textural and structural descriptions of healthy marriages.

Researcher's Epoché or Bracketing

This research was inspired by the lived experiences of married couples, the researcher employed the transcendental method, using an epoche approach. Using this approach, the researchers emphasized the participants' experiences, allowing the researcher to set aside

prejudgments and open the interview with an unbiased, receptive presence (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) noted that epoche could assist the researcher when encountering “something or someone and to listen and hear whatever is being presented without coloring the communication with habits, thinking, feeling, and seeing, removing the usual ways of labeling or judging, or comparing” (p. 89). For the research design to meet the qualifications to be considered a transcendental phenomenological study, the research must begin by identifying a phenomenon to study.

The researcher bracketed out their own experiences with the phenomenon. The researcher then analyzed the data, reducing the information to significant statements and quotes. Lastly, the researcher developed the statements into themes and created a textural and structural description of the participants’ experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study explored the phenomenon with a heterogeneous group that varied from three to four individuals to 18 (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this process, the researcher set aside his presuppositions and biases to view the phenomenon of long-term marriages from a fresh and objective perspective (Moustakas, 1994). Epoche is utilized in phenomenological studies to bracket the researcher's experiences to understand the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994).

Researcher’s Background, Training, and Experiences

As a pastor and marriage counselor, the researcher has concluded that many couples are not staying married due to the lack of examples and false expectations of what a marriage should resemble. The researcher has often wondered why many couples divorce while others make marriage look easy. The researcher spent time speaking with several couples after worship services, asking questions about the success of their union. This probing did not lead to a definitive answer, which prompted a desire to research the trend of successful long-term

marriages in the African American community. The couples studied have adopted healthy habits which aided their marriage to last 20 years or longer.

Participant Portraits

The participants in this study were married couples who unanimously agreed to participate in the research study consisting of a face-to-face recorded interview. The husbands ranged from 51 to 77 years of age, and the wives ranged from 49 to 76 years old. The couples were married between 24 and 56 years. The population was relegated to African American couples; however, the couples were diverse religiously, educationally, and socioeconomically. No real names were used in this study; the researcher utilized pseudonyms to represent the participants. The following listed names do not belong to the participant couples (see Table 1).

Couple 1: Myles and Stephanie

Myles and Stephanie are 65 years old. Myles is a native of Palmetto, Florida, and Stephanie is from Sumter, South Carolina, they currently reside in Palmetto, Florida. From this union, four children were born. Educational attainment included a bachelor's degree for Stephanie and a high school diploma for Myles. Socioeconomically, the couple identified with the middle class. Myles serves as a full-time pastor; Stephanie is an Echocardiographer and realtor. Their religious affiliation was Christianity.

Couple 2: Joe and Betty

Joe is 60 years old, and Betty is 61 years old. They are natives of Buffalo, New York, where they currently reside. From this union, one child was born. Educational attainment included a bachelor's degree in nursing for Betty, while Joe did not disclose his educational achievements. Socioeconomically, the couple identifies with the middle class. Professionally, Joe

is a retired state trooper and Betty is a retired nurse who currently works as a teacher's aide. Their religious affiliation is Christianity.

Couple 3: Johnny and Angela

Johnny is 77 years old, and Angela is 76 years old. Johnny is from Georgia and Angela is from Mississippi; they currently reside in New York. From this union, four children were born. They also have nine adopted children. The participants did not disclose their educational attainments. Socioeconomically, the couple identifies with the middle class. Professionally, Johnny serves as a full-time pastor and Angela is retired. Their religious affiliation is Christianity.

Couple 4: George and Mary

George is 51 years old, and Mary is 56 years old. They are natives of Gainesville, Florida, where they currently reside. From this union, three children were born; however, Mary has one daughter from a previous relationship. Educational attainment included bachelor's degrees for both participants. Socioeconomically, the couple identifies with the middle class. Professionally, George serves as a government worker and Mary is an entrepreneur. Their religious affiliation is Christianity.

Couple 5: Thomas and Theresa

Thomas and Theresa are both 64 years old. They are natives of Gainesville, Florida, and they currently reside in Archer, Florida. From this union, four children were born. Educational attainment included a master's degree for Theresa and a bachelor's degree for Thomas. Socioeconomically, the couple identifies with the middle class. Professionally, Thomas is an entrepreneur and Theresa is a retired educator. Their religious affiliation is Christianity.

Couple 6: Peter and Tammy

Peter is 51 years old, and Tammy is 49 years old. They are natives of Gainesville, Florida, where they currently reside. From this union, two children were born. Educational attainment included a master's degree for Peter and a doctorate degree for Tammy. Socioeconomically, the couple identifies with the upper-middle class. Professionally, Peter serves as a business executive and Tammy is an entrepreneur. Their religious affiliation is Christianity.

Couple 7: Mark and Latanya

Mark is 72 years old and Latanya is 69 years old. Mark is from Jacksonville, Arkansas, and Latanya is from McCrory, Arkansas. They currently reside in Jacksonville, Arkansas. From this union, two children were born; however, Mark has two children from a previous relationship. Educational attainment included a bachelor's degree for Latanya, Mark did not disclose his educational attainment. Socioeconomically, the couple identifies with the middle class. Professionally, they are both retired. Their religious affiliation is Christianity.

Couple 8: Tyrone and Melinda

Tyrone is 65 years old, and Melinda is 66 years old. Tyrone is from Plainfield, New Jersey, and Melinda is from Hot Springs, Arkansas. They currently reside in Jacksonville, Arkansas. From this union, one child was born. Educational attainment included bachelor's degrees for both participants. Socioeconomically, the couple identifies with the middle class. Professionally, both Tyrone and Melinda are retired from the military. Their religious affiliation is Christianity.

Couple 9: Carlos and Caroline

Carlos is 53 years old, and Caroline is 57 years old. Carlos is from Archer, Florida, and Caroline is from Jasper, Florida. They currently reside in Archer, FL. From this union, one child was born; however, Carlos has a child from a previous relationship. Educational attainment included an associate degree for Carlos and a Doctor of Education degree for Caroline. Socioeconomically, the couple identifies with the middle class. Carlos is an entrepreneur, and Caroline is an educator and university staff member. Their religious affiliation is Christianity.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Couple # (Pseudonyms)	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Years Married	Times Married	Highest Level of Education	Employment Status
1. Myles	65	M	African American	47	1	High School	Employed
Stephanie	65	F	African American		1	Bachelors	Employed
2. Joe	60	M	African American	29	1	Did not disclose	Retired
Betty	61	F	African American		2	Bachelors	Employed
3. Johnny	77	M	African American	56	1	Did not disclose	Retired/ Part-Time Worker
Angela	76	F	African American		1	Did not disclose	Retired
4. George	51	M	African American	30	1	Bachelors	Employed
Mary	56	F	African American		1	Bachelors	Employed
5. Thomas	64	M	African American	39	1	Bachelors	Employed
Theresa	64	F	African American		1	Masters	Retired
6. Peter	51	M	African American	24	1	Masters	Employed
Tammy	49	F	African American		1	Ph.D. Ed.S.	Employed
7. Mark	72	M	African American	41	1	Did not disclose	Retired
Latanya	69	F	African American		1	Bachelors	Retired
8. Tyrone	65	M	African American	40	1	Bachelors	Retired
Melinda	66	F	African American		1	Bachelors	Retired
9. Carlos	53	M	African American	25	1	Associates	Employed
Caroline	57	F	African American		2	Ed.D.	Employed

Presentation of Findings

Demographic Questions

Before interviewing the participant couples about their marital experience, the researcher posed several general demographic questions. One question was asked regarding how long the couples had been married. Using this as a basis, the researcher concluded an average of 37 years of marriage experience between the couples, which provided the researcher with a baseline for how long they have experienced the shared phenomenon in question.

Interview Questions

The researcher interviewed a total of nine participant couples. Each of the couples was interviewed using Zoom video conferencing, which allowed the researcher to record each interview. Once consent (Appendix A) was obtained from the participants, the researcher advised them that their interviews would be transcribed for data analysis. The interviews were automatically recorded using the Zoom platform. These recordings were then uploaded into the secure transcription service platform Otter.ai to be transcribed. Participant interviews lasted roughly 60-120 minutes. The researcher jotted notes regarding each couples' interactions during the interview. These interactions included body language, emotions, eye contact, handholding, gestures, or any other signals the participants showed that the audio would not detect. The researcher jotted down any emotions he encountered after each interview.

Once transcribed, the researcher provided each participant a copy of their transcribed interview to check for possible errors, omissions, and accuracy. This process is known as member-checking, and it was used to ensure all provided data was true and accurate. Each participant couple agreed on the accuracy of their data and requested no changes. Following the participant couples' transcript approval, the researcher began the horizontalization process.

Horizontalization of Data

Using the process of horizontalization, the researcher began analyzing data by employing a list of significant statements. To accomplish this, the researcher poured over the data, highlighting significant statements, sentences, or quotes that explained how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The data was inputted into Dedoose to begin the process of horizontalization, creating horizons related to the research questions (Creswell, 2013). Following this procedure, the researcher extracted 652 original significant statements from nine transcripts, allowing the researcher to begin a thematic analysis. After completing horizontalization, the researcher then clustered the comments into themes. According to Moustakas, “When we horizontalize, each phenomenon has equal value as we seek to disclose its nature and essence” (p. 95).

The use of the Dedoose software allowed the researcher to analyze and efficiently code the collected data, resulting in the development of themes. The researcher noted that many participants provided similar responses to the interview questions. The researcher narrowed down each significant statement, coded them, and produced four significant themes and 11 sub-themes. Table 2 provides samples of meaningful statements from the participants with formulated meanings and assigned codes. Initial codes (IC) were W (what) and H (how). These statements were then arranged into two categories and assigned a subtheme (ST) to each statement. Finally, the researcher arranged each subtheme and assigned a final code (FC) for similar statements. The final codes consisted of C (collaboration), COM (communication), CMT (commitment), and R (religiosity), which emerged as themes.

Table 2*Horizontalization of Data*

Significant Statement	Formulated Meaning	IC	ST	FC	Speaker
My image of marriage was instilled that it should be two people that are committed; committed to death do them part, right, do they part. And that's how I approached it. Right? I wanted to ensure that it was going to be forever, right	A successful, long-term marriage begins in the mind.	W	mindset	CMT	Peter
I'd say marriage is a compromise. It's an unselfish love because you have to take into consideration how your husband's viewpoints on things as well as he takes your consideration consider you so it's a compromise that's how I look at it.	Successful marriages require a team effort.	W	compromise	C	Theresa
You have to, sometimes you have to wait to talk? Because sometimes you can't talk while you angry? That's when you say things out of context that you're apologizing for.	Couples cannot thrive without learning to communicate.	H	problem-solving	COM	Stephanie
It makes you get out of this thing trust God! And really continue to try your best to get in your word. You see what I'm saying? Because it can be difficult without it. So, you always every day, you try to listen to his voice to get some sort of confirmation.	A relationship with God is central to the success and longevity of marriage.	H	faith	R	Peter

Note. Participant responses have been divided into what participants experienced (textural) and how they experienced the phenomenon (structural).

Textural Descriptions

Gaining an understanding of each participant's image and expectation of marriage assisted the researcher in data analysis. To truly understand participants' lived experiences, researchers must set aside prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things they are trying to understand (Moustakas, 1994). The participant couples in this study provided candid descriptions of the lived experiences in their long-term marriages. The participants displayed genuine emotion and gratitude as they reflected, laughed, and shared introspective accounts and descriptions of their marriage. The following are the participants' verbatim stories.

Couple 1:

Myles summed up his image of what he thought marriage was in one simple word, "Teamwork!" When asked about his expectations of marriage he was quick to add:

My expectation going into marriage was to marry, provide for my family, and take care. Because like if I can go back. What we saw in marriage in my home, I wanted different. Because my dad didn't raise me. My dad was nowhere around. And we seen a lot of other stuff. So, my expectation of marriage was defined to be different from my daddy's.

Stephanie provided a similar description of her image and expectations of marriage. She stated:

I came from my parents were divorced when I was like nine or ten. And I was a serious avid reader. And back then, everybody stayed married. All the books you read they were married. So, I don't know, partners! Keep in mind now I was very young. And I had come out of this broken home that I constantly, I was the oldest it was just me and my brother, and I was constantly trying to keep them together. If I had known the right words as a 10-

year-old, or nine-year-old what to say, I often think maybe I would have done it. But I didn't know what to say. So, I remember saying when I get married, I'm going to show them how it's supposed to be done. If I had if I didn't have that in my head, I probably wouldn't. You wouldn't have known me.

Couple 2:

Joe offered a rather stirring explanation of his image and expectation of marriage, demonstrating an oath of commitment and companionship, stating:

I said I do sober and I took my vows seriously when it came to, forsaking all others, to richer and poor, sickness and in health, I took that seriously because Even though I wasn't really going to church, I was just starting to go at that time in 92' I like I said, I had a foundation and I didn't want to stand there and say something to someone I love and it be a lie. So, my vows were very important. My expectations going into marriage was just loving each other. I didn't marry my wife to cook for me. I didn't marry my wife that clean for me. I married my wife because I loved her. All those other things I could do on my own. I just wanted a companion, someone there in my corner. My wife is my ride or die.

Betty gave a simple explanation of her image of marriage, while simultaneously showing her Christian roots. In response to what her image and expectations of marriage was, she answered, “My image of marriage was put God first in everything that you do in try to work and talk things out and grow together. My expectations was always someone to be there.”

Couple 3:

Johnny presented a real-world example of his image and expectation of marriage, he said:

Well, I would say that by having some idea of what I wanted out of life and having the idea of what type of individual I'd be looking for. For example, I was more interested in someone that was a churchgoing person. And didn't spend all that time in the bars and going out. One thing that I never was able to, really except was, and I know they have just as much right, but I never cared too much for a female that went out drinking and living that kind of a life, that type of life. That would never appeal to me. My expectation was that when we went into marriage it was to be able to have something to make a difference. I didn't want to be married just to be another person in the community to say I'm married. But I, I wanted my, my marriage to make a difference. I wanted it to matter, I wanted to make a difference. To have something in life besides just children.

Angela's image and expectation of marriage hint at teamwork and compatibility. When asked, she stated:

A proud and like-minded person, the same ideals, the same goals. A person that's loving. My expectations were probably about the same. I wanted our marriage to count. I wanted us to grow together. to have the same ideals of how to raise our children. For us to, when we buy a home or different stuff like that, we talked about it. I wanted somebody that I could talk about it, and we agree on stuff, things like that. I didn't want somebody that just did everything and told me this is the way it's gonna be. I wanted to be an equal partner in the marriage, share in the talk, and talk it out.

Couple 4:

George's image and expectation of marriage denoted an air of learning about marriage.

He stated:

When I think about marriage, I think it's a beautiful thing. I think every man should be married. I promote it like I do the vaccine. In a sense, in the sense of being vaccinated, I want them to get vaccinated. When I see a man unmarried, I want them to get married. And I know what I might not be is everybody's cup of tea. Might not be for everybody. I do get that. But the Bible says pretty much that it's not good for man to be alone. So, I just think with all our issues, all our circumstances, I think it's a beautiful thing. Now, what did I know about marriage? What did I think about marriage? Before I got married? I didn't think about marriage. You get what I'm saying? I didn't have any role models. Any. I didn't have a picture of marriage before I got married. Okay, so the picture that I have was developed through marriage, but I didn't have a picture.

George's explanation became clearer as he continued. When asked about his expectations,

George replied:

If I could be totally honest. None. That's, that's not a slight on Mary. But the way my mind is set up might be weird, but the way my mind is set up, I don't put an expectation. In my mind, I don't put expectations on others. And I think it was just like a defense mechanism to keep from being disappointed.

Mary's image and expectation of marriage were reflective of the lessons she learned as a young lady and her growth over time. She stated:

My image of marriage when we first got married, was like I was in love with the idea of being married because that's how women are raised. They're groomed to be a wife and a mother. My image of marriage was saying what they used to say. Find your man a good man, let him take care of you. That's what was told to us. That was that that was my image. But right now, my image is, now I know it ain't supposed to be a fairy tale praise,

God. But I think it should be a man and woman giving their all to have a successful marriage, not each partner have the view of giving their all, like, they go, they take it day by day, step by step.

Couple 5:

Thomas lends a practical portrait of marriage to the conversation. His vision and expectations were simple:

It's a two-way street. I mean, as much as a husband you can't just look at things in one way, or base everything on your decision or your belief. You have to have the input from your spouse as well to make it successful. Has it always worked? No. But I think over the years it has helped mold and shaped us to be able to have a relationship. Coming from a single-family home I knew my father, but he didn't...I knew my father, he was a part of my life. And coming up as a young teenager, I had cousins that had multiple kids and stuff, and I vowed not to be in that same category. And that when the Lord blessed me with kids, I determined to take care of them and to provide and give them life. So, marriage was, it wasn't something that I had to think about it was something that I took on full responsibility for.

Likewise, Theresa's explanation was straight to the point the way she described compromise in their marital relationship, she stated:

I'd say marriage is a compromise. It's an unselfish love because you have to take into consideration how your husband's viewpoints on things as well as he takes your consideration consider you so it's a compromise that's how I look at it. My expectation was a lifelong partner. I expected my marriage to last a lifetime I was not expecting to get divorced in case we had rough spots. I think that makes a difference. Is that your

expectation when things get rough? I can just switch up and get someone else? That wasn't my expectation.

Couple 6:

Peter's response to his image and expectation of marriage was grounded in commitment.

He provided a depiction of staying until the end, stating:

My image of marriage was instilled that it should be two people that are committed; committed to death do them part, right, do they part. And that's how I approached it. Right? I wanted to ensure that it was going to be forever, right? barring any passing. I guess I expect it to be the best decision of my life right now, so I expected everything to be well, regardless of the obstacle.

When asked about her image and expectations of marriage, Tammy was quick to provide a summation stating:

I always felt like I was going to get married. I always felt like I was gonna get married, and it was going to be forever. Um, I never have thought about divorce or seen myself being divorced. And it wasn't long into our conversations into our dating, that I felt like he was my husband. And I felt like this is the one and even when I was in high school always had the mentality of, I'm not going to be playing games. I expected commitment. We both were Christians. So, I expected him to continue that walk to be a spiritual leader in our marriage and our home. I expected him to be a provider, and to support me and some of my efforts and things I want to accomplish. Because once I got my undergraduate degree, I thought I might go to law school. So, I still need to go to school. And so, I needed somebody who wanted to support my dreams and aspirations. And he

was willing to do that. And also, I needed somebody that was going to, I saw the importance of somebody helping me maximize my potential.

Couple 7:

Mark's image of marriage was one laced with a desire for companionship. More than anything, he envisioned a life-long friend, he stated:

Well, I've always wanted a good friend that I could trust. And I guess, in dating you always, just chancing yourself out. And we weren't just playing, the more we talk, the more...how would I put it? The more involved our relationship got I just enjoyed someone I could talk to and listen to. So, in my basic things, I needed a friend that I could trust. And I found that I could trust her without a shadow of a doubt. So, it just grew from there. And I've learned over the years, and I know I'm getting in deep, but I've learned our friendship, our love got stronger as we grew. As long as we stayed together.

My expectations. As I said, I just wanted someone that I could trust. I expected my wife to be independent and forth going with helping me with opinions because I wanted someone, I could share my opinions with. And it worked out that way. I've met a lot of people, both male, and female, but the idea of having a female person that I liked that I could share my opinions with she could share her opinions with me. It was great for me, and I wasn't worried about money because I'm always a hardworking man. And I can see she was working so there was no question there. I expected to be an independent couple.

Latanya's image of marriage provided a slightly different view of the inner workings of a long-term marriage. She stated:

Okay, a lot of people will say, Oh, it's a partnership. And in a way it is a partnership, if you go by the dictionary term partnership, but so much is give and take, give, and take. And sometimes one partner may give more than they want to give, but they give. And then the other partner, in turn, would have to do the same thing for them to be partners. They have to balance it out some kind of way. But it doesn't necessarily mean it's 50/50. I think that is so foolish to think like that. I was looking, to be honest, I always wanted to marry somebody like my daddy. Okay.

He was a protector, a provider, I never worried. I grew up spoiled, put it like that. And I never had to worry about anything. And my husband is a protector and a provider. Usually when you date guys, well, you don't date guys, but you might not feel safe with him, or it just is something kind of in the air. But I always felt safe with him. I just did. I didn't know him for that, but I went to his apartment. And he was an absolute gentleman. He brought me back home; he was an absolute gentleman. So, I could trust him. Trust is very, very important.

Couple 8:

Tyrone described his image of marriage as a single unit. He recalled, "Well, when I thought about marriage, well, I knew that it was, you become one, it's not a single thing anymore. My expectation was just to enjoy life." Melinda echoed Tyrone's sentiments by stating emphatically what her image of marriage was, she said:

Oh, my image of marriage was us against the world. I had somebody on my side. My expectations going into marriage were that we would take care of our families basically what I thought, because his mother, he had a single mother, I had a single mother that we

wouldn't do that, that we would start a family and just move forward in this world the best we could.

Couple 9:

Carlos' image and expectations of marriage were steeped in the example provided by his parents as a child. He had his mind set on what a marriage should be. He stated:

Well, it was growing up in a household where I was there is pretty much my area. Every house had a father and a mother. And there was nothing like divorce around here. So, growing up in a household where my father and mother was there. I had, growing up from childhood, seeing how, even though when my parents disagreed, I had a general idea of in a fairy tale, that this is what marriage was a woman and a man joining together, raising kids doing whatever it takes to do things to support their children to financially support the house. So, when I met Caroline, I knew that okay, I had to do this to be not the man of the house, but the provider. Before I met her, I was looking for somebody to help me with my son. I needed help, and the marriage expectation was there somebody to come in, and kind of fill the shoes like my mother was, family-oriented. And you could say, I had that fairy tale thing.

Caroline's image and expectations of marriage differed from Carlos. She honestly denoted this was a struggle for their marriage for years. She recalled:

Well, I think this is one of the areas that Carlos and I had to work on for a long time. And to be honest, it was there were times that we hit some rough patches because his idea of being married was the provider, it was the act, get out and do this and, and I take care of my family, and I'm going to be married regardless. And it was sort of like a, he treated marriage, like an operation or a business type thing. And me, coming from broken home,

I never had my dad in the house with me. My visions of marriage were shaped by the Huxtables. And some of the people that I met when I was in school so, I'm in my head trying to both make a picture for me of what marriage was, but I knew it's more than it more than what he was looking at it. I used to tell him for a long time, I want you to, to adore me, I want you to just embrace me, I want you to show that love and that commitment, not necessarily from operations or financial sense, but just that connection of two hearts.

Composite Textural Descriptions

Throughout the interview sessions, each couple expressed their image and expectations of marriage. Of note is that both husbands and wives expressed attainable expectations. Each of the wives described their image and expectation of marriage as one of stability and security. They spoke about finding a husband who would be there for them during the hard times and help them reach their goals by pushing them to their full potential. The husbands in the study described their image and expectation of marriage as a team and a friend. The men expressed their need for partnership, and a few of the wives stated the same thing. Both husbands and wives expressed the need for their marriages to mean something, to make a difference in the community. The couples communicated the importance of being realistic with expectations of marriage, as marriages typically experience issues when expectations are not met.

The couples stressed the importance of being committed to being in the marriage. The participant couples believed that marriage can be successful through faith, prayer, and teamwork. It is also important to know what you want and remain cognizant of your vows if there is hope for the marriage to last. The couples also expressed the need to be open-minded when communicating expectations and approaches towards marriage. To these couples, marriage was

not an operation, but a team effort, a relationship that must be developed through time, patience, communication, and understanding.

The age difference between the oldest participant couple and the youngest participant was 27 years. Collectively, the couples possessed more than 330 years of marriage experience between them. The age difference accounted for the way each couple viewed marriage. The difference also explained how each couple handled marital problems. Where one couple would argue incessantly, the older couple would deem the issue unworthy of the energy it took to argue. They chose, instead, to wait until things calmed down and allow logic to prevail over emotion.

Structural Descriptions

Understanding “how” participants experienced marriage was the goal of this phenomenological qualitative research. Moustakas (1994) emphasized understanding the “underlying dynamics of the experience” of participants to better understand the phenomenon (p.135). It was important for the researcher to bracket himself out of the equation to gain this understanding. Each couple offered insight into how they experienced and managed problems in their marriages. Those experiences were expressed in the following verbatim responses below.

Couple 1:

Myles offered insight into how he and his wife experienced and managed problems in their marriage. He stated:

You have to, sometimes you have to wait to talk? Because sometimes you can't talk while you angry? That's when you say things out of context that you're apologizing for. So, you got to and that's why once you learn a person, you know when they get ready to get angry, you know when to shut up. Okay, and don't be egging on. So and so once you know a person, you're going to avoid some things. So how do we handle problems? It, all

depends on what state we are in? So, we discuss it and go from there. Am I gonna win all of them? No.

So sometimes we come back and say, well, well, let's do it that way. So that's, that's how we it's not all about one, it's about us. I think one of the hardest times in my marriage had to be back in 76. I knew what I wanted, but I was going the opposite way. And then when I was about to lose my son and her, that was the hardest time in my life, I believe; one of the hardest times in my marriage right there. Where, when it was all shaky there. So that's when I had to come and make a decision. So would have been 76, in February. I woke up and told the Lord I'm tired. So that's when my life got right. It was on a Tuesday, or Tuesday, February of 76.

Likewise, Stephanie mirrored Myles' sentiments on handling and experiencing problems in the marriage when she recounted:

I think I'm waiting til' the cool of the day. It all depends on what kind of issue it is. If it's a serious issue, you might need to wait until you are kind of cool or you got a good understanding of it. And communicating, talking, talking about it. Not just assuming but talking about it. You know, sometimes people can have a really good argument and one person that they don't want to apologize to. So, and they're sorry. So, what do they do they just come back and girl, what is this and just start talking? Because they don't have the nerve to apologize. And that doesn't cut it with me. I think when you just talk about it, you just gotta wait until you're calm and talk about it. I think when I lost confidence in him, he had to build that trust because you know, you can't go to the store and get trust in a bottle. He had to, I had to see him making it better. You can't just go to somebody okay

I'm gonna make you trust me. I had to see him building that backup. The trust was knocked down. And I had to see him build it back up, make sense?

Couple 4:

Mary was able to go into a deep place while describing her experiences in marriage and dealing with problems. She stated:

Sometimes I tend to withdraw. Because, depending on what the problem is, I feel that he should know. He's told me and he might have even told me later that I'm not a mind reader. Because in my mind, I'm like, he should know. You don't have to read my mind to know if something is bothering me. I don't always communicate problems. Because he's the type of person that will shut down. He shuts down with problems. So, knock on wood, praise God we haven't had any big, big problems. But in the past, there would be no communication. Because I just didn't talk to him. I wouldn't look at him. For the first three years of our marriage, I can't tell you what this man looked like. Because I spent most of my time angry and not talking to him.

But then it was because I felt that he isolated me from everything and everybody I knew. And he was at work all day. And I was home with the youngest because my daughter was in school. So, I just felt like I was just in isolation. And then I spent most of that time angry at him. I was like, oh, he made me mad. Just gouge his eyes out. Oh, he made me mad. Just throw something stop me hit him in the head. So, I was messed up. And I should have just really had some deep counseling before I got married. And I didn't, I still tell him to this day. I don't see what made him stay with me. Because I was not, I was not good. Now I'm not quick to anger anymore. Because I think my approach is baby, we need to talk. I try to have a

positive outlook on what his response to me coming to him with the problem would be. I try to remain positive.

Couple 5:

Theresa offered her take on her experiences with problems in the marriage and how she handled them. She recounted:

I'm the type to get mad and won't say anything for a few days; that's me. But a part of that, as I've gotten older, I think now, I deliberately don't speak when I'm at the height of my anger because I feel like that's when I say things that hurt that you can't take back. So, as I matured, that's how I looked at it. So, I try not to say, well, give him the silent treatment as long as I used to. But I, I'm an introvert. So, I think, I stepped back from the relationship in the sense, I stepped back from the argument. And I give it time for us to calm down. And one thing about my husband is, usually, he's the first one to come to say, I'm sorry. So that reassures me that he's in it for the long haul. So that's not one way. It's not be doing it.

But that's one way how we work through problems in our marriage, we make sure that we let the other person know that we're sorry. It's not it's not going to be blown out of proportion. And then we're gonna continue. I can think of the hardest time. Oh, well, the hardest time is when, I guess I can share it's kind of intimate but not intimate, but private. My husband used to smoke marijuana. And I wanted him to stop smoking marijuana. And I think that was the toughest part right there. Because I, we separated. I went to find my apartment. And for us to continue working on our marriage, he had to take a drug test. So that was a big thing.

Couple 6:

Peter's approach to experiencing problems in the marriage was one of faith and commitment. He stated:

The hardest part was when she was diagnosed with breast cancer, and we had to go through that period. But even then, just tries to stay committed, as she talks about having a relationship with God. It was just more or less. I had a sure word, so I wasn't like, what's the word I'm trying to use? I was concerned, but I wasn't worried, right? Because my sure word was, we were going to have children. And at this point, we had no children. So, because I was, I just really felt I had a sure word, when the doctor came out and said, oh, yeah, it is malignant. I was like, okay, what does that mean? She got breast cancer. I was like well, a dog who that's for? I instantly went into okay, for the glory of God, we got to minister to people, once we're over this ordeal. So, just going through that phase, I'm not gonna say it was like, oh, because when you have the shadow of death right upon you. All the concerns that come with it decisions you got to make as relates to you're going to do chemo or not, you're going to take tamoxifen or not, you're going to do all the different things, you make any decisions on what you're not what you're going to do. And it becomes a part of the process that you want to stay in his will.

It makes you get out of this thing trust God! And really continue to try your best to get in your word. You see what I'm saying? Because it can be difficult without it. So you always every day, you try to listen to his voice to get some sort of confirmation. You got to talk about it, avoid avoidance. And in talking about it, you do learn when and when not to talk about something because sometimes things just go away. You don't even remember, right. It wasn't even necessary to

have a conversation in the thing. We got to discuss it, you know, so just learning that process and understanding a person is always developing, they develop and pretty much every day. Even if it's small and incremental, they're not the same they were saying two weeks ago, three weeks, four weeks ago, five years ago. So, you just got to continue to flow with their development.

When asked about how she reacts when they experience problems in the marriage, Tammy stated:

I talk to him. And usually, before I talk to him, I need to pray. Because if it's something that I need to talk about, I'm probably fuming a little bit. And I think, too, I engaged the kids who already have me, like, okay, what are you doing? And why are you doing that? And they're teenagers. So, I need to make sure that when I'm talking to him, I'm not being influenced by that, or by some project that I'm working on and that I'm in the right spirit. And it's coming from a place of love, as well. And so, I'm always asking God, you to help me choose my words. I'm gonna be wise in what I say because I know that my tongue can be sharp at times. So, for example, it was Valentine's Day. And he sent me flowers. And I'm like, okay, cool. And I'm thinking we're going out to dinner. And somehow, I missed the memo that no, we're not going out to dinner for Valentine's Day, we're going to go on another day, not Valentine's Day.

So, I'm sitting and I'm waiting, I'm hungry. And so, he finally kind of tells me what the plan is. And I'm like, you should have called me earlier, and told me what the thing is. I shouldn't be sitting here wondering what the thing is. I need you to be a little more clear and concise about what we're doing and when we're doing it. And so that was pretty much how the conversation went. And once he

kind of told me what his plans were, because my birthday is also near Valentine's Day. And by the way, my son and I share a birthday. So, several things were happening. And so, he was thinking one thing and I was thinking something else. But again, communication is key. It's never Oh, my God, I'm leaving you or you this and you that.

Couple 7:

Mark and Latanya shared similar answers to the question. The informative answer took on an undertone of communication, commitment, and problem-solving. Latanya noted:

Okay, if we're having a problem, the first thing to do is just lay it out there. I'm an old woman now I'm not going to do battle with you. If something is amiss or something is troubling me, I'm just gonna lay it out there. And hear what he has to say. And we work from that. Though I don't need to be balled up in a corner mad, that's useless. Just lay it out there in the open. Because you are hurting in the open. So, it's hard to hide when you're hurting about something. It is for me? No, you should I think you should speak up. You don't have to be cussing and swinging but speak up.

And I've never said this to my husband. So, he gonna hear it for the first time just like you. He, he worked long, long hours. He was a fireman for 27 years. And I had to, I began to wonder did I have a husband, I had to do so much by myself. But it wasn't all, not every 27 years, but 27 years. I feel like I was very independent. And I had to do make a lot of decisions that I wanted him to be a part of. And he wasn't here. So, I had to hold on. Hold on hold to him, hold on to our marriage. And just Soldier on. Like the things regarding the kids' discipline, that was a big, big issue.

So, but we never had a blow-up about a discipline that I can recall. Now he's the spanker, I'm not the spanker if I spanked you, you pushed me and that's the way my dad was. But I think that was it when he had to be away from work, be away from home so much. Until it kind of like, oh, I can't, can I do this? Can I keep doing this? But I did. And I've never told him that. I just, I kept going. That's what I did. I didn't, I didn't give up. But I'll put it like that. I didn't give up because it wasn't just about me. I had to still see about the kids. I had to still see about him. I couldn't just give and leave, which is what I think some people do they just give up in a situation. But I didn't I didn't give up. And I'm not going to give up.

Couple 9:

Carlos provided an all too familiar scenario within the confines of his marital relationship related to stonewalling. When recounting a challenging marital experience, he stated:

During a point in our marriage when she felt that I did not value her. And I don't know what I did, I don't know what I said, but she said that that did not value her. And I guess it could have been a time when I wasn't focusing on her enough or I was interrupting her I don't know what it was, but when she finally, after, because we went through a solid spell that may have been two weeks without speaking even though we slept in the same bed and everything, we did not talk and it was just enough to get by and our day to day things and I still don't recall to this day what, what got us over that hump. But that was, I recall that one as being the thing that really, I do recall now she one night during that moment she went and she and our daughter, she stayed in a hotel room; she did not come home. And that upset me. And she's just said she needed to be alone to think and I'm like,

what do you mean I don't value you I work hard. And I guess it was caused how I was thinking how a marriage should be was not what she was thinking marriage should be because we had our preconceived notions, but we had not sat down and talked about it and said okay, this is what I want. This is what you want. This is what we have to put together to get to marriage, so I guess it was during that time early in the marriage when she said after weeks of not communicating well, you don't value me, and I thought did. I remember that.

I did not handle it well; I did not handle that well. Instead of trying to defuse the moment I do recall saying okay, well you don't want to talk to me, I'm not gonna talk to you. Not being the bigger man and saying okay, babe can we sit down and talk and whatever. When I think I did realize that okay, something is going on and this is what I need to do I think I was able to talk with her we've been able to de-escalate it, but I did not handle it well, I was very I would say immature in my going about that particular time that would be my answer I was immature in solving that problem. Well, ask questions. The things that I've learned. Well, I guess it's a part of communication. I'm asking her all the time I do now. I ask babe is everything okay in the marriage. I don't want to let things fester.

Communication's still going back to that thing that's always communication. She felt, and you cannot, when someone feels a certain way, you cannot tell that person that they don't feel that way. Everyone is allowed to have their feelings but when they have those feelings okay, what do I need to do to make you feel well? If you're sad well, what can I do to make you feel better? That will be the

communication and the thing that I've learned now, these are the things I would need to do to keep things moving.

Caroline offered a very candid and real account of one of her hardest experiences within the marriage. She explained how she has chosen to deal with problematic experiences since the incident to ensure the success and longevity of her marriage. She noted:

One of the hardest times in our marriage, most of the hard times in our marriage dealt with our kids. Because when you try and blend the family it's always going to be difficult. I was assimilated into this family, sort of a preexisting culture that is like, how they say the Kennedys and how they are? Well, we're the poor part of the Kennedys. We live on a compound; everybody has input as to who does what, the kids are in and out all over. And we have some true parenting-type conflicts that we had to deal with.

Sometimes I felt like my opinions as far as dealing with our son were not valued. And sometimes he feels like...probably most of the time, his feelings about our daughter weren't valued on his part.

But I think the toughest time for us came when there was a conflict with our son.

And there was an issue that just blew up. And it was one of those things where I could be like, or, I probably was, I told you so, I tried to tell you this was going to happen. If you would have listened to me if you would've trusted my judgment, if you would have done that done, this wouldn't have happened. And then it sort of blew up and our son didn't live with us anymore. And I think that was a hard time for me because I'm thinking it could have been avoided if he had only listened and been open to what I was saying, rather than thinking that I'm just trying to be the evil stepmother. And I think I was perceived like that in a lot of people's eyes in

the family. But it was just because of my experiences that I was always sensitive to things that children go through.

So, I think that was one of the toughest times for me and having to deal with not only the loss of our son as far as him being in physical residence with us but also sort of dealing with him and his state of mind, thinking that I was sort of like the evil stepmother. I used to handle problems like this not talking about it, just, you know, leave me alone, don't come in my space, whatever, I'm just mad or upset or sad or whatever. So, I used to be really, I would isolate myself and not face it. Now, I try to keep an open dialogue, or at least talk about it, or don't let it stew for so long, sort of jump on it, trying to exit out before it becomes too much of a problem. We just sort of hash it out. We talk about it. And there doesn't have to always be a winner, there doesn't always have to be a loser, there's always compromise. And we just try to hash it out.

Composite Structural Descriptions

Each participant couple provided stories of their significant marital events that influenced their marriage. It was important to the researcher that participants had a safe avenue to share their lived experiences without fear of judgment or distortions. Learning from problematic experiences can produce a close bond in married couples. The couples demonstrated a strong attitude toward commitment and communication, allowing the couples to work towards a solution for the problem.

The couples emphasized faith and compromise, always taking their partner's thoughts and feelings into account before making a decision. Health issues, substance abuse, feelings of

loneliness, and inadequacy present very real challenges for marriages; however, these couples have managed to overcome by collaborating and compromising. They found their strengths and weaknesses and used them to better their marriages by complementing their spouse.

The ability to solve problems effectively is essential to the success of a marriage. The researcher inquired about how each couple handled different issues within a marriage. Even though each couple was from different locations and generations, each marriage faced its fair share of problems requiring couples to work together to solve the issue. Faith, persistence, and commitment to success were some of the distinguishing factors of successful marriages. The couples demonstrated that to be successful in marriage, you must remain committed, stay positive, learn to laugh, communicate respectfully, and be willing to grow and learn with your spouse.

Emerging Themes

Qualitative research utilizes themes to form a common idea (Creswell, 2013). van Manen (1990) stated that a theme describes an aspect of the structure of lived experience. The researcher read and re-read each verbatim transcript to look for patterns or themes in the data. After analyzing the transcripts, the researcher identified subthemes, which were then placed into clusters of meaning units, thus forming the themes. The following four major themes emerged from the participant couples' reflections of their marital relationship leading to the success of their marriage: collaboration, communication, commitment, and religiosity. These themes played a key role in the longevity of the participants' marriage and attested to the amount of effort they invested into the relationship.

Theme 1: Collaboration

The overarching theme of collaboration can be described as a couple's ability to work together toward a common goal in marriage. Usually, when a couple cannot make decisions together, it is due to a lack of agreement on a specific viewpoint. This conflict is frequently the case when making financial decisions and raising children (Ward & Lynch, 2019). Marriage requires compromise; Latanya is a strong advocate for talking things over with her husband Mark. She expressed:

Listen to each other. Don't try to hush the other person's voice. And what I mean by that, let them express themselves, everything is not going to go 100% the way you want it, and it's not realistic to expect everything, that you can have your way all the time. That's just not it. So, listen to each other. Share your feelings.

Much of collaboration has to do with working as a team. Carlos' ability to work as a team and pick up the slack in areas where Caroline was not able assisted the couple in moving forward. Carlos stated:

But it's just, it is teamwork. And when you complement each other, where one is strong, that's where that person does that. But you don't sit back and let that person do all of it, you support that person, and you do your part. Because my wife is not an outside person, she'll stay in the house, I'll take care of her outside. And I know certain things in the house she doesn't like to do. So that has to be my job. So, this is both complementing each other so what's makes the marriage work when you can complement each other.

Two distinct subthemes emerged to form the major themes. From collaboration the subthemes included teamwork and compromise.

Teamwork

For these participants, collaboration was all about teamwork. Collaboration carries an air of selflessness. Couples took the time to drive this point home during their interviews. One husband described how important it was for him and his wife to work as a team and to have her support. He noted:

She was financially doing well, she was moving up, and, you know, I'm sitting in the background, but she was like, well, I want you to come with me. I want you to be successful. And she encouraged me as a husband, and also lit a fire upon me, I needed that. And she encouraged me to, okay, if you're going to be successful, you're going to have to do this, you're going to have to be more motivated.

For these couples, a critical component of marital success lay in their ability to focus their efforts on one goal at a time. When they pooled their individual resources and energies, they were able to accomplish what they could not on their own. These couples embodied teamwork as they each began with nothing and worked together to achieve the lives they now have.

Compromise

Equally important to marital success was the subtheme compromise. One wife summed up compromise with this statement:

Because once you get married, there's, it's not, it's more than just you and your ideas, it's your husband's. So, you got to agree on stuff, you know, you can't just go off and say, you know, he going left and you going, right? It's got to be, you got to get to know in your head that it's two of you. And you got to if you want a successful marriage, you got to agree, you got to talk stuff out, you got to agree on stuff.

Each of the participating couples highlighted the purpose of collaboration. They each learned they could not always have things their way, nor should they always give in to what their partner wanted. However, they learned they should look at both sides of the issue and assess which was more important and ensure they each had all of the facts to make a sound decision to move forward.

Theme 2: Communication

The second major theme was communication; it played a critical role in marital success. Research suggested that proper communication also helps create an environment of mutual trust and respect (O'Daniel & Rosenstein, 2008). Tammy talked about how important it was for her and Peter to communicate, she stated:

But as Peter said, just communicate, we talk a lot. We date each other weekly. So that helps a lot. We call each other throughout the day in the mornings, we're having conversations. We're building or developing a vision together. And we come back to our goal. So how are we coming on with this idea? So, what was that about? That text you sent me or that idea? And we're always looking out for each other. So, we're discussing different visions, opportunities. We're thinking about those things throughout the day. So, it's nothing for Peter to send me a podcast. Hey, listen to this podcast it's about something you talked about or an idea you had. So, he's always trying to nurture me and encourage me and give me that push and know that you can do this, I believe you can, we can do this. And vice versa, as well.

Likewise, Carlos expressed how communication is a staple in setting marital expectations, he recounted:

This is what we're going to do. And I sat down and talked with her about it. This is the process we want to go through. And it worked. Because she got in with me. And it worked. But I laid all these things out ahead of time. And she's like, okay, well, let's do it. Let's do it. And it worked out. So open communication, just sit down and throw things out on the table, write it down and everybody so everybody can see well, you want five kids, I don't want anything but one. So maybe we're not a couple or something like that. But at least these things are exposed, and they will not come later in life and blow you out of the water because these things have been discussed upfront.

Subthemes that emerged from communication included open-mindedness and problem-solving.

Open-mindedness

Open-mindedness is described as receptive to others' arguments or ideas. For Thomas, being open-minded is about much more than just allowing his wife to speak. This originates from his belief that marriage is a team effort, and couples must communicate to be successful. He stated:

I mean, as much as a husband you can't just look at things in one way, or base everything on your decision or your belief. You have to have the input from your spouse as well to make it successful. Has it always worked? No. But I think over the years it has helped mold and shaped us to be able to have a relationship.

Thomas showed the importance of being open-minded and working together to achieve marital goals. He counted his wife's open-mindedness as a reason for his success in business. Having a willingness to be open-minded lends itself to the next emerging sub-theme, problem-solving.

Problem-Solving

Central to communication is the act of problem-solving. Each participant couple shared their experiences with solving problems in their marriage. Tyrone detailed how he and his wife Melinda approach problems through communication. He noted, “We just identify, take steps, and implement steps that will minimize, get to a solution, and then reevaluate the solution afterward.” Likewise, Melinda offered her take by adding a statement regarding handling problems in marriage. She expressed, “Don't sweat the small stuff. Because I can handle the small stuff. I just don't sweat it. It's the big problem that we have to work on.”

It was clear to the researcher that these couples knew when to address which problem. It was common among the couples to “choose the right battle” and know when the time was right to address each other. Having an open-minded approach assisted each of these couples to learn how to communicate with each other. Couples also learned how to navigate the idiosyncrasies of marriage by knowing when not to address a problem proved to be a key component of these couples' success and longevity.

Theme 3: Commitment

Lauer and Lauer (1986) defined commitment as “willingness and determination to work through troubled times” (p. 57). All the participant couples expressed a passion for commitment as a means of marital success. Stephanie summed up her marriage's success by stating:

You have to be committed to it, and you have to love this person you got to go in there with I am going to make this work. We are committed to each other good days bad days, we are committed. You've gotta be committed to it because commitment will keep you.

Carlos conveyed an attitude of enduring commitment in his relationship with Caroline as he envisioned a future filled with husbandly responsibilities. Carlos expressed:

I had a general idea in a fairy tale, that this is what marriage was a woman and a man joining together, raising kids doing whatever it takes to do things to support their children to financially support the house. And so, when the time came, and I got serious about marriage, when I prayed, and the Lord, Caroline came into my life, and I chose her. I was in this thing for the long haul.

Three distinct subthemes emerged from commitment, including breaking generational curses, contentment, and mindset for both husband and wife. These factors assisted the couples in staying committed to their marriage.

Breaking Generational Curses

Many African American couples face hardships in marriage and ultimately divorce based on the culture in which they were raised. Lack of examples of marriage, single-parent households, and rampant divorce rates add to the stigma that they should not marry. Carlos noted that African Americans could break many of these generational curses, he stated:

Black people do not have to be accustomed to their families being broken up, we can break that cycle. And we can offer a lot of excuses. But it comes down, to her and I making this thing work, doing whatever we can to get to make it work, not giving up. And I think at some point, we realized for us that divorce was not an option. And I think that's when we, really, really started to do the work. And we commit it to it. So, I think it's a systemic problem too, with black marriages.

Some couples marry to ensure that they do not end up a statistic. Myles' motivation to marry stemmed from his upbringing. He remarked:

Because like if I can go back. What we saw in marriage in my home, I wanted different. Because my dad didn't raise me. My dad was nowhere around. And we see a lot of other

stuff. So, my expectation of marriage is defined when I found, you know, to be different from my daddy.

These husbands confirmed the results found in Wallace's (2007) study, which stated many African American men choose to marry based on what type of husband their father was. These men married to prove that African Americans did not have to be statistics and to show they could be better husbands and fathers than their fathers.

Contentment

Another subtheme emerging from commitment was contentment. The couples noted that being content made it easier to stay committed. Mark eloquently summed up his contentment and enthusiasm for his marriage with the following remark. He claimed:

I don't ever want to get married again. Because I'm doing so good where I am now with the way I feel. So, then I don't want to go through this is all over to try to please another woman and hoping that she can please me. I'm satisfied. If we are separated because of death, so be it. I don't have any desires. I won't remarry even if it does happen. I've got my children to love and the memory of my wife. So, I'm good.

For these couples, contentment seemed to be a critical component woven into a successful marriage. The determination to stay together stemmed from being content with your chosen partner. The couples expressed a quorum that if a person is satisfied at home, they do not need to look for that satisfaction elsewhere.

Mindset

While sharing their marital experiences, the couples disclosed that mindset is a critical component of commitment. Johnny drove this point home by stating:

I believe the foundation starts with, knowing what you want, I believe so. I believe that that's the foundation. you have to know what it is that you want. And once you know what is identify what's wrong, then you make that a goal to go after it.

Similarly, Mary added that it was the shift in her mindset that allowed her to begin to live life as a wife. She added:

Well, number one, I had to get all the stuff that I'd ever seen in movies out of my brain. Because once you are in it, it's different than what you see on TV, totally different from what your girlfriends say. So, it was like, I'm in this now, and I'm gonna have to figure this stuff out on my own. Right? As you said, no examples, none. So, I had to get the image of marriage, the image that I had grown to, to know about I had to get that out of my head because it was different once I was in it. It was like some real-life stuff that we encountered. And that's stuff doesn't prepare you for what you're in. It gives you a false assumption of what it's supposed to be versus what you're going to through when you're in it.

It was clear to the researcher that having the right mindset was another crucial component of a successful marriage. Couples whose minds were not centered around the task of marriage may face significant challenges and decide to give up. However, these couples proved that if they were genuinely focused on making the marriage last, they would commit to the union.

Theme 4: Religiosity

Religion plays a role in the way couples communicate with each other (David & Stafford, 2013). Religion can also be the glue that holds a marriage together. Carlos noted:

As for me, it was what kept me in the room. That was my buffer. Because I knew that I cannot go out. Yes, we know, as a man you want to venture out. As we said, some of the

things that bring into the marriage, destroyed the marriage, but I know because of my faith, and the love for Christ, He's given me detailed instructions. If I follow these instructions, you're going to be successful. And it helps me, and the Holy Spirit is in my ear when things go wrong, or a young lady walk by and I see she's a good-looking woman, well, you don't, don't sit there and stare, if you're going to work on a marriage. But that keeps me buffered and keeps me going. Keeps me in the right direction.

Religion also teaches couples to love each other properly. Myles provided an example of that love when he expressed:

Oh, it played a whole lot. It plays a whole lot. And yeah, and that's why when you understand the Scripture, about marriage, and then not only that, when you apply it, and that and then go back to the point. That's why a lot of black marriages are failing because they don't have the scriptures in the marriage. So just the religion says, and then, we look at religion, okay. It's, you know, that's something we do over and over again. So, it's just like a duty. But you got to go further than religion I believe and be in love with God. If you're in love with God, then you can love your wife.

The following subthemes emerged, forming the theme of religiosity, they were God, prayer, faith, and whether religion was helpful or not for both participants.

God

A relationship with God plays a central role in how couples love each other. Tammy was eager to talk about how a relationship with God supports her marriage. She stated:

And thankfully, just from my upbringing, I had enough sense to say you know what, okay, Lord, not my will yours. I surrender to this person and first of all, I submit to you got having that vertical relationship with God. And then realizing too, that you know

what Peter can only give me so much. collateral the stuff that you we might be asking for is women is gonna come from God.

Having a relationship with God was important to these couples; they counted their relationship with God as the saving grace of their marriage. It is important to note that all of the couples were Christian, so God was a mainstay in their life from a child.

Prayer

Carlos understands that central to his relationship with God is prayer. He admitted that prayer had helped him and his wife handle problems in their marriage. He expressed:

Probably prayer, prayer, you know, going to the word, I think that's something that we've had to sort of stake our claim with. And we both see that when our prayer life is rich, and we're having issues, we're able to work through those through going to the Lord in prayer, as well as, reading the Word, and becoming stronger in the word, which helps us and then it helps us as a married couple.

If God is the glue to marriage, prayer is the glue's container. For these couples, prayer was extremely important. They prayed before discussing major decisions, problems, or anything that could cause a problem. They taught their children to pray and created an atmosphere conducive to prayer and faith.

Faith

A relationship with God filled with prayer fuels faith, which has been the foundation of many marriages. Caroline put it this way, "I'm gonna say our faith has been the cornerstone of our marriage. I think it's really what helped us hold it all together." By exercising faith, these couples believed they pleased God in their decision to stay married. Modeling Heb 11:6 (ESV), which states, "And without faith, it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to

God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” These couples proved that their faith held their marriages together and pulled it from the brink of dissolution.

Religion Helpful or Not

The last subtheme which emerged from the data to form religiosity was whether religion was helpful or not. Both male and female participants provided their take on the subject. Mary found religion as the key to her marital success, she stated:

Religion played a big part in our marriage. Because we started applying the Word of God into our marriage. Prayer life. Back in the mid-90s, late 90s we had a real strong prayer life. There were even times when we dabbled and dabbled in counseling. So just the principles that we've learned in the Bible and being able to apply them to our situation and marriage.

George added a different perspective on religion and marriage. He noted:

I agree with what she said, but I don't think religion helped us out. I think religion messed us up. It was when we got into a relationship that things changed for us. But you've gotta think, the era that we were in, religion was what you can't do. They never told us what we could do. So not knocking on the Word of God, the Word of God helped us out tremendously. But religion is too restrictive. So, it was really when we gained a relationship.

It was evident to the researcher that religion played an intricate role in marriage success. These participant couples felt they would not have lasted as long as they had without God in their marriage. God proved to be a mainstay in their lives, homes, and marriages, and for that, the couples appeared to be grateful. They lit up when speaking about their relationship with God and

how they have become closer, and the bond between them was stronger because of that relationship.

Research Question Responses

The results of this study were garnered from a qualitative phenomenological research approach (Creswell, 2013). The study investigated the lived experiences of 18 participants (nine couples) to understand the healthy habits of African Americans in long-term marriages. The participant couples were added to the study by responding to a consent form, an online flyer, an interview via Zoom virtual video, and audio conferencing. The garnered responses from the interviews assisted in developing themes, understanding their mindset, and uncovering the often unseen and unspoken idiosyncrasies of marriage. The verbatim statements which follow present a summary of the participants' responses.

Research Question 1

What is it like to be Black and succeed in marriage? With the first question, the researcher aimed to elicit the raw emotion of how each participant couple viewed that narrative versus their marriage's success and longevity. The researcher wanted to understand the lived experiences of each couple with the obstacles they may have faced trying to succeed in marriage. Most of the couples communicated a sense of pride and accomplishment; they saw themselves as role models for future married couples. Caroline spoke candidly about the need to break boundaries with her marriage. She stated:

I view my life within analogies of the statistics, you know, I love beating the statistics. From birth till now, I beat a lot of the odds, and I've done away with some of the stereotypes. And some of the prejudice and bias that people have about black people, black women, black men, black marriages, black families, you know, so I think it's very

important that we are the statistics that you hardly ever see. I think it does a lot to, to assert as much of a rally or a representation of equal justice and all that, as you know, walking in a parade or protesting us standing together in the face of where we are as a married couple that makes it that I think that does more to build up our race than a lot of other things.

So, I take it very seriously. Because like I said, I've read a lot of statistics, and we have a lot of people in our village, our kids are God kids. students that I've had students, people that I mentor, that need to, that need us to, need to know that it can be done so I take it very, I think it's very important, I take it to heart. And that's why we work at it because we want to be a good statistic.

Commitment (third theme) emerged from a set of subthemes showing that couples understood the need for a changed mindset and the tenacity to break generational curses. Contrarily, another point that came out of the interviews was race. One wife replied that race should not be a determining factor in marital success; the burden of success rests with the couple, not their color. She stated, "I don't think being black makes a difference. Because deep within we all have the same feelings. Excuse me, regardless of your skin color."

Research Question 2

What factors contribute to failing marriages in the African American community? This question addressed the narrative that marriage is not favored among African Americans and is prone to divorce. As shown in the research, Kiecolt and Fossett (2010) stated that marriage has declined amongst African Americans due to the imbalanced ratio of Black males to females. However, the participants offered their insights into what was causing the failure of marriages.

Peter believed that most marriages fail due to spouses being selfish, only caring about their own needs. He stated:

The problem is most of it is routed back to somebody who was just being selfish. I wanted to buy this, so I do spend all the money they account, I wanted to experience something else, so I done messed around and went to his or her place. It's total neglect of the other person being very selfish. So, what makes it work? You have to be selfless.

Right. Be super intentional to be selfless.

Stephanie added that there is a lack of commitment to marriage, causing it to fail among today's younger married population. She noted:

I think the thing that they are missing is commitment. Okay, that is you got to go in this saying I'm going to do this. I'm not I'm not going to fail. And I mean, you have to you it's not easy. You got to fight. You've got to fight.

Other opinions abounded between the couples regarding the failure of marriages. Outside influences appeared to top the list. One participant noted, "Based on the experience of other people, you really can't trust people who you think are your friends to come around your family, and then they put your family in an uncomfortable position." Another wife added:

And the thing that I've noticed about girls, is I'm a woman. If I don't have one of those [husband] at home. Girl If I was you, I wouldn't put up with that. I think that marriage can be destroyed by this. I mean, I've seen a marriage destroyed because of other people dipping in, I've seen marriages destroyed because other people dipped in. Sometimes they young couples, just leave them alone. They'll get it; leave them alone.

The couples disclosed a litany of issues facing marriage and why they believe it was failing in the African American community.

Research Question 3

What role does having a healthy married couple to model play in the success or failure of marriage? This question attempted to address the need for modeling marital relationships. The researchers noted that the future of marriage might be marred by removing positive examples of a healthy marriage for the younger generation (King, 1999). Many couples agreed that having a healthy married couple to model is invaluable to marriage. Carlos talked about the importance of having a couple to model. He said:

When you have someone to model after, it is vital. Because even if you can't speak with those people, one on one, you can model yourself how to even carry yourself in public. And if you can get to that person, and you can ask the questions, well, if this happened, how did you make it through? It is 100% vital, because...that's in doing pretty much anything because with that person having the experience that has already traveled the road or the bridges you're trying to get across, it makes it easier to.

Attending the marriage retreats, and the couples retreat and stuff like that, that builds a marriage because you're looking at someone that has experience. That has the experience and is willing to share that experience that would make any couple, the first year...when someone's going to come and tell you that okay yes, he's going to snore. And this is how you're going to be able to sleep at night, when that person starts to snore you say okay, well, this is what I do.

Modeling is a trait handed down from couple to couple. Each married couple has a responsibility to model what a healthy marriage looks like. Caroline believed this wholeheartedly. She expressed:

Wow, I think it's vital. And I know that I have made an effort to stay connected with people in my village that I know, have those healthy marriages. And we have two or three couples that, you know, we are constantly in touch with some shape, form, or fashion and use them as role models. It's very, very important. And if you don't have that, you know, you sort of model what you see or you know, you, you see what you see, if you don't have any idea of what a healthy happy marriage looks like, then there's no way that you can navigate your way to one yourself. And you have to find people in your village to do that. You certainly can't find them on TV anymore.

When choosing a couple to model, the couples pointed out that it was important to find a couple who is honest in their actions. When describing her lived experiences with models, Latanya put it this way:

Okay, I think we have to, we have to be honest. Because people are looking at you. And children, grownups, everybody. Everybody's looking at everybody else. You, you have to be honest. So, if someone wants to model or just act like you, they are gonna watch you. So, we have to be honest in our doing in our speaking or whatever we take on, that we have to take on the role of honesty. Can't be out there fake phony cause somebody gonna see through that. I've seen it. Okay. But be honest. And you know that that's a big load, being honest, people are gonna see us out. If we not walking together, acting like we know each other.

I've seen couples do that they're out in public. And you wonder are they together today or what? Are you running to her, and she all snarled up or see him? And I mean, I don't know what will be going on. But it would give the impression that wow, something, something is amiss. I don't know what. But always be honest in

your actions. And in your speaking, because our young people, they are looking for a role model. And I don't want it to be the mess that they see on TV. Be honest. Just be honest. Show them, show them how to do it. Yeah, take your butt home and cook some dinner, clean up the house. Take care of the kids. Fix your hair. Do all that you can do to be the best for yourself. If you don't take good care of yourself, what can you do for anybody else? So, this one, I think, honestly, be honest.

Research Question 4

How does socioeconomic status factor in the decision to marry? Research purports that marriages decline due to socioeconomic status, suggesting that economic instabilities undermine long-term relationship success (Hurt et al., 2014). Most of the participants dismissed socioeconomic status as a means of selecting or staying with their spouses. This question takes root in theme two (communication) and theme three (commitment). The research demonstrated that for spouses who talk about the issues at hand and are committed to the marriage, finances are not as significant as previously thought. One couple who modeled this approach to marriage was George and Mary, who began with nothing and was able to amass much by being committed to each other and the marriage. Mary offered her perspective on this issue. She explained:

It didn't. Because at that time, he was in the service. So, I had no clue as to how much he was getting paid or anything. The finances weren't a reason that I married this young man. No, not at all. Because when we got married, we struggled for a while so. Yeah, it didn't have anything to do with finances.

According to George, Mary's socioeconomic status was not a factor in his choice to marry her, nor was it a factor to stay with her. He denoted:

Zero! I knew what I wanted. But I didn't. Didn't have...let's back up. Outside of it lasting, and that's one I could say, I wanted it to last. But outside of that, I didn't have...I didn't picture a big house. I didn't picture any of that, just being together man for me when we started. Because you have to understand, you might understand, but probably not as good as us, being poor. Okay? Being poor and not having, I ain't gonna say not a dream, but not being able to command your day.

Many couples reported that socioeconomic status should not be used as a basis to marry. One of the wives, Tammy, expressed separate views of this belief. When the researcher posed the question, she stated:

Well, I felt like he had financial stability. He had graduated from college. I had graduated from college as well, one of the things that I noticed, was when we started dating, we met each other my freshman year of college. And so, he was ahead of me, he had had internships, or at least had an internship in Boston. He graduated from the wonderful School of Business and Industry, fam, you Florida A&M University. And so, I just felt like, you know what, we're gonna be good because he was in a top-notch business program, as well as he had had a great internship. And later on, when we continued to date, he had another internship in St. Louis. Plus, he came from a family of business owners, so I wasn't concerned, and I was excited to know that he had stability in mind.

Tammy led on that the impact of your spouse's socioeconomic status not only affects you but also your lineage and way of life. She continued to say:

When I married him, he was the vice president of a company, so that meant a lot. I expected...I expected him to be a provider, and to support me and some of my efforts and

things I wanted to accomplish. And I also know that it's important to have stability and a safe place for our children.

Research Question 5

How important is religion to the success or failure of marriage? This question examined the lived experiences of couples implementing religion in their marriage and its effect. The couples freely offered their viewpoints on religion within a marriage. Angela offered her perspective on religion and its effect on marriage. She noted:

I believe the whole Bible, and I believe what it says about what a woman should be doing in a marriage, and I believe, I believe in true holiness and God, and what He is teaching. And so, by that, because of that, then it's easier for me and my marriage.

Johnny stated he didn't think he would be in the marriage if he had not become closer with God. Melinda added to the discussion stating that her faith in God reminded her of her vows when dealing with problems in the marriage. She stated:

It has at times, it has helped me to realize that when I made a promise to this man, I also made a promise to God. So, whenever I start to question him, I feel like I'm questioning God. And I don't want to do that. So, I have to calm myself down and talk to God about it. And we figure it out.

Myles offered a compelling observation of how religion helps mold and shape a husband's love for his wife. He noted:

That's why a lot of black marriages are failing because they don't have the scriptures in the marriage. So just the religion says, and then, we look at religion, okay. It's, you know, that's something we do over and over again. So, it's just like a duty. But you got to go

further than religion I believe and, be in love with God. If you're in love with God, then you can love your wife.

Theme four (religion) emerged from the subthemes showing the impact of faith and God's relationship on their marriage.

Summary

Chapter Four presented the results of this transcendental phenomenological study. Data collection sought to understand and describe the lived experiences of African American married couples with marriages lasting 20 years or more. Eighteen individuals (nine couples) participated in the study and shared their experiences, beliefs, and advice for newlywed couples. The husbands ranged from 51 to 77 years of age, and the wives ranged from 49 to 76 years old. The age difference between the oldest participant couple and the youngest participant was 27 years. The couples' years of marriage were between 24 and 56 years, and the participants resided in several different states. The transcribed data showed repeated patterns of meaning which produced themes.

Each of the couples participated in a structured interview consisting of 22 open-ended questions. From the interviews, four major themes emerged during data analysis. These themes were derived from the lived experiences of long-term married African American couples. The first emerging theme was rooted in the couples' collaboration ability, undergirded with the sub-themes of teamwork and compromise. The second theme was based on communication, which emerged from the interviews with the sub-themes of open-mindedness and problem solving impacting a couple's ability to work through problems and achieve marital goals. The third theme of commitment emerged from the interviews with the sub-themes of breaking generational curses, contentment, and mindset, which affected a couple's ability to stay together for the long

haul. The fourth and final theme of religiosity emerged with the sub-themes of God, prayer, faith, and whether religion was helpful or not. This theme centered around the impact of religion and how couples have integrated religion into their marriage.

Themes and codes served as the basis for the researcher's attempt to answer the five research questions presented in this study, seeking to understand what constitutes a healthy, successful marriage. Each of the five research questions was answered using structured interviews upon analyzing the data. Overall, the couples felt a sense of pride at how long their marriages lasted and its impact on society. The couples, apart from one, noted that socioeconomic status was not a determining factor in their decision to marry their spouse. Each participant couple shared why they felt marriages in the African American community failed. The couples discussed how religion has helped their marriages last so long and how it has helped them grow as a couple and as individuals. All the couples discussed the need for married couples to be positive role models and impact future marriages.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

This phenomenological study's purpose was to describe the lived experiences of successful, long-term African American married couples. Chapter Five included a summary of study findings, a discussion of how these findings related to empirical and theoretical research, practical implications, delimitations, limitations to the study, and recommendations for future research. Many studies concerning marriage have been conducted; however, very few studies have related to long-term marriages in the African American community. Karimi et al. (2019) postulated some aspects of relationships, such as commitment, to preserve the pillars of marriage in critical situations. Other aspects, such as intimacy, helps construct marital identity and satisfaction.

This qualitative study was conducted using the phenomenological approach with nine African American married couples. Through structured interviews, the participants acknowledged the challenges, successes, failures, and techniques they have encountered during their marital journey. Due to the current national health crisis, the interviews in this study were conducted through Zoom video conferencing. The participants conducted the interviews from their homes and the researcher facilitated the interviews from his office. Each interview was transcribed by the researcher using the secure Otter.ai platform. Each participant received a copy of their transcript to validate the information.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand what contributes to the success of long-term marriages in the African American Community. Nine participant couples agreed to interview for this study. The current study only focused on

African American couples having marriages lasting 20 years or more. Each of the participants met the established criteria. The researcher used recorded interviews, which were transcribed using the secure Otter.ai platform. The transcripts were subsequently uploaded into the Dedoose software. Dedoose is a secure, web-based Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) application that allows the researcher to organize, analyze, code, and quickly perform thematic analysis on the transcribed data. The following questions guided the research:

RQ1: What is it like to be Black and succeed in marriage?

RQ2: What factors contribute to failing marriages in the African American community?

RQ3: What role does having a healthy married couple to model play in the success or failure of marriage?

RQ4: How does socioeconomic status factor in the decision to marry?

RQ5: How important is religion to the success or failure of marriage?

After participants verified transcript data, the researcher began the process of data analysis. Using the process of horizontalization, the researcher analyzed data by employing a list of significant statements. These experiences were then given a code name, which produced eleven sub-themes. Four major themes emerged during data analysis. These themes were derived from the lived experiences of long-term married African American couples. The sub-themes of teamwork and compromise produced the first major theme, collaboration. The sub-themes of open-mindedness and problem-solving produced the second major theme, communication. The sub-themes of breaking generational curses, contentment, and mindset produced the third major theme, commitment. The sub-themes of God, prayer, faith, and whether religion was helpful produced the fourth major theme of religiosity.

The researcher was able to answer each of the five research questions. The research questions sought to understand and describe the lived experiences of African American married couples with marriages lasting 20 years or more. The couples vehemently touted collaboration as the primary source of success in marriage.

The first research question was answered through the theme of commitment. The participants recounted the need for a changed mindset and the tenacity to break generational curses and motivation to stay married. The participants stated that African Americans do not have to have their lives under the confines of what has always been; they can break the cycle of single-parent homes and divorce in the African American community.

All participants answered the second research question; they acknowledged and understood that the biggest threats to marriage are selfishness and outside influences. The couples acknowledged that if younger newlywed couples are simply left alone to manage their affairs, they will figure it out.

The third research question was answered unanimously by all participants and is vital to the success of a marriage. The couples noted that it is wise to have an honest couple willing to share their insights into marriage and from which a newly married couple can model their relationship.

The fourth research question was answered by all but one of the participant couples who dismissed socioeconomic status as a means of selecting or staying with their spouse. This question was grounded in both theme two and theme three.

The final research question was answered through the fourth emerged theme of religion. Participant couples unanimously answered this question stating that religion or a relationship with God has been crucial to their marriage.

Discussion and Analysis of Findings

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of long-term African American marriages. A transcendental phenomenological design was chosen for this research because it relied more on the lived experiences of the participants and less on the researcher's viewpoint (Creswell, 2013). Seeking to answer what makes a marriage successful, the researcher investigated the healthy habits of successful long-term African American couples.

Bowlby (1984) and Gurman and Kniskern (2013) studies primarily guided this study. Overall, the study's findings were consistent with the idea that satisfying marriages typically exhibit high levels of positivity, empathy, commitment, acceptance, love, and respect (Leigh & Clark, 2000). This section analyzed the correlation between the study's findings and the empirical and theoretical literature reviewed in Chapter Two.

Empirical Discussion

Bowlby's attachment theory is comprised of a behavior system linking a child to its attachment figure. His study intended to understand why infants underwent such intense distress when separated from their parents. Bowlby (1984) postulated when a child feels as if their attachment figure is nearby, they are more apt to be themselves and explore their environment. If the attachment figure is not around, the child becomes self-conscious, anxious, and begins to show signs of distress (Bowlby, 1984). Bowlby (1984) argued as humans, we develop mental representations of relationships, allowing us to interpret social events which form the basis for future attachment relationships. Bowlby also believed attachment characterized human experience from the cradle to the grave, meaning we are always attaching, detaching, and reattaching throughout our lives (1984).

Based upon Bowlby's theory, Hazan and Shaver (1987) believed the emotional bond that develops between adult romantic partners is partly a function of the same motivational system. This attachment behavioral system gives rise to the emotional bond between infants and caregivers. Once spouses form the attachment in marriage, they are identified as attachment figures. Spouses begin displaying the learned relational patterns to implement Bowlby's attachment behavior system. Spouses start to engage in "baby talk," close, intimate, bodily contact, play with each other's facial features. Furthermore, each of them begins to feel safe when the other is around and insecure when their spouse is away for any given length of time. These attachment behaviors depict the lived experiences of long-term married couples, showing the bonding process, interactions, and mannerisms that make a marriage stand the test of time. During the interviews, the researcher observed six couples holding hands, smiling at each other, laughing together, and one wife rubbing her husband's leg.

Theoretical Discussion

The theoretical framework guiding this study was family systems theory. Dr. Murray Bowen developed this theory; it views the family as a complex system, and the members are interconnected. Therefore, the family has a profound effect on individual's views, attitudes, and behaviors (Gurman & Kniskern, 2013). Family systems therapies include the structural family therapy approach. This approach considers the behaviors, attitudes, relationships, and patterns of interaction as the family members demonstrate them during a session (Gurman & Kniskern, 2013). By observing these attributes and interactions, the therapist can discover and assess the structure of the family and discover the subsystems that are often present in families. Such a therapy aims to identify the dysfunctional patterns of interaction in the family and change them,

changing the structure rather than changing individuals on their own (Gurman & Kniskern, 2013).

Bowen's theory suggested that the smallest change in one individual within a family can influence the entire system. This change can lead to other members of the system exhibiting the change as well. Bowen believed that although focusing on a child would suffice; one could derive more benefit by focusing on the family (Kerr and Bowen, 1988). Bowen's family systems theory is comprised of eight interlocking concepts:

- Triangles
- Differentiation of Self
- Nuclear Family Emotional Process
- Family Projection Process
- Multigenerational Transmission Process
- Emotional Cut-off
- Sibling Positions

In the family systems theory, a triangle is a three-person relationship and is considered a “building block” for larger family systems (Pfieffer & In-Albon, 2021). The family systems therapy approach acknowledges the major impact of the family on an individual, their development, their attitudes, behaviors, and attempt to influence the relationships and structure in the family if these become dysfunctional (Garland, 2012). This approach could assist in understanding why some marriages last longer than others, opting not to hurt their children by simply staying together. Family plays a pivotal role in the emotional and physical well-being of children, spanning the course of their lives. This study extended the research of Gurman and Kniskern (2013) and examined how important the family was to the motivation to stay married.

Of the couples researched, seven cited their children, their upbringing, and providing a safe, nurturing atmosphere for them to grow as reasons they stay married. It is also important to note that many participants came from single-parent homes or bad examples that have impacted their behavior and thoughts toward marriage and how they raise their children.

Implications

The purpose of this section was to address the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the study. This study addressed the literature of Gurman and Kniskern (2013), which found the family as a complex interconnected system, having a profound impact on individual's views, attitudes, and behaviors (Gurman & Kniskern, 2013). This section also discussed the empirical research of Bowlby's (1984) study, which found that we develop mental representations of relationships as humans, allowing us to interpret social events that form the basis for future attachment relationships. The practical implications of this study will inform pastors and marriage counselors about the healthy habits of successful long-term African American couples. The findings of this study may assist in the development of a more practical approach to marriage counseling. Chapter Two introduced twelve main topics through a review of the literature. From these topics, eleven sub-themes emerged after data analysis was complete. These sub-themes later produced the four major themes of this study. The data produced the following themes and sub-themes:

- Collaboration with the sub-themes of teamwork and compromise
- Communication emerged from the interviews with the sub-themes of open-mindedness and problem-solving
- Commitment emerged from the interviews with the sub-themes of breaking generational curses, contentment, and mindset

- Religiosity emerged with the sub-themes of God, prayer, faith, and whether religion was helpful or not.

The following sections discuss the study findings of the empirical and theoretical literature reviewed in Chapter Two.

Theoretical Implications

This study's theoretical implications focus on family systems therapy as a measure of marriage longevity. The researcher used this investigation to shed light on a deeper understanding of the inner workings of marriage from an African American perspective. As mentioned, the family systems therapy approach acknowledges the significant impact of the family on an individual, their development, attitudes, behaviors, and attempt to influence the relationships and structure in the family if these become dysfunctional (Garland, 2012). The findings of this study confirmed the results of Gurman and Kniskern's (2013) study, which found many of the issues faced in marriage can be traced back to one's family structure. Forty-four percent of the participant couples came from a broken home and witnessed unhealthy habits in a marriage that carried over into their marriages. Mary recounted the fact she witnessed this behavior as a child. She stated:

It wasn't his fault. It was just that, the way that I saw my parents manage problems was not good because they were physical with each other. That's what I and my younger brother saw in our home or a household, or a relationship. It was never hugging, holding hands, kissing, or saying I love you. It was always physical. So, I mean, that's what I internalized.

One of the goals of family systems theory is to identify the dysfunctional patterns of interaction in the family and change them, changing the structure rather than changing individuals on their

own (Gurman & Kniskern, 2013). This study confirmed this theory as the couples noticed unhealthy habits in their interactions with their spouse and endeavored to change them. The participants realized the error in their behavior and made the change. The erroneous behaviors included improper communication techniques, not dealing with problems promptly, stonewalling, and playing the blame game. Once the erroneous behavior was noticed, the respective spouse changed the behavior and noticed a change in their marital relationship. This adjustment denotes an attitude of compromise and a complete shift in the individual's mindset, thus changing the structure of the family unit. Family systems theory also assists in assessing the nature of a relationship by examining the interactions between individuals (Johnson & Ray, 2016). The researcher noticed the couples' interactions with each other during the interviews.

Empirical Implications

Empirical research on long-term African American marriages is limited. Overall, research revealed that African Americans are the least likely to marry; they do so later and are the least likely to stay married (Dixon, 2009). Research showed Black people were more likely to be separated, widowed, or divorced. According to the report, 4% of Black people were separated, 6% were widowed, and 12% were divorced (Black Demographics, 2016). Previous studies revealed that the average Black woman spent 16 years married during her 73-year life span; however, their White counterparts typically spent 33 out of their 77 years married (Jaynes & Williams, 1989). This research was based in part on Bowlby's attachment theory. Attempting to understand the lived experiences of long-term African American married couples, the researcher posed questions regarding the bond the couples shared. Bowlby (1988) understood that attachment patterns are difficult to change in adulthood, although they are possible. Spouses

associated each other as an attachment figure. This section of the research compared the current research findings to previous research.

Practical Implications

The practical implications of this study depended on the information provided by the lived experiences of each participating couple. The study revealed how African American marriages survived the statistical odds of divorce. This study will benefit pastoral counselors, church marriage ministries, premarital/marriage counselors, and couples who want to learn more about how other couples are sustaining in marriage. This study will also benefit community outreach programs and others who desire to develop a program to help married couples. The couples provided some real-world information based upon their marital experiences.

The study's themes will assist counselors in helping couples, enabling them to use real-world scenarios and experience to assist in getting to the issues their clients may face. They will also assist premarital counselors to tailor the sessions around what newly married couples should expect in marriage. The current structured premarital programs such as Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts (SYMBIS) and Prepare/Enrich are designed to help couples address their strengths and weaknesses before marriage. They only speak to what could cause problems in marriage. However, the counselors will benefit from this study because it will allow them to coach the couples on what to expect and how to deal with it when it happens. The religious aspect of the study will enable Christian counselors to help the couple understand God is the foundation of marriage, thus allowing the couple to build a successful marriage. It could be debated whether the findings of this study can only apply to African American couples; however, other couples approach marriage and marital success differently.

Christian Worldview

Marriage and religion influence various dimensions of life, including physical health, longevity, mental health, happiness, economic well-being, and raising children (Waite & Lehrer, 2003). The Bible declares in Mark 10:9, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (English Standard Version Bible, 2001). In this study, each of the participant couples spoke about their faith during the interview, expressing their marriage would not have survived without God. Theresa stated:

Our faith, and our love for Christ, and our reading and studying the Word, and being prayerful, I think is really what shaped our marriage, that's the only thing I can, can account for how we all held together, because, you know, we wanted to be pleasing to God and the union that he had blessed us with. So, I think most of our marriage's success comes back down to our faith or belief in just who we are as Christians.

Couples value marriage's sanctity and tout their spiritual responsibility to God as motivation to stay married (Hurt, 2014). As children, many are taught to implement God in all that they do in life. This same principle holds true for marriage. One couple agreed and stated their faith had been the cornerstone of their marriage. He went on to say, “I think it's really what helped us hold it all together.” Research notes that a deep religious conviction aids in steering couples in the right direction along the path to marital success with higher levels of shared religious beliefs between spouses. These shared religious convictions about the sanctity of marriage and religious beliefs concerning lifelong marriage were linked to better marriage outcomes (Mullins, 2016).

The principles of religion are used as a guide for raising children. Through religion, parents instill discipline, character, and love. This ideology is modeled through the parents' behavior, which stems from their religious upbringing. A couple's religious beliefs shape their

relationship and lead to greater shared intimacy in a marriage. The Bible instructs husbands to love their wives as their bodies. "He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his flesh, but nourished and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church" (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Eph. 5:28-29). God desires a man to love his wife unconditionally; likewise, a wife should do the same. Many participants attributed religion as the glue that allowed them to embody the commitment required to stay married.

Participant Responses Compared to Findings from Literature

The lived experiences of the participant couples were consistent with the literature as it pertains to marital success and failure (Birditt et al., 2017; Connell, 2005; Farrel & Farrel, 2000; Flood & Genadek, 2016; Hurt, 2014; Kornrich et al., 2014; Michael & Spiegel, n.d; O'Daniel & Rosenstein, 2008; Yoo, 2013). The interview responses of each couple and the interactions observed by the researcher during the interview process denoted a positive atmosphere in the relationship. The garnered responses were consistent with the literature that the more positive the environment, the healthier the marriage, as couples' environments affect their relationship's success and satisfaction (Vanover, 2016).

The participant couples were married for a period of 24-56 years, with a 32-year difference from the shortest to the longest union. These couples experienced and managed problems differently. For instance, when the youngest couple would become upset about a momentary lapse, the oldest couple would perceive it as a minor setback and continue pushing through. It is understood that the oldest couple had had their share of negative experiences, which allowed them to reach the level of problem-solving they now have.

Communication

One of the major themes of the study was communication. From the data, communication is paramount to the success and longevity of marriage. Communication is the foundation of all relationships and marriage is no different. The participant couples have avoided significant setbacks by simply talking about them. Communication helps to set the tone of the expectations in marriage. Carlos and Caroline have developed a level of communication and it has helped them navigate pitfalls in their marriage. Carlos stated:

I sat down and talked with her about this is the process we want to go through, and it worked because she got in with me. And it worked. But I laid all these things out ahead of time. And she's like, okay, well, let's do it.

This statement is consistent with research that proper communication also helps create an environment of mutual trust and respect (O'Daniel & Rosenstein, 2008). It confirms the study of Ward and Lynch (2019), which found couples can improve decision-making by sitting down and talking things through with each other. By communicating effectively, couples learn when to raise concerns or why certain problems are particularly difficult (Lavner et al., 2016). Myles spoke of his experience when he said:

Sometimes you can't talk while you are angry. That's when you say things out of context that you're apologizing for. So, you got to wait and that's why once you learn a person, you know when, when they get ready to get angry, you know when to shut up.

This couple faced tough times during the first year of their marriage. After a brief period of separation, they learned to forgive, set boundaries, and communicate better; they have been married for 47 years.

Devaluing Men

All the men in this study agreed that being valued by their wives was important. The data shows that gratitude also communicates that support is effective and that the support receiver values and desires the relationship with the support provider (Algoe et al., 2013). The support of the participants' wives meant everything to them. Carlos confirmed these findings by saying:

It means a lot because when I look back, she supported me when I wanted to venture out and start my own business. When I wanted to do certain things around the house. She said, yes, whatever you want. That means a lot that she has my back. And when, when the wife has your back, you know, even if you go out and you fail, she's still standing behind you, rooting you on, he'll go okay, I'll try again.

To compensate for the challenges they face, many African American males feel the need to assert their dominance. Connell (2005) stated that young men respond to race and class subordination by asserting masculine domination over others. However, this data revealed that when African American men are respected and valued in the home and allowed to be the man of the home, it gives them a sense of pride and a “can do” attitude. Myles stated:

Well, it means a whole lot. Because when I know she values me, it doesn't matter what nobody else says. When she values me then I know she got my back. And I know she's there for me. So, we do what Scripture says with our vows through the thick and thin through sickness and health and in all that, so that's why we value it because she tries to take care of me as a wife supposed to do help me.

Intimacy

This study confirmed the findings of Yoo (2013), which found that the intimate experience of being close with one's partner centered on trust and respect. The couples in this

study confirmed intimacy as a factor in their marriage's success. Intimacy is more than just the physical act of sex, intimacy in marriage involves handholding, cuddling, kissing, talking, and simply being in each other's company. Peter added, "Intimacy is very important as long as people understand intimacy is beyond, lay down, undress, and let's do that. No, it's way more to it than that." Subsequently, this also confirms the Kardan-Souraki et al.'s (2015) findings that there are several distinct types of intimacy: emotional, psychological, physical, sexual, temporal, communicational, social-recreational, aesthetic, spiritual, intellectual, and total.

The couple's confirmed intimacy is inherently different for everyone, and it meant more than a kiss. Spouses should take the time to get to know one another on an intimate level for marital success. One way to do that is through communication. Caroline offered her advice for couples, stating, "I think figuring out your love language is very important. I think that's a big part of intimacy." Elevated levels of intimacy may denote a healthy relationship; however, intimacy should not be used as a basis to predict relational satisfaction. Satisfaction occurs when couples adjust to each other and have a mutual understanding in the relationship.

Sex

Sex is a critical component of marital success and longevity. Research links sex to emotional satisfaction and physical pleasure, and couples with greater sexual frequency are less likely to divorce or break up (Kornrich et al., 2014). Theresa spoke candidly about her experience. She stated:

So, we need to be candid with you. I think a good sex life helps marriages is good, healthy sex life. And then and over the years, hopefully, that sex life has gotten better over time. And, and that makes a difference. Sometimes couples, individuals might be

seeking something outside of marriage. But when you have a good sex life in your marriage, that helps your marriage.

All the couples agreed sex is a vital component in their marriage; it helps strengthen the bond each couple shared.

Infidelity

Consequently, a lack of healthy sex life can lead to marital issues, substantiating the findings of DeMaris (2013). The researcher found problems due to extramarital involvement were strongly related to marital disruption, even holding constant marriage quality (DeMaris, 2013). When one partner withholds sex, it can lead to the other partner venturing out and finding someone else to satiate that need. According to George:

A lot of people get into marriages and find out their wives don't like sex. It's different if your wife is sick. Or if something is going on with her, but some of them just don't like to have sex. And I would like to know that beforehand. And then the crazy thing is like they were having crazy sex before they got married so when did you stop liking it? After? Like at what point? So, men have a healthy sex drive. But like sex like, men are, the Bible says a woman is like a covered cistern and men are like you know like pretty much like a faucet. So, a pipe under pressure and when you go outside turn it on, it's gonna come out. So, a man cheating is a game-changer. It's usually the one thing that will end the marriage. If he has sex with somebody else, but the one thing that they're not doing is having sex with him. Crazy as hell to me, excuse my language.

Research revealed 21.6% of marriages end due to infidelity, making it one of the leading causes of divorce (Scott et al., 2013). Infidelity destroys trust in a marriage. According to a study by Knopp et al. (2017), a single act of infidelity can lead to jealousy, leading to the spouse

suspecting negative behavior from their partner all the time. In the couples' experience, infidelity can be averted if they are open and communicate their needs. Seven of the nine participant couples have a set time for their intimate activities, avoiding the stigma once the marriage starts, the sex ends.

Marital Expectations

One key area the participant couples homed in on was marital expectations. The couples felt expectations should be realistic, as unrealistic expectations can lead to disappointment and a sense of letdown. Peter stated:

Disappointment comes from failed expectations. Right. And sometimes, not sometimes a lot of times when you talk about it 47% Right? A lot of times that's traced back to just failed expectations. Some of the expectations are just way too lofty.

Peter's outlook confirmed a study conducted by Birditt et al. (2017), which found that if the expectations are unrealistic, the partner will have set a bar their spouse can never reach. This mismatch can cause a setup for failure in marriage. As Tammy expressed:

I think expectations, I think that people have the wrong model of what marriage is. And they're thinking, okay, we should be able to get along, it ties in with the communication.

If we're arguing we must not, it must not be for us to be together. I mean, I think I made a mistake. He didn't agree with me. And I don't agree with him, we argue all the time.

If the expectations do not align with reality, then the marriage is doomed from the start. It is healthy for couples to talk about their expectations and agree to compromise on those that may seem farfetched.

Learning from Past Mistakes

The shift in the mindset of spouses is important for married couples. The ability to learn from past mistakes shows both growth and commitment. Farrel and Farrel (2000) posited that many couples had brutalized their marriage by making illogical decisions, using devastating words, rejecting their partner, and failing to let go of old habits. Their study was confirmed through the experiences of each participant couple. Once the spouse learned the behavior was hurting the marital relationship, they shifted their thinking and applied the lessons learned, which changed the fabric of the relationship. Peter addressed the subject by recounting his past mistakes and learned lessons. He said:

So, I'm like, I don't want to let her go. So, I had to make some changes. This is my time to make some changes. It's time to let the boys go. Like Nah, man, I ain't fooling with y'all. I'm done. I mean, it wasn't instantaneous, it just had to be over time, let me slow down and properly manage this process. Because this is what I envisioned. This is what's been instilled in my mind.

When spouses do not learn from their past mistakes, it can place the marriage under duress. If a wife has a spending issue, it can strain the family's finances, leading to greater problems in the marriage. However, if the wife makes the necessary changes to better the relationship, it can open the door to reconciliation and a stronger union.

Religion and Marital Success

Hurt (2014) found many couples value marriage's sanctity and tout their spiritual responsibility to God as motivation to stay married. Their findings were substantiated through the findings of this study. The participant couples cited religion as a contributing factor in their marriages' success. Theresa stated:

I think going to church is important. Reading the Bible is important praying is important. And when you have all of those fights, those spiritual fights and building up your relationship with God, it only enhances yourself and it also enhances our relationship our marriage, so I think that's how religion has been a guiding force for me because I take it seriously that has helped me I take a series of when God says that the man is the head of the household Oh to the best of my ability.

There is a positive association between marital satisfaction, religion, and spirituality (Fincham & Beach, 2008; Mahoney, 2010). Religion instills a sense of commitment and pride in the marriage. Modeling godly principles or character and leadership in the home allows families to succeed spiritually, mentally, and emotionally. Religion can also steer partners in the right direction. According to Thomas:

One of the things about, she said religion or faith, however, you want to interchange those two. As for me, it was that that kept me in the room. That was my buffer. Because I knew that I cannot go out. Yes, we know, as a man, you know, you want to venture out, as we said, some of the things that we bring into the marriage, destroys the marriage, but I know because of my faith, and, you know, the love for Christ, He's given me a detailed instruction, if I follow these instructions, you know you're going to be successful. And it helps me, and the Holy Spirit is in my ear when things go wrong, or, you know, or a young lady walk by, and I see she's a good looking woman okay, well, you don't, don't sit there and stare, you're going to work on a marriage. But that keeps me buffered and keeps me going. Keeps me in the right direction.

Using religion as a canon, Thomas proved that it was the principles of knowing who God is and what He requires that helped him remain faithful to his wife. This knowledge of God

proved helpful in keeping his marriage together when times were tough. The researcher found this same notion with all of the participant couples. Having a relationship with God and understanding what God required of a believer proved to help keep their marriages on track. When times were tough, these couples leaned on God and their faith to pull them through. Religious principles also guided their children's rearing and interactions with the world around them.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations are purposeful decisions the researcher makes to limit or define the study's boundaries. This research contains several delimitations and limitations that must be considered. First, the COVID-19 crisis has caused many older and less technologically savvy individuals to bow out from participating. Due to the fear of being near others and the health risks to themselves, some of the couples who were contacted decided it was best not to participate in the study. These barriers resulted in a much smaller sample size, which could have added value for statistical purposes. The researcher chose to focus on the lived experiences of long-term marriages through the lens of African American participants. Leaving other ethnicities out of the equation inhibits the researcher from concluding marital success and longevity in Caucasian, Hispanic, non-Hispanic whites, and Asian participants.

The sample size for this study was small compared to other studies. A larger number of participants can provide significant data in other areas where none existed. In addition, all the couples who participated were of Christian faith. Therefore, the study's findings do not apply to the general population, presenting another limitation in this study. Another limitation was that this study only focused on those marriages lasting 20 years or more. Broadening the study to include those couples married for ten years or longer would yield more beneficial results.

Furthermore, this study was also limited by a lack of willing participants, giving credence to the African American saying, "what happens in this house, stays in this house." Many couples were simply unwilling to disclose what goes on in their private lives. Bigelow (2019) stated that holding on to this rule is why many people in the African American community suffer in silence. This mentality lends itself to a myriad of effects on the family and becomes another barrier to passing down the successful tips to reduce the divorce rate.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research study attempted to answer five questions regarding the phenomenon of long-term African American marriages. Considering the study's findings and limitations, further research should be conducted on marital longevity in the African American community. It is suggested that this study is repeated employing a mixed-methods approach, which would allow the researcher to obtain a larger sample size, reaching a more varied populace. Researchers should focus their efforts on expanding this study to include multiple races. Research should be conducted on which factors lead to divorce in African American couples. Structural factors such as declining employment prospects and rising incarceration rates for unskilled Black men should also be considered as a construct affecting marital stability and longevity (Raley et al., 2015). Future studies should incorporate separate interview sessions, adding a compare and contrast component to the study.

Summary

This transcendental phenomenological study attempted to discover the healthy habits of long-term African American couples who have been married for 20 years or longer. The findings in this study were consistent with previous studies and provided validation for studies that have been performed regarding long-term marriages. Using Moustakas' process of horizontalization,

the researcher reduced all emerging sub-themes into the four major themes of commitment, communication, religiosity, and collaboration. Unique to this study was that collaboration was weaved into the fabric of these marriages. What was also unique about this theme was how the couples used collaboration to knit all the other themes together to achieve marital success.

The findings were in line with the constructs of family systems theory by Gurman and Kniskern (2013), where a change in one member's behavior changes the structure of the family unit and can contribute to marital success and longevity. The lack of willing participants and the smaller sample size necessitates conducting further research on this topic. The researcher recommends broadening the study to include other ethnicities to garner a complete picture of marital success, revealing different themes not present in this study.

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APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Form

Consent

Title of the Project: The African American Nuclear Family: Investigating the Healthy Habits of Successful Long-Term Marriages in the African American Community

Principal Investigator: Derrick Smith; Liberty University, School of Behavioral Sciences

Invitation to be part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be of African American descent and have been married for at least 20 years. 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.

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

The purpose of this case study is to understand what contributes to the success of long-term marriages in the African American Community.

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 an audio- and/or video-recorded Zoom or telephone interview consisting of 22 open-ended questions. This should last approximately 60 minutes.
2. Provide the name and contact information of a close person such as a counselor, pastor, a close family friend, or family member whom you have known for at least 5 years. This person will be contacted for an individual interview to provide additional insight into your marital relationship.
3. Provide any artifacts or documents if available such as letters, diaries, etc. that may help answer the research questions.
4. Review the transcription of the interview to verify its accuracy and answer any additional follow-up questions for clarity, via email or telephone.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

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

Benefits to society may include assisting in developing a new, innovative approach to counseling practices with married couples and premarital couples.

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. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. 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. All recorded information will be accessed solely by the researcher, stored on a password-locked computer for three years, and then erased.

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

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study with a \$50 VISA gift card.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time 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 Derrick Smith. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Gary Probst, at [REDACTED].

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

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

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted ethically as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

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 of 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 and video record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

APPENDIX B

Third-Party Informed Consent for Interviews

Consent

Title of the Project: The African American Nuclear Family: Investigating the Healthy Habits of Successful Long-Term Marriages in the African American Community

Principal Investigator: Derrick Smith; Liberty University, School of Behavioral Sciences

Invitation to be part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must have known a couple involved in this study for at least five years and be one of the following: a pastor, marriage counselor, relative, or close family friend. 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.

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

The purpose of this case study is to understand what contributes to the success of long-term marriages in the African American Community.

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 an audio and/or video recorded Zoom or telephone interview consisting of 6 questions. This should take approximately 30 minutes to complete.
2. Review the transcription of the interview to verify its accuracy and answer any additional follow-up questions for clarity via email or telephone.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

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

Benefits to society include assisting in developing a new, innovative approach to counseling practices with married couples and premarital couples.

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. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any

information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. 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. All recorded information will be accessed solely by the researcher, stored on a password-locked computer for three years, and then erased.

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

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study with a \$25 VISA gift card.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time 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 Derrick Smith. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Gary Probst, at [REDACTED].

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

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

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted ethically as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

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 of 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 and video record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

APPENDIX C

Participant Interview Questions

Ice Breaker

1. Please introduce yourself to me, as if we just met one another.

Demographic Questions

2. Can you please answer the following?
 - a. How old are you?
 - b. How old were you when you were married?
 - c. Where do you reside?
 - d. How long have you been married?

Pre-Marital Concepts

3. How did your partner's socioeconomic status shape your decision to marry?
4. How would you describe your image of marriage?
5. What were your expectations going into marriage?
6. Did he/she live up to your image/expectation of what your spouse would be at the time?
7. Can you tell me how your marriage has lived up to or differed from your expectations?
8. How would you describe the process of becoming a husband/wife?

Marital Satisfaction

9. What do you believe is causing marriages to fail in the African American community?
10. Why do you believe your marriage has been so successful?
11. How do you handle problems in your marriage?
 - a. What is one healthy habit or problem-solving technique you have implemented in your marriage?

12. How has religion helped to shape your marriage's success?
13. What does it mean to you to be valued by your husband/wife?
14. What role does having a healthy married couple to model play in the success or failure of marriage?
15. What does it mean to you to be black and make it in marriage?
16. How would you describe the bond you share with your spouse?
17. What is one piece of advice you would give to a younger, newlywed couple who hopes to achieve the longevity you have?
18. How important has intimacy been in the success of your marriage?

APPENDIX D

Member Checking Interview

1. How long have you known the couple?
2. What would you say contributes to the success of their marriage?
3. To your knowledge, how long have they been married?
4. To the best of your ability, can you describe for me the way they handle conflicts in their marriage?
5. How would you describe the bond they share?
6. What do you think is their greatest strength as a couple?

APPENDIX E

Recruitment Letter

Dear Prospective Participant

As a doctoral candidate in the School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, I am researching as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree. The purpose of my research is to discover what contributes to the success of long-term marriages in the African American Community, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be African American couples who have been married for 20 years or longer. Participants will be asked to participate in a recorded Zoom or telephone interview consisting of 22 open-ended questions. This should last approximately 60 minutes. Participants will also be asked to provide the name and contact information of a person such as a counselor, pastor, or a close family friend or family member whom they have known for at least 5 years. This person will be contacted for an individual interview to provide additional insight into your marital relationship. Additionally, couples will be asked to provide any artifacts or documents if available such as letters, diaries, etc. that may help answer the research questions. Finally, participants will be asked to review the transcription of their interviews to verify their accuracy and answer any additional follow-up questions for clarity via email or telephone. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

If you would like to participate or would like more information, please email me at

[REDACTED]

Once you have agreed to participate, a consent form will be emailed to you before conducting the interview. The consent form contains additional information about my research. Please sign the consent form and return it to me via email at least three days before the interview. Couples participating in this study will receive a \$50 VISA gift card by email once the interviews have been completed.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Derrick L. Smith
Doctoral Candidate

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

APPENDIX F

Social Media Recruitment Post

ATTENTION FACEBOOK FRIENDS: I am researching as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree at Liberty University. The purpose of my research is to discover what contributes to the success of long-term marriages in the African American Community, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study. To participate, you must be an African American couple who has been married for 20 years or longer.

Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in a Zoom or telephone interview consisting of 22 open-ended questions. This should last approximately 60 minutes. Participants will also be asked to provide the name and contact information of a close person such as a counselor, pastor, a close family friend, or a family member whom they have known for at least 5 years. This person will be contacted for an individual interview to provide additional insight into your marital relationship. Additionally, couples will also be asked to provide any artifacts or documents if available such as letters, diaries, etc. that may help answer the research questions. Finally, participants will be asked to review the transcription of their interviews to verify their accuracy and answer any additional follow-up questions for clarity via email or telephone.

If you would like to participate and meet the study criteria, or for more information, please email me at [REDACTED] or inbox me with your email address. Once you have agreed to participate, a consent form will be emailed to you. The consent form contains additional information about my research. Please sign the consent form and return it to me via email at least three days before the interview. Couples participating in this study will receive a \$50 VISA gift card by email once the interviews have been completed.

APPENDIX G

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

August 13, 2021

Derrick Smith
Gary Probst

Re: IRB Approval - IRB-FY20-21-758 THE AFRICAN AMERICAN NUCLEAR FAMILY:
INVESTIGATING THE HEALTHY HABITS OF SUCCESSFUL LONG-TERM MARRIAGES IN THE
AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

Dear Derrick Smith, Gary Probst:

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: August 13, 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 applies 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,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional
Research Ethics Office