

A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Lived Experiences of African American Couples
Attending Premarital Counseling

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Department of Community Care and Counseling, 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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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of African American couples who completed a premarital counseling program in African American communities facilitated through local churches in New Jersey. How African American couples described their experiences attending a premarital counseling program in the African American church was the study's central research question. The theory guiding this study was Schlossberg's (1981) model of transition. This model offers a theoretical framework for understanding the experiences that African American couples endured in the transition from single to married. The study was a qualitative research using an interpretive phenomenological approach to recruit the participants for the study. The study employed face-to-face semi-structured interviews with couples to collect data regarding lived experiences. A structural and textual analysis technique was used to analyze the data by identifying common meanings and essences through textual and structural analysis of what was expressed by the participants. The study found that couples engaged in premarital counseling voluntarily or mandatory due to church requirements or the couples' desire to learn skills necessary to build a strong and lasting relationship. Also, this study determined that the pastor's actions and knowledge are critical for the couples' experience. In conclusion, premarital counseling is a critical platform for couples to learn communication skills and conflict resolution techniques, and prepare for marriage, highlighting the necessity of selecting the best qualified premarital facilitator to support their journey.

Keywords: premarital counseling, couples, marriage, phenomenology, communication, support, education

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Dedication

To my daughters, Jade, Jani, Janell, and Jalynn, I dedicate this dissertation to each of you in hope you have a wonderful life and marriage with a wonderful husband. Through my experience and the experience of others, I hope this educational material provides inspiration for you to seek premarital counseling before you walk down the aisle of holy matrimony. Never stop learning. Begin with the End in Mind. ~ Daddy ~

To Cameron, my son, life is filled with decisions and consequences. Seek to be on the right side of your decision by first 'Seeking to Understand before Seeking to be Understood.' Finding a wife is a joyous occasion in a man's life and I pray you seek your wife through God and your heart. Take time to understand the meaning of a husband and your responsibilities while measuring yourself for the life transition of marriage. ~ Pappa ~

To Nicole, my yellow rose, thank you for all you have done for us and then some. Marriage is beautiful when we are painting it together. Through our moments, we were able to step back and admire our work and plan for the future. Never stop dreaming and desiring more. You deserve the world and then some. I love you! ~ Pastor P. ~

To my mother, Mary Nell Pettis, I did it. I am your doctor. I dedicate this research dissertation to you because I saw your sacrifices, disappointments, and pain with and without a husband. You are the strongest person I have ever known, and no one comes close to measuring up to you. Until we meet in heaven, I love you and miss you. ~ Jimmie ~

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Next, I acknowledge my daughter Jade, who is my biggest supporter and admirer. It was 26 years ago that I launched my education journey to be an example for my oldest child. Over the years, she stood by my side through the good and the most challenging times of my life: Just you and me, kid. I also thank Nicole and my sister Pamela for their words of encouragement. I thank Nicole for putting up with the late nights, missed events, and my lack of assistance with the houses, kids, and laundry. I thank Pamela for always being there for me through good and bad or right and wrong. I love you, sis!

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List of Abbreviations

Building A Lasting Connection (BLC)

Community Marriage Initiatives (CMIs)

Community Marriage Policy (CMP)

Conflict Management Skills (CMS)

Couples Therapy (CT)

Emotional Focus Therapy (EFT)

Emotion Focus Therapy for Couples (EFTC)

Families Northwest (FNM)

First Things First (FTF)

Handling Our Problems Effectively (HOPE)

Healthy Marriages Grand Rapids (HMGR)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMSS)

New International Version (NIV)

Relationship Education (RE)

Chapter One: Introduction

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of African American couples who completed a premarital counseling program in African American communities facilitated through local churches. This chapter covered the background of this study, including the historical, social, and theoretical context of the research problem. Next, the researcher discussed concerns regarding the situation to self, followed by the philosophical assumptions in this study. Then, the researcher explained the problem and purpose statements. Following the statements, the researcher presented a discussion about the significance of this study. A list and description of the research questions followed. Following the research questions, the researcher provided a list of important terms for this study and their definitions. Finally, this chapter concluded with a summary.

Background

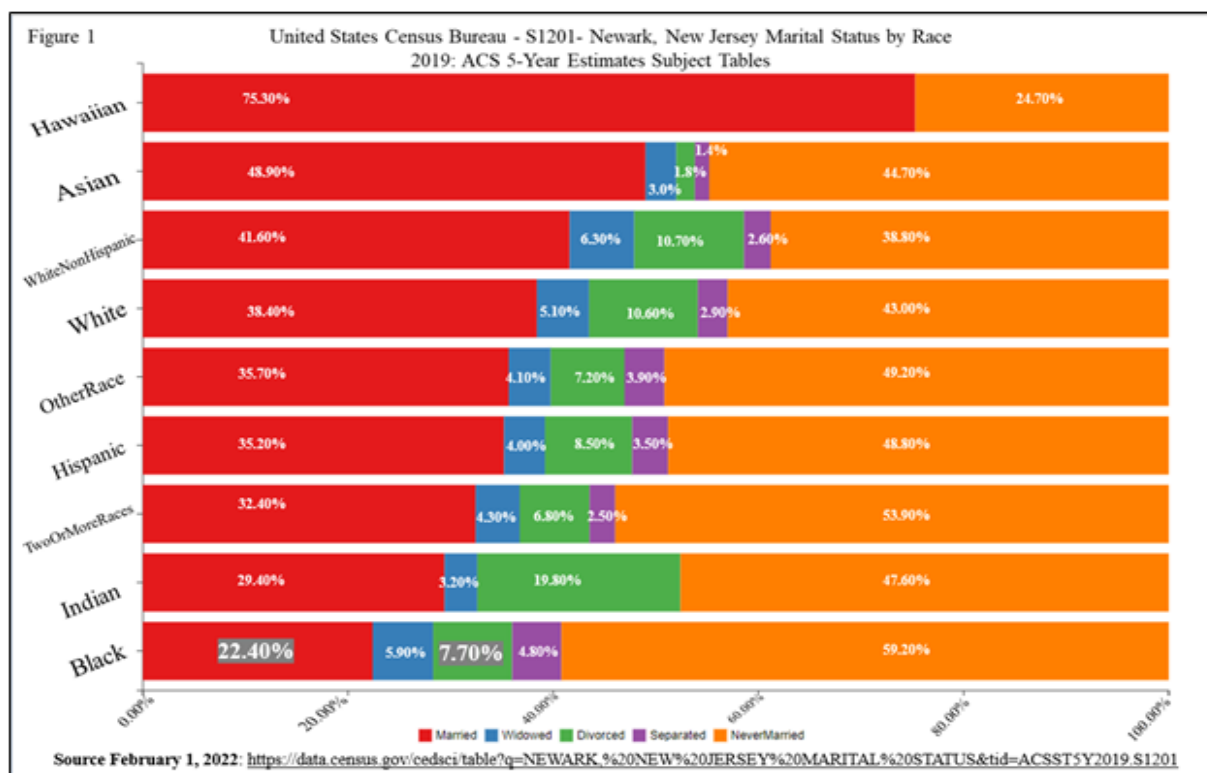
African Americans' divorce rate is high when compared to non-Hispanic Whites. Since the 1960s, the African American divorce rate has grown twice that of Caucasians (Pinderhughes, 2002). African Americans have adhered to a problem-oriented or deficit perspective of marriages, leading to a lack of marriages and more likely to divorce (Phillips et al., 2012). When challenged with separation and divorce, African American marriages stand on the heels of premarital counseling and counseling received either in a local church or a local community agency, if any. According to Clyde et al. (2020), "An accumulating body of research indicates that too many marriages (24%) begin at low levels of quality and satisfaction, and these marriages are at greater risk for divorce" (p. 149). These relationship gaps suggest that further research on applying premarital counseling and counseling in African American marriages may

improve African American marriage satisfaction rates while reducing the African American divorce rate.

According to Lavner et al. (2012), whether a couple seeks to get divorced or not, the couple shares low levels of marital satisfaction or becomes a couple with a highly satisfying marriage. The gap continues to expand as the African American marital rate declines yearly. According to Amato (2010), “Divorce continues to be a major topic of scholarly interest” (p. 650). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.), the African American population in Newark, New Jersey, has the fifth highest divorce rate with the lowest marriage rate among nine races reported by the U.S. Census Bureau (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Marital Status by Race



Note. Breakdown of marital status by race in New Jersey (2019).

Whether couples have or have not completed premarital counseling, the divorce rate among African American couples continues to rise across the United States. A premarital

counseling program seeks to enhance relationship quality before marriage by preventing distress and dissolution. Premarital counseling could provide an unmeasurable understanding of each couple's self-improvement and overall satisfaction when couples engage themselves to improve.

Although divorce rates continue to rise, there is a chance to reduce divorce rates through premarital counseling. Premarital counseling concentrates on the couple's pre-marriage deficiencies and current conflicts. The impact of premarital counseling towards preventing and reducing the global trend of divorce (marital breakdown) becomes influenced by local church premarital counseling programs designed to strengthen, empower, and create profound awareness of the need for potential couples, as well as married couples, to make use of available resources and counseling services (Abanyam et al., 2014). A church program, such as a marriage ministry, may offer committed relationship enhancement and conflict resolution techniques for premarital couples. Through the church marriage ministry, couples can seek a long-term approach using religion and hope in God to obtain marital satisfaction.

According to Cirhinlioğlu et al. (2018), "Religiousness is acknowledged as a significant element of the marital relationship and is one variable that affects marital quality" (p. 208). Although couples may attend a church with a marriage ministry or seek premarital counseling, statistics indicate that African Americans' separation and divorce rates are rising, according to the U. S. Census Bureau (n.d.). This research sought to explain the lived experiences of African American couples who completed a premarital counseling program in African American communities facilitated through local churches in Newark, New Jersey.

This section briefly summarized the historical, social, and theoretical contexts for further research for premarital education, primarily experiential and attachment based. The historical context explains how the research problem was established over time. The social context

provides a contextual perspective of the societal environment and explains why the need for premarital counseling continues to grow. The theoretical context discussed Schlossberg's transition theory and its theoretical principles and concepts.

Historical Context of Premarital Counseling

From a historical context, premarital counseling provides a prevention program to educate noncoupled individuals on avoiding divorce after marriage. Carroll and Doherty (2003) defined "premarital prevention as a knowledge and skills-based training that equips couples with resources on ways to sustain and improve their relationship once they are married" (p. 106). Generally speaking, premarital counseling programs tend to help couples become aware of and identify potential problems subject to happen while married. Premarital counseling provides couples with resources to help them work through problems after marriage. Premarital counseling is essential for any couple; however, "premarital counseling has become more complex because of the increased number of divorced and subsequently remarried couples" working through their post-divorce attachment (Wright, 1992, p. 255).

Premarital counseling could provide an unmeasurable understanding of each couple's self-improvement and overall satisfaction when couples engage themselves to improve. Premarital counseling helps decrease the general divorce rate and increases marriage success rates. Fox and Shriner (2014) reported that "participating couples receiving premarital counseling from clergy permitted them to sense a connection to a supportive body of faith, which positively supported their relationship" (p. 291). A premarital counseling program aims to prevent and reduce human dysfunction, supporting premarital counseling's efficacy on the participants' perception of marriage (Fox & Shriner, 2014).

Premarital counseling is a valuable tool to help couples build and endure a healthy

marriage that passes benefits down to the couple's children (Kruenegel-Farr et al., 2013).

Kruenegel-Farr et al. (2013) also indicated that premarital counseling aims to advance couples to their wedding date, and relationship counseling teaches couples how to live currently in harmony without respect towards the couple getting married. Premarital counseling works with couples to provide training and tools designed to generate and promote happiness while developing long-term, lasting effects in the relationship.

Social Context of Premarital Counseling

From a social context, the African American culture has struggled with establishing successful marriages. Marriages across ethnic and racial groups have struggled to establish stability and risk becoming nonexistent over time. According to Burdette et al. (2012), African American women have a two out of three chance of becoming married, and 70% of those marriages end in divorce, compared to 47% of married non-Hispanic Whites. The differences in racial and ethnic marriages have limited effects on the couples' desire to marry. However, a religious difference between the African American culture and other racial and ethnic groups is paramount. This difference is significant given that African American religion is remarkably vivacious. Research revealed that religious involvement among the African American community is exceptionally higher than indicated among non-Hispanic whites with religious backgrounds in a local church setting (Burdette et al., 2012).

Clinton and Trent (2009) stated, "For a marriage to be long-term and go the distance, it must ground itself in more than a piece of paper. It [marriage] requires the supernatural merging of lives and the binding of hearts" (p. 89). According to 2 Corinthians 6:14 (NIV), the Bible says, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers in the Bible. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?" "God, the

creator, designed marriage to be a lifelong and exclusive covenant of love and dedication, leading to children and family, if possible, between one man and one woman” (Clinton & Trent, 2009, p. 88). The church’s focus on a covenant marriage implies that two individuals join together to form one mindset to make long-term marriage possible. According to Clinton and Trent (2009), “A covenant requires the death of two wills and the birth of one. ‘I’ becomes ‘we,’ never to be separated again. The Bible says in Matthew 19:6 (NIV), they are no longer two but one flesh” (p. 88). As the two become one flesh, substantial risk and failure are possible. However, the critical factor is not discovering the right individual, but it is critical to become the right person. Both individuals can experience calamities in the journey of marriage, but it is just as possible for both to experience success in marriage (Wright, 1992).

Theoretical Context of Premarital Counseling

From a theoretical context, theorists have suggested that a theoretical framework be provided in academic scholarly work to orient the reader to the paradigm through which the study should be understood (Anfara & Mertz, 2014). The framework for providing cognitive information on transitions from African American premarital couples to married African American couples is most effectively set by interviewing African American couples who have already experienced similar transitions. The similar shared transition experiences share valuable and insightful discussions of the issues married couples faced, what was helpful, what was not helpful, and what they wished they had known prior to marriage (Leibowitz & Schlossberg, 1982). Understanding the significance of the theoretical framework's impact on research studies, the descriptions of the experiences that African American couples endured in transition from single to married are presented through the lens of a transition theory formulated by Schlossberg. Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory defines transitions as occurrences that build into life

changes in relationships, roles, or routines. These changes present challenges, and Schlossberg's transition theory helps researchers understand the transition model of three types of transition: The 4S system of coping with transitions and three distinct phases of transitioning (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 2011; Schlossberg et al., 1989). As adults age, they theoretically learn to change and manage life transitions (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). Schlossberg's transition theory focuses on how people and those they are connected to transition with change (Schlossberg, 1981).

Situation to Self

My rationale for conducting this qualitative phenomenological study derived from firsthand experiences of divorce and my aspiration to help couples succeed in their marital relationships. In church settings, I have counseled and guided premarital couples in getting ready for their marriage and distressed couples seeking to revive and save their marriage. The couples I usually work with do not use problem-solving techniques and solution-focused approaches. The couples generally understand their situations shortly after discussing a few techniques and approaches during individual sessions. As I listened to the couples explain their perspectives of what was causing the marital problems, I became puzzled about how they explicitly decided not to revert to their premarital counseling information and experiences.

The philosophical assumption that guided my research as a clergy member and researcher was ontological. Højjer (2008) emphasized that ontological assumption refers to various idealisms, views on reality, or taken-for-granted assumptions of social reality. The interpretive framework used with epistemological assumptions that guided my research in trying to get close to the participants was social constructivism. According to Højjer, social constructivism implies that the significance of the meaning is explicit to lived experiences, situation-bound experiences,

and subjective and unstable experiences. Through interviews, I developed a perspective to relate to the world where the participants live and defined themes to the participants' lived experiences of attending premarital counseling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants' interview responses justified a new premarital counseling experience not studied up to this point.

Problem Statement

Premarital counseling originated from an effort to reduce divorce rates and promote healthy marriages in the United States of America. Although African American married couples participated in premarital counseling programs, African American couples continue to separate and divorce, resulting in the highest divorce rate in Newark, New Jersey. Research shows that a premarital counseling program can help prepare couples to remain happily married. Muluha Keverenge et al. (2020) found that premarital counseling and couples counseling steered couples toward a successful marital union while encouraging couples to revisit a marital therapist to avoid separation. Unfortunately, not all couples heed the advice provided in premarital counseling programs, particularly those attending premarital counseling as a requirement rather than a desire before marriage.

Marriage is a well-respected union all over the world. Scholars believe the premarital counseling conception's main objective is to assist families in re-evaluating their views about marriage and its values to experience marital harmony (Muluha Keverenge et al., 2020). Unfortunately, marital disharmony could lead couples to divorce and downgrade the marriage institution worldwide. Muluha Keverenge et al. (2020) believe that the leading factor to marital disharmony presents an underdeveloped communication process in couples and how the couple manages conflicts.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe African American couples' lived experiences of premarital counseling in New Jersey. The theory guiding this study was Schlossberg's (1981) model of transition. This study aimed to examine the before, during, and after experiences of African American premarital couples who participated in premarital counseling in an African American community. Additionally, this study sought to determine if premarital counseling contributed to a couple's relationship satisfaction by utilizing solution-focused interventions. The lived experiences of the couples depended on the full participation of couples from before premarital counseling to the end of the premarital counseling. The usefulness of premarital counseling for a successful marriage ventured to benefit couples that choose to participate in a premarital counseling. The data collected from the interviews and journal illuminated the experiences of each stage of the couples' premarital counseling administered to African American couples seeking a successful marriage.

This study evaluated African American couples' lived experiences of premarital counseling in New Jersey, hoping for a positive impact on an African American couple's successful marriage. Premarital counseling experiences are an important study area because relationship enrichment programs (Shahhosseini et al., 2014) and solution-focused premarital counseling (Murray & Murray, 2004) guide individuals toward having a meaningful relationship with an outlook of a successful marriage.

Significance of the Study

Since the mid-1900s, the African American marriage rate declined, and most African Americans chose not to get married to avoid later divorcing (Clarkwest, 2006). According to Clyde et al. (2020), "An accumulating body of research indicates that too many marriages (24%)

begin at low levels of quality and satisfaction, and these marriages are at greater risk for divorce” (p. 149). These relationship gaps suggest that further research on applying premarital counseling in African American marriages may improve African American marriage satisfaction rates while reducing the African American divorce rate.

Although divorce rates continue to rise, there is a chance to reduce divorce rates through premarital counseling, whereas counseling and training focus on the couple’s pre-marriage deficiencies and current conflicts. Premarital counseling programs improve couples’ communication, increase relationship satisfaction, and reduce relationship distress (Williamson et al., 2014). Premarital counseling provides a form of a premarital prevention program to educate noncoupled individuals on how to avoid divorce after marriage. Through premarital counseling, African American couples will explore their commitment to marriage and develop behaviors and characteristics to diminish the African American marital disruption gap (Clarkwest, 2006). Research has shown that the overall positive effects of participating in a premarital counseling program are “to improve couple communication and prevent deterioration in relationship well-being” (Williamson et al., 2014, p. 112).

In addition, clinical intervention based on premarital counseling consistently shows the efficacy of increasing the probability of receiving couples counseling by 45%. The association between premarital counseling and later help-seeking was stronger for African American couples than for White and Hispanic couples (Williamson et al., 2014). According to Phillips et al. (2012), 77% of single African Americans between the ages of 19 to 35 desire to marry, but little do they know how to sustain an African American marriage. Markman et al.’s (2013) research on the effectiveness of premarital intervention revealed that various programs positively affect marriages, but few studies exist on whether relationship counseling prevents divorce.

Few studies evidence the relationship between premarital counseling and reducing African American divorce rates in a two-parent family (Barton et al., 2018). The African American culture has relied on religious coping for marital and family support using various behaviors, activities, and beliefs in conjunction with limited professional support (Chatters et al., 2008). According to Williamson et al. (2014), race significantly interacts with African Americans receiving premarital counseling and income and counseling as risk moderators. African American couples desire premarital and marital counseling. The affordability and availability of premarital counseling determine the probability of examining the lived experiences of couples' participation in the various premarital counseling programs.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this transcendental phenomenological study:

Central Research Question

How do African American couples describe their experiences attending a premarital counseling program in the African American church?

Sub question One

How do participants describe their expectations for premarital counseling before participating in the premarital counseling program?

Sub question Two

How were the participants' expectations met, and what were the unexpected outcomes experienced while participating in the church's premarital counseling program?

Sub question Three

How do participants describe the short-lived and enduring influences of their premarital counseling experience?

Definitions

1. *Behavioral Couples Therapy (BCT)* – Behavioral couples therapy (BCT) is a couple-based therapy for adults. BCT helps partners build support for improving relationship functioning (O’Farrell et al., 2016).
2. *Couples Therapy (CT)* – Couples therapy is an intervention for couples needing to repair relationships, improve functioning, and manage complicated and long-term issues (Burr & Hubler, 2021).
3. *Effectiveness* – Positively has an impact on a couple’s interactive satisfaction.
4. *Enrichment* – Interventions designed to help couples sustain healthy, mutually satisfying, and stable relationships (Halford et al., 2017).
5. *Healthy* – High-level functioning communication skills with a preventative approach for addressing many risk factors typically associated with couple distress and divorce (Tambling & Glebova, 2013).
6. *Ministry* – A ministry is a church-based program offering committed relationship enhancement and conflict resolution techniques for premarital couples. In addition, it helps foster and reinforce biblical principles for couples to achieve and maintain a successful relationship (Abanyam et al., 2014).
7. *Relationship Counseling (RE)* – Counseling is designed to prevent challenges, increase knowledge and skills, and deal with less difficult relationship issues (Burr & Hubler, 2021).
8. *Satisfaction* – Couples functioning with high-level positive emotions and responses towards one another (Christensen & Doss, 2017).

9. *Success* – This is the ability of a couple to resolve conflicts through mutual adaptation (Lavner et al., 2012).

Summary

This study examined the lived experiences of African American couples who completed a premarital counseling program in an African American community. Although couples may attend a church with a marriage ministry or seek premarital counseling, statistics indicate that African Americans' separation and divorce rates are rising, according to the U. S. Census Bureau (n.d.). This research evaluated a premarital counseling program in an African American community at a local church in Newark, New Jersey.

When challenged with separation and divorce, African American marriages stand on the heels of premarital counseling from a local church or community agency, if any. A premarital counseling program seeks to enhance relationship quality before marriage by preventing distress and dissolution. Whether couples have or have not completed premarital education, the divorce rate among African American couples continues to rise across the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.), the African American population in Newark, New Jersey, has the fifth highest divorce rate with the lowest marriage rate among nine races reported from the U.S. Census Bureau. These relationship gaps suggest that further research on applying premarital counseling in African American marriages may improve African American marriage satisfaction rates while reducing the African American divorce rate.

Premarital counseling provides a form of a premarital prevention program to educate noncoupled individuals on how to avoid divorce after marriage. Although divorce rates continue to rise, there is a chance to reduce divorce rates through premarital counseling, focusing on the couple's pre-marriage deficiencies and current conflicts. The impact of premarital counseling

towards preventing and reducing the global trend of divorce (marital breakdown) becomes influenced by local church-based programs designed to strengthen, empower, and create profound awareness of the need for potential couples (Abanyam et al., 2014).

Marriage is a beautiful institution. Couples who are seeking marriage benefit from attending and participating in premarital counseling. Premarital counseling allows couples to understand marriage as God designed it. Premarital counseling's idea of marriage success prepares couples to make positive influences in the relationship for a successful marriage.

A church premarital counseling program provides couples with skill sets to manage conflicts and communication. Although African American married couples participate in premarital counseling programs, African American couples continue to separate and divorce. Research shows that a premarital counseling program can help prepare couples to remain happily married. Muluha Keverenge et al. (2020) found that premarital counseling steered couples toward a successful marital union while encouraging couples to revisit a marital therapist to avoid separation. Unfortunately, marital disharmony leads couples to divorce and downgrades the marriage institution worldwide. The leading factor to marital disharmony is an underdeveloped communication process in couples and how the couple manages conflicts.

A couple's communication process predicts their marital satisfaction level in their later years of marriage. Lavner et al.'s (2016) research results showed that individual cross-sectional studies have consistently shown that distressed couples show more negative correspondence ways of behaving and less positive correspondence ways during conflict resolution tasks than moderately satisfied couples. As a result of the inadequate response to conflict, the couple presents themselves as a high-conflict couple. To help couples understand and process their conflicts and difficulties, they could use a solution-focused intervention. Conflict management

skills (CMS) and the couples' abilities improve marital satisfaction to assist individual, family, and social concordance (Hou et al., 2019). Conflict management skills (CMS) are the gateway to a couple's communication process toward avoiding relationship deterioration and distress.

The upside to participating in a premarital counseling program is that the counseling trains couples in reciprocal communication using direct and discreet communication styles concerning relationship harmony and satisfaction. According to Askari et al. (2012), communication and conflict management skills highly correlate to predicting relationship satisfaction levels. Muluhya Keverenge et al. (2020) found that premarital education and couples counseling steered couples toward a successful marital union while encouraging couples to revisit a marital therapist to avoid separation. Premarital counseling research for African American couples is complex because there is "a serious limitation of existing evaluations in reliance on samples of mostly White middle-class couples" (Stanley et al., 2006, p. 117).

This study examined the lived experiences of African American couples who completed a premarital counseling program in an African American community. The lived experiences of African American couples who complete premarital counseling is an important study area because relationship enrichment programs (Shahhosseini et al., 2014) and solution-focused premarital counseling (Murray & Murray, 2004) guide individuals toward having a meaningful relationship with an outlook of a successful marriage. The data collected illuminated the lived premarital counseling experiences of a select group of African American couples seeking a successful marriage via surveys and in-person interviews. This study evaluated the lived experiences of African American couples who completed a premarital counseling program in Newark, NJ.

Since the mid 1900s, the African American marriage rate has declined, and most African Americans chose not to get married to avoid later divorcing (Clarkwest, 2006). Although divorce rates continue to rise, there is a chance to reduce divorce rates through premarital education, whereas education and training focus on the couple's pre-marriage deficiencies and current conflicts. Premarital counseling provides a form of a premarital prevention program to educate noncoupled individuals on how to avoid divorce after marriage. Premarital counseling improves couples' communication, increases relationship satisfaction, and reduces relationship distress (Williamson et al., 2014). Through premarital counseling, African American couples explore their commitment to marriage and develop behaviors and characteristics to diminish the African American marital disruption gap (Clarkwest, 2006).

Markman et al.'s (2013) research on the effectiveness of premarital intervention revealed that various programs positively affect marriages, but few studies exist on whether relationship counseling prevents divorce. Also, few studies evidence the relationship between premarital counseling and reducing African American divorce rates in a two-parent family (Barton et al., 2018). According to Williamson et al. (2014), race significantly interacts with African Americans receiving premarital counseling and income and education as risk moderators. African American couples desire premarital and marital counseling.

“The divorce rates across the United States and the associated costs of marital dissolution have become increasingly apparent to policymakers, political leaders, and clergy, who have promoted marriage-strengthening strategies such as premarital education for all couples entering a marriage” (Fox & Shriner, 2014, p. 277). Premarital counseling seeks to improve relationships while reducing divorce rates. Through the church marriage ministry, couples seek a long-term approach using religion and hope in God to obtain marital satisfaction. Although couples may

attend a church with a marriage ministry or seek premarital counseling, statistics indicate that African Americans' separation and divorce rates are rising. This research evaluated the lived experiences of African American couples who completed a premarital counseling program at a local church in the Newark, New Jersey, African American community.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Overview

In Chapter Two, the researcher provided an overview of the literature and theoretical framework of transition theory for couples who completed premarital education. Chapter Two provides a context for the present research and demonstrates its importance based on the problem demonstrated in Chapter One via the literature and the gap in the literature. Chapter Two comprises (a) an overview, (b) a theoretical framework, (c) related literature, and (d) a summary.

Chapter Two provides a background to the need for a qualitative research study of the lived experiences of African American couples who completed a premarital counseling program. The current focus of the study was to explore the lived experiences of African American couples who completed a premarital counseling program leading African American couples to a successful marriage. The need for this study centers around the fact that African Americans' divorce rate is high compared to non-Hispanic Whites.

Since the 1960s, the African American divorce rate has grown twice that of Caucasians (Pinderhughes, 2002). African Americans have adhered to a problem-oriented or deficit perspective of marriages, leading to a lack of marriages and more likely to divorce (Phillips et al., 2012). When challenged with separation and divorce, African American marriages stand on the heels of premarital education and counseling received either in a local church or a local community agency, if any. According to Clyde et al. (2020), "An accumulating body of research indicates that too many marriages (24%) begin at low levels of quality and satisfaction, and these marriages are at greater risk for divorce" (p. 149). These relationship gaps suggest that further research on applying premarital counseling in African American marriages may improve African American marriage satisfaction rates while reducing the African American divorce rates.

According to Bradbury and Lavner (2012), whether a couple seeks to get divorced or not, the couple shares low levels of marital satisfaction or becomes a couple with a highly satisfying marriage. The gap between low- and high-level marital satisfaction continues to expand as the African American marital rate declines yearly. According to Amato (2010), “Divorce continues to be a major topic of scholarly interest” (p. 650). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.), the African American population in Newark, New Jersey, has the fifth highest divorce rate with the lowest marriage rate among nine races reported by the U.S. Census Bureau (Figure 1). Whether couples have or have not completed premarital education, the divorce rate among African American couples continues to rise across the U.S. A premarital counseling program seeks to enhance relationship quality before marriage by preventing distress and dissolution.

Although divorce rates continue to rise, there is a chance to reduce divorce rates through premarital counseling. Premarital counseling also concentrates on the couple’s pre-marriage deficiencies and current conflicts. The impact of premarital counseling towards preventing and reducing the global trend of divorce (marital breakdown) becomes influenced by local community-based or government-institutionalized programs designed to strengthen, empower, and create profound awareness of the need for potential couples, as well as married couples to make use of available resources and counseling services (Abanyam et al., 2014). A church program, such as a marriage ministry, may offer committed relationship enhancement and conflict resolution techniques for premarital couples. Through the church marriage ministry, couples seek a long-term approach using religion and hope in God to obtain marital satisfaction. According to Cirhinlioğlu et al. (2018), “Religiousness is acknowledged as a significant element of the marital relationship and is one variable that affects marital quality” (p. 208). Although couples may attend a church with a marriage ministry or seek premarital counseling, statistics

indicate that African Americans' separation and divorce rates are rising. This research evaluated a premarital counseling program's effect on African American couples' lived experiences of life transitions before, during, and after completion.

While the transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981) provides the context to the description of the experiences that the couples have had throughout their premarital counseling experiences, the related premarital counseling literature includes an overview regarding premarital counseling, background, and history of marriages established through the local churches providing premarital counseling, the impacts of completing and not completing a premarital education program, and the established theoretical framework relating to the couple's lived experiences provided clear context to the couples transition from single to married. The transition theory in this study was appropriate because researchers previously applied it to the research of African American marriages transitioning into happy marriages (Ali & Ajilore, 2011; Bethea, 1995; Skipper et al., 2021). Chapter Two concludes with a summary of the subject and identifies the gap in the literature that was filled through this study.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework in research serves as the logically developed foundational review and a roadmap connecting a set of concepts and premises toward developing arguments or supporting a researcher's scaffolded work behind a theory of a research study (Varpio et al., 2020). Scholars have recommended that all researchers conduct academic scholarly work led by a theory or a set of theories to give direction toward the phenomenon of interest and how the events are relevant, but without a theory of relevance, then how can research identify what is to be observed for cause-effect relationship (Anfara & Mertz, 2014).

Understanding the significance of the theoretical framework's impact on research studies, such as the descriptions of the experiences that African American couples endured in transition from single to married, are presented through the lens of transition theory as formulated by Schlossberg (1981). Schlossberg's transition theory defines transitions as occurrences that build into life changes in relationships, roles, or routines. These changes present challenges, and Schlossberg's transition theory helps researchers understand the transition model of three types of transition: The 4S system of coping with transitions and three distinct phases of transitioning (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 2011; Schlossberg et al., 1989). As adults age, they theoretically learn to change and manage life transitions (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988).

Transition theory was originally established within the business world to define how dealing with the loss of a job affects a person; the transition theory defines a life-changing experience, whether positive or negative, which changes one's role, relationship, routine, or assumption (Leibowitz & Schlossberg, 1982). Leibowitz and Schlossberg (1982) sought to establish their theory concerning job loss as a transition and that all transitions, regardless of the distinctive characteristics of each, can be explained using a common set of variables: onset, source, timing, affect, duration, and degree of stress. The framework for providing cognitive information on transitions from African American premarital counseling couples to married African American couples is most effectively set by interviewing African American couples who have already experienced similar transitions, which can share valuable discussion of the issues they faced, what was helpful, what was not helpful, and what they wished they had known (Leibowitz & Schlossberg, 1982).

Schlossberg's transition theory focuses on how people and those they are connected to deal with change (Schlossberg, 1981). Schlossberg developed her theory to help businesses

understand how to help people transition to the change proposed. Schlossberg (1981) believed people move through life continually experiencing change and transition, which result in new networks of relationships, behaviors, and self-perceptions requiring them to adapt to the situation. In the transition process, individuals develop expectations and experiences before, during, and after the change. People adapt and cope with change during the transition phase through a support system. A system of coping with transition is critical

since people react and adapt so differently to transitions and since the same person can react and adapt so differently at different points in life, a system of coping with transitions is needed to help adults as they face the inevitable but nonpredictable transitions of life. (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 3)

Three Types of Transition

Life transitions come in three types of transitions: anticipated, unanticipated, and nonevent. Schlossberg (2011) defines the three transitions as life experiences that alter lives, and the critical point of the transitions cements how much an event alters a life by one of the three transitions. The first transition is the *anticipated* transition, an expected event that an individual prepares for, such as planning for marriage through premarital education. The second transition is the *unanticipated* transition that unexpectedly disrupts a person's life, such as a spouse needing emergency surgery. The third transition is the *nonevent* transition, where an expected event does not occur, such as a spouse applying for a promotion and not receiving it. These three transitions formulate "the transition model for understanding transitions, coping with transitions, and applying the model to work-life transitions" (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 159), which is a system of coping with transition since people react and adapt so differently to transitions.

The 4Ss System of Coping with Transitions

As people transition differently, their uncertainty about what is next may become a big mystery and become their misery. An individual needs to have a system to cope with the transition in a systematic format that helps the individual identify four critical resources to aid in a decision-making process: situation, self, support, and strategies. People transitioning will benefit from a coping system using a transitioning model to identify where the individual is in the transition process, whether moving in, moving through, or moving out of the process (Schlossberg, 2011).

The 4Ss system of coping with transitions takes time, and the individual must have a realistic perspective of their situation, self, supports, and strategies. Understanding the situation helps the individual identify what is and is not a stressor, an opportunity, or whether the change to the individual's current lifestyle is positive, negative, expected, unexpected, desired, or dreaded (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988). However, understanding the self identifies a person's strengths and weaknesses from previous experiences in coping with life changes. Furthermore, a person's support system consists of people who are likely to help and are accessible as the moment in time of transition is crucial to one's perception of well-being (Schlossberg, 2011). As the individual becomes aware of life variables, abilities, and available networks, the person strategizes a plan of action to identify areas for improvement to determine if all 4Ss are positive or negative in advancing the decision. If the 4Ss are not favorable, the individual would need to take time to recalibrate resources, adjust position in the transition process, make changes in lifestyle prior to completing the transition, and decide if to delay the type of transition that is problematic (Schlossberg, 2011). When a person becomes accustomed or plateaus to a coping system they use, it could hinder them from successfully working through a transition phase, and

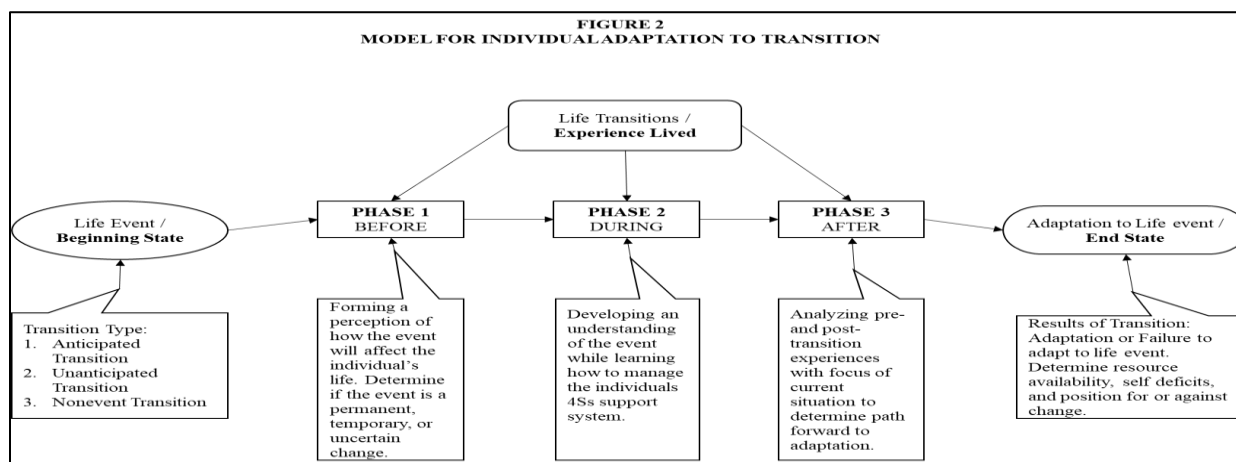
they may need help to revitalize and advance to the desired end state of the transition (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988).

Three Distinct Phases of Transitioning

A person develops lived experiences while participating in transitions. Individuals following the transition model develop lived experiences gained before the transition event, during the transition event, and after the transition event. Schlossberg (2011) stated, “Adults continuously experience transitions, and we know for certain that all adults experience changes that require a new network of relationships and a new way of seeing oneself” (p. 3). Each phase allows the individual to experience factors that influence adaptation to the event experienced. In Phase 1, the individual develops a perception of an event before going through the transition. Phase 2, during the event, the individual creates a new presumption of the transition. In phase 3, the individual combines the before and during thoughts of the transitions to determine how to utilize the learned experience towards adaptation of the event experienced. The researcher created a model for individual adaptation to transition in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Schlossberg’s Transition Model (2011)



Note. Schlossberg’s Transition Model (2011)

Related Literature

The literature review examined recent studies in premarital education and counseling constructs. To establish an understanding of the literature to support this study, the researcher reviewed prior research and theories. The literature review provided the groundwork for this study by understanding how premarital counseling affects African American couples. The researcher divided the literature review into themes, such as the historical background of premarital education and counseling, benefits, communication and conflict management, challenges and consequences in premarital counseling, Christian perspective of premarital counseling, and cost constraints to receiving premarital counseling in an African American community.

Background and History of Marriages

The African American culture has struggled with establishing successful marriages. Marriages across ethnic and racial groups have struggled to establish stability and risk marriages becoming nonexistent over time. According to Burdette et al. (2012), African American women have a two out of three chance of becoming married, and 70% of those marriages end in divorce, compared to 47% of married non-Hispanic Whites. These differences in racial and ethnic marriages affect couples' desire to marry. However, a religious difference between the African American culture and other racial and ethnic groups is paramount. This difference is significant given that African American religion is remarkably vivacious. Research revealed that religious involvement among the African American community is exceptionally higher than indicated among non-Hispanic Whites with religious backgrounds in a local church setting (Burdette et al., 2012). Clinton and Trent (2009) stated, "For a marriage to be long-term and go the distance, it must ground itself in more than a piece of paper. It [marriage] requires the supernatural merging

of lives and the binding of hearts” (p. 89). According to 2 Corinthians 6:14 (NIV), the Bible says, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers in the Bible. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?” (Barker, 1995, 2 Corinthians 6:14).

“God, the creator, designed marriage to be a lifelong and exclusive covenant of love and dedication, leading to children and family, if possible, between one man and one woman” (Clinton & Trent, 2009, p. 88). The church’s focus on a covenant marriage implies that two individuals join together to form one mindset to make long-term marriage possible. According to Clinton and Trent (2009), “A covenant requires the death of two wills and the birth of one. ‘I’ becomes ‘we,’ never to be separated again. The Bible says in Matthew 19:6 (NIV), they are no longer two but one flesh” (p. 88). As the two become one flesh, substantial risk and failure are possible. However, the critical factor is not discovering the right individual, but it is critical for both partners to become the right person for marriage. Both individuals can experience calamities in the journey of marriage, but it is just as possible for both to experience success in marriage (Wright, 1992).

Overview of Premarital Education

Premarital education programs improve couples’ communication, increase relationship satisfaction, reduce relationship distress (Williamson et al., 2014), and help couples learn how to reduce relationship risk factors while improving the couple’s relationship quality and life experience (Stanley, 2001, p. 272). Premarital education originated from an effort to reduce divorce rates and promote healthy marriages in the United States of America. “The divorce rates across the United States and the associated costs of marital dissolution have become increasingly apparent to policymakers, political leaders, and clergy, who have promoted marriage-

strengthening strategies such as premarital education for all couples entering a marriage” (Fox & Shriner, 2014, p. 277). The efforts made by previously mentioned community leaders are to raise protective factors supporting long-term marriages and lower risk factors associated with high divorce rates.

Premarital education provides a premarital prevention program to educate noncoupled individuals on avoiding divorce after marriage. Carroll and Doherty (2003) defined premarital prevention as a piece of information and abilities-based preparation that furnishes couples with resources on ways of supporting and further developing their relationship whenever they are married. A premarital education program will help couples become aware of and identify potential problems that are more likely to happen while married. Premarital education and premarital counseling are similar and, sometimes, interchangeable, but different (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Premarital counseling provides couples with resources to help them work through problems after marriage. Premarital education seeks to prevent marital distress through engagement in teaching communication and relationship skills. Premarital counseling centers around the partners’ positive qualities, including self-openness, trustworthiness, and love, so they can be kept up with to serve the marriage however much as could be expected (Alkhazaleh & Alkhalwaldeh, 2023). Couples in premarital education programs can utilize premarital education in their premarital counseling to help them identify which prevention programs are the right fit for them and how to avoid the hazards within their marriage (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Premarital education is essential for any couple; however, “premarital counseling has become more complex because of the increased number of divorced and subsequently remarried couples” working through their post-divorce attachment (Wright, 1992, p. 255). During premarital education, the couples must “talk in detail about each topic so that the couple reaches a solid

understanding as well as ask questions so they can apply the materials to their lives” (Wright, 1992, p. 217).

Premarital education provides an unmeasurable understanding of each couple’s self-improvement and overall satisfaction (Markman & Rhoades, 2012). Premarital education helps decrease the general divorce rate and increases marriage success rates. Fox and Shriner (2014) reported that participating couples receiving premarital education from ministry leaders allowed them to detect an honest association with a steady body of faith, which decidedly supported their relationship. A premarital education program aims to prevent and reduce human dysfunction, supporting premarital education’s efficacy on the participants’ perception of marriage (Fox & Shriner, 2014).

Couples could easily mistake premarital and relationship education as the same approach to attending to their relationship. However, relationship education provides an evidence-based prevention approach to curriculums toward helping couples discover happiness and pursue unified dreams through techniques that fit individual and distressful circumstances (Markman et al., 2013). Data from the Supporting Healthy Marriage Project, which examined economically advantaged populations, assisted the researchers in concluding that relationship education primarily teaches distressed couples to produce small-scale improvements in raising their relationship satisfaction rates and communication levels (Williamson et al., 2016). In contrast, premarital education provides proactive and purposeful training tools for couples to build stronger emotional bonds for long-term marriage and happiness. Premarital education is a valuable tool to help couples build and endure a healthy marriage that passes benefits down to the couple’s children (Kruenegel-Farr et al., 2013).

Relationship education and premarital education have differences. Premarital education aims to advance couples to their wedding date (Stanley, 2001), and relationship education teaches couples how to live currently in harmony without respect towards the couple getting married (Cobb & Sullivan, 2015). Meanwhile, relationship education and premarital education have common elements, such as working with couples, providing training and tools, promoting happiness, and developing long-term, lasting effects in the relationship.

Nexus of Premarital Education and Marriage

A premarital education program's success depends on the work the couple is willing to put forward towards preparing for marriage success. Couples attending premarital education learn to communicate with their partners, support their partner, love and respect one another, and most importantly, grow closer together through God and live out God's plan for a successful marriage (Reapsome & Reapsome, 1999). First-time premarital couples tend to have differences but have not recognized the differences. As couples spend time together, they tend to ignore negative and harmful relationship warning signs because of having a high emotional state of mind. Wright (1992) wrote, "Each person needs to come to a better understanding of who he or she is" to develop a strong identity of self-strengths and weakness, thoughts and fantasies, beliefs and values expressed through feelings to present a clear and realistic perception of who the individual is marrying (p. 77). Premarital education programs attempt to illuminate first-time premarital couples' differences.

First-time premarital couples need to understand that the lifestyles they currently are living will change, and some of the couples' single-minded aspects must evolve into a lifestyle of togetherness to increase their relationship and marriage satisfaction levels. While in the premarital education program, couples realize their differences, learn how to communicate

effectively, and listen. Active listening contributes to the couple's success in dissolving differences. 1 Thessalonians 5:15 (NIV) says, "Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and everyone else" (Barker, 1995, 1 Thessalonians 5:15). First-time couples may not have the necessary skills and knowledge to resolve and control differences. However, through an effective premarital education program, a couple may defeat the odds of having poor communication and satisfaction in their marriage.

"God created marriage to be a lifelong and exclusive covenant of love and dedication, leading to children and family, if possible, between man and woman" (Clinton & Trent, 2009, p. 88). A biblical worldview of marriage is that of man and woman together to procreate and fulfill God's design of marriage and family. "In the Bible, a covenant was the most serious, sacred, and solemn agreement humans could make between themselves. It is a sacred act for a man and a woman to enter a covenant relationship before God, family, and friends" (Clinton & Trent, 2009, p. 90).

In Genesis 2: 7-8, 18, 21-24 (NIV), God revealed His plan for man and woman when he stated,

The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed; The Lord God said, it is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him; So, the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, bringing her to the man. The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, for she was taken out

of man. For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. (Barker, 1995, Genesis 2: 7-8, 18, 21-24).

God's 'invention' for His people is marriage. He prearranged it, designed it, and initialized the first wedding in the garden, and they became husband and wife. Marriage is a beautiful institution. According to Galatians 6:7 (NIV), when couples invest time and effort into developing their permanent relationship, they accumulate bountiful marital bliss and prosperity (Barker, 1995, Galatians 6:7). Couples that are seeking marriage benefit from attending and participating in premarital education. Thomas (2015) wrote that couples could encounter God in new ways because of the marriage experience. Premarital education allows couples to understand marriage as God designed it.

Marital commitment demands work. Wilson et al. (2005) stated successful marriages in Western cultures require both partners to attend to the relationship while engaging in effective action to promote relationship satisfaction. Partners working on their relationship summon ideas to manage the relationship while participating in a viable activity to advance relationship fulfillment (p. 385). Premarital education's idea of marriage success prepares couples to make positive influences in the relationship for a successful marriage (Wilson et al., 2005, p. 392).

The premarital work couples embed into the relationship builds cohesiveness over time, thus, producing a projected successful marriage in time. Kammrath et al. (2015) determined "that as relationships mature over time, communal actions require less self-control to implement, and cohesiveness becomes a default. Their research suggests that communal actions may be a more deliberative response in newer relationships but more reflexive in established relationships" (p. 276).

History of Premarital Education Program

In the mid-1960s, marriage preparation, known today as premarital education, was a developing concept to prevent the nation's divorce rate from rising (Wright, 1992). Wright (1992) also believed that as the nation sought to identify the contributing factors to the rising divorce rate, church organizations believed the contributing factors toward divorce may have been contributed to by the church by performing effortless weddings without requiring in-depth counseling and education towards building successful marriages. During the 1990s, church organizations decided to develop a community marriage policy to take a stand requiring couples to enter premarital education before marriage (Birch et al., 2004).

Promoting healthy marriages and families is a prioritized function of most church organizations.

In the mid to late 1990s, Michael McManus, a journalist, made news within the United States for a community marriage policy (CMP) by positioning that it was necessary for the Christian body to assert religious leadership in preventing divorce and salvage marriages. (Doherty & Anderson, 2004, p. 426)

Seminaries and other religious organizations train clergy to unite couples under holy matrimony following the church organization's by-laws and covenants. However, a clergyman does not have to perform a couple's marriage when the clergyman disagrees with the union. In efforts to standardize religious marriage requirements, 73 church pastors and ministers from Protestant, Catholic, Jewish Synagogue, and Greek Orthodox churches adopted and signed a community-wide marriage policy in 1986 to make it more challenging for couples to get married (Wright, 1992).

The community marriage policy (CMP) established three fundamental changes to unify churches of various denominations. According to Wright (1992), the first fundamental change for all churches entering the CMP required all engaged couples to enter a minimum four-month preparation period. This preparation period included a minimum of premarital evaluation and counseling, various biblical explanations of marriage, and working alongside a mature married couple for spousal support (Wright, 1992). The second key element in the CMP required two to six mandatory counseling sessions (Wright, 1992). The third fundamental change to unify churches under the community marriage policy required all churches to cooperate across denominational lines by not allowing couples to visit several churches in an effort to forego CMP requirements (Wright, 1992). For example, suppose a couple started premarital counseling at a church under the CMP and decided that the church's program was not to their liking. In that case, the couple could not simply go to another church to avoid completing the CMP marriage requirements. When the next church identifies the couple left a fellow church of the CMP, the pastor informs them of the standard marriage preparation community policy and advises them to return to the first church to complete the preparation requirements. The primary focus of a community marriage policy equips clergy to refuse "performing weddings unless couples had gone through an extended premarital education experience" (Doherty & Anderson, 2004, p. 426). According to Doherty and Anderson (2004), a community marriage policy has supported the development of a modern marital health intervention under community marriage initiatives (CMIs) since the 1970s (p. 426).

Community marriage initiatives (CMIs), a term coined by Sollee in 1995, are derived from marriage education and were developed to address marital breakdowns within the community (Doherty & Anderson, 2004). Sollee established a pathway with the introduction of

CMI to connect disparate marriage groups toward building healthy marriages through a binding combination of cultural changes, skills-based education, and a steady flow of information on marriage (Doherty & Anderson, 2004). This proposed marriage education built the catalyst needed to increase the acceptance of CMIs. Birch et al. (2004) assessed and believed community marriage initiatives (CMIs) help build strong marriages while simultaneously increasing stability in marriages. The community marriage initiative's movement of 1995 made a positive impact on making marriage education the forefront focus for premarital couples (Doherty & Anderson, 2004).

Premarital couples benefited from three popular community initiatives developed during the community marriage initiatives movement of 1995. The first community initiative to benefit premarital couples started in 1996 under an organization called Families Northwest (FNW), which served the state of Washington. Doherty and Anderson (2004) stated that FNW worked to increase the state's marriage success rates, reduce the state's divorce rates, and by 2002, FNW had implemented a four-phased approach to reaching out to and educating communities on marriage and family-building dynamics through various resources (p. 428). The four-phase approach described FNW's Strategy Blueprints that were developed to execute a 10-year cultural campaign.

The next initiative to benefit premarital couples started in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1997 under First Things First (FTF), which operated as a nonprofit organization. FTF is actively involved in premarital and marriage programs and initiatives designed to reduce divorce rates, strengthen marriages, and increase noncustodial fathers' activities with their children (Doherty & Anderson, 2004). FTF's primary focus is Chattanooga, Tennessee, a local community area that emphasizes the African American community. Additionally, the organization offers premarital

online courses and resources, seeks to train professionals through marriage enrichment, and recruits local churches to sign a community marriage covenant.

In 1997, the third program, Healthy Marriages Grand Rapids (HMGR), expanded the 1995 community marriage initiatives movement to benefit premarital couples in Grand Rapids, Michigan. HMGR supports developing a healthy and life-long marriage with three long-range goals to reduce the divorce rates and increase the percentage of churches that offer premarital education (Jones, 2004). According to Doherty and Anderson (2004), HMGR provides faith-based premarital workshops, teaches clergy how to conduct premarital inventories, and hosts events based on marriage and enrichment topics in the African American community. In February, HMGR raises the importance of marriage through a community awareness celebration for the entire month. The celebration aims to allow low-income couples access to relationship education (RE) and marriage preparation classes, premarital inventories, and relationship skills courses provided by local agencies to infuse healthy marriage and RE programs into local communities (Doherty & Anderson, 2004). Other communities nationwide participate in HMGR's premarital workshops to promote CMPs and initiate cultural CMIs (Doherty & Anderson, 2004). Finally, HMGR actively participated as a pioneer in the federal government's efforts to provide premarital and marriage counseling grants to reduce the nation's high divorce rates.

Benefits of Premarital Education

Premarital education provides couples with the best-expected outcome for successful counseling and strengthening their marriage relationship. "Premarital education programs are generally effective in generating significant immediate gains in communication processes, conflict management skills, and overall relationship quality, and the gains appear to hold for at

least six months to three years” (Carroll & Doherty, 2003, p. 114). Couples can develop solutions to ongoing conflicts they have experienced before counseling to evaluate the theories and practicums of premarital education. Hence, couples do not have to wait until marriage to make their relationships successful.

Premarital education teach couples how to support their future spouse; spousal support is critical for couples to develop a cohesive marriage and future. Spousal support's essence is to provide attention to a relationship where couples struggle. For example, in situations where one spouse has considerable resistance to extended benevolence to their partner, spousal support would include educating the spouses on how to repair past hurts and fears of becoming vulnerable to future hurts in the marriage (Vernick, 2013, p. 268). In premarital education, couples learn to support each other while reducing fears of marriage and staying together. Premarital couples often fear not knowing what to expect, how to deal with challenges together, how to continue being individuals within the marriage, or how to plan for financial independence and dependency on one another.

Additionally, a premarital education program can help alleviate pressures of fear that appear to stimulate anxieties, concerns, and worries about the consequences of not finding a romantic partner to marry (Spielmann et al., 2013). Premarital education assists couples in determining their partners’ attitudes and behaviors towards relationships. Also, when couples actively engage in premarital education programs and continue with counseling after marriage, they have a good opportunity to have a good marriage relationship. The couples’ relationship satisfaction rate increases through developing substantial commitment and communication bonds leading to successful long-term marriages.

Research Results on Premarital Education Benefits

Bradbury and Lavner (2012) reviewed qualitative research and analytical summaries of relationship education programs that objectively impact couple relationship quality and communication skills. The review included studies executed three to six months following counseling and education interventions. The authors reported that although the studies indicated the excellent promise of improved relationship satisfaction using continuous and interval counseling, researchers continued to narrow the gap between divorce and successful marriages if the interventions produced lasting changes in the lives of couples (Bradbury & Lavner, 2012).

This question of lasting changes is evident in a study by Soleimani et al. (2021). According to Soleimani et al., building a lasting connection (BLC) is a newly designed premarital program based on emotional focus therapy (EFT) using a building block system of five sections dependent on completing each level sequentially. Soleimani et al. (2021) researched whether premarital education influenced couples who took pretest and posttest marital satisfaction surveys using the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMSS) to determine the significance level of the education received. During the research, there was an experimental and control group. The experimental group received BLC premarital education, and the control group did not receive any education or training. The research results of the mean determined that the experimental group showed a significant increase in marital satisfaction, and Levin's test revealed improvements with a significance level greater than 0.05 (Soleimani et al., 2021).

Researchers have documented the effects of premarital education with proven results of increasing marital satisfaction. In Soleimani et al.'s (2021) research, the benefits of the BLC program created health skills for married couples by establishing security in relationships through attachment, forming the right communication skills in a safe environment, controlling

negative interactions through conflict management, learning how to have a healthy and sexual relationship through sharing, and building commonly shared goals for the future. They also posited that premarital education works; when couples complete a program, they build a lasting connection. The research results on premarital education reassure premarital couples of the benefit of participating in a premarital education program.

Premarital couples also benefit spiritually when religious organizations provide premarital education. Wright (1992) stated that direction from God aligns with His Word. A couple's beliefs and values play a vital role in building a marriage under God's will for marriage and raising a family with religious traditions and benefits.

Communication and Conflict Management

A couple's communication process predicts their marital satisfaction level in their later years of marriage. Lavner et al.'s (2016) research to examine the direction of the relationship(s) between marital satisfaction and observed communication of 431 newlywed couples of the same ethnicity in low-income communities revealed that cross-sectional studies have consistently shown that distressed couples show more negative ways of behaving than moderately satisfied couples. Accordingly, when a couple has poor communication processes, the couple's relationship deteriorates and distress increases with aversive and ineffectual responses to conflict (Lavner et al., 2016). As a result of the inadequate response to conflict, the couple presents themselves as a high-conflict couple. A high-conflict couple is "usually low in valuing love and high in devaluing each other" (Worthington & Ripley, 2014, p. 166). To help couples understand and process their conflicts and difficulties, they need a solution-focused intervention. A conflict management intervention, a solution-focused intervention, will teach a couple to navigate their problems into solutions more effectively and is likely to be beneficial (Lavner et al., 2016).

Conflict Management Skills

Hou et al. (2019) studied 400 Chinese couples and observed that couples' actor-partner interdependence asymmetric association style of communication through conflict management mediates the relationship between marital commitment and marital satisfaction. Actor-partner interdependence asymmetric association style of communication seeks to determine the impact communication has on the association between marriage commitment and marital satisfaction when using conflict management skills (Hou et al., 2019, p. 371). Conflict management skills are among the most critical characteristics among married couples seeking a lifetime of marital satisfaction and commitment. Conflict management skills (CMS) and abilities improve marital satisfaction to assist individual, family, and social concordance (Hou et al., 2019). Conflict management skills are the gateway to a couple's communication process toward avoiding relationship deterioration and distress. Hou et al. (2019) stated, "Doubtless, successful marriages depend on quality communication that may include positivity, openness, and trust, which presents as a means of building intimacy and support that maintain relationships" (p. 370). If a couple cannot manage their conflicts, they will lack effective communication and are bound to encounter stressed relationship connections and marital disappointment.

Communication Processes and Conflict Management Skills Training Support

Participating in a premarital education program is that program trains couples in reciprocal communication using direct and discreet communication styles concerning relationship harmony and satisfaction. Askari et al.'s (2012) research on 54 couples "examined the effects of communication and conflict resolution skills training on marital satisfaction among Iranian couples based on PREPARE-ENRICH program" (pg. 182). The research results indicated that communication and conflict resolution training improved marital satisfaction in

post-test ($p < .05$). This research shows that a premarital education program can help prepare African American couples to remain happily married. According to Askari et al. (2012), communication and conflict management skills highly correlate to predicting relationship satisfaction levels. Therefore, couples can use the training received to support their spouse by being open and not avoiding conflicts, understanding each other's communication style, and committing to a positive and lifelong satisfying relationship (Hou et al., 2019). A positive attitude leads to a change for the better, increasing relationship satisfaction and reducing divorce rates. Gottman and Silver (2015) stated that a positive attitude allows couples to maintain and increase their sense of romance, playfulness, adventures, and learning, which are at the heart of a long-lasting love affair.

This research examined the lived experiences of African American couples who completed a premarital counseling program in African American communities facilitated through local churches. Premarital education efficacy is an important study area because relationship enrichment programs (Shahhosseini et al., 2014) and solution-focused premarital counseling (Murray & Murray, 2004) guide individuals toward having a meaningful relationship with an outlook of a successful marriage. According to Murray and Murray (2004), solution-focused premarital counseling guides individuals toward having a meaningful relationship with an outlook of a successful marriage.

Christian Premarital Education and Spiritual Benefits

Throughout a Christian-based premarital education program, the biblical goal is for couples to grow closer through intimacy, communication, and commitment. Paul stated in Ephesians 5:25-33 (NIV) that the purpose of marriage is for two individuals to become one flesh (Barker, 1995, Ephesians 5:25-33). Paul reiterated three foundational biblical principles for a

successful marriage in this scripture text. Paul provided marital counseling that is integrated with the biblical principle of marriage, whereas Paul stated that the first principle is to love (experience intimacy) each other as Christ loves the church. The second principle is sacrifice (reinforcing commitment) of individual thoughts, hopes, and dreams for the sake of the marriage. Paul illuminated the third biblical principle for the couple to be in one accord (improve communication) through speech and actions. Through scripture and counseling, these three principles guide efforts to maintain healthy marriages and avoid divorces. Through the Handling Our Problems Effectively (HOPE) interventions, couples learn these principles through skills or behavior-based interventions that are highly congruent with Christian beliefs (Worthington & Ripley, 2014). Also, an active and informative church marriage ministry helps foster and reinforce the biblical principles from Matthew 19:3-6 for couples to achieve and maintain a successful relationship (Fincham & Beach, 2013).

Jesus reinforces the biblical principle to achieve and maintain a successful relationship with us in Matthew 19:3-6 God's plan for man and woman. Jesus stated in Matthew 19:3-6 (NIV), "Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason? Haven't you read," he replied,

That at the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and said, for this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and [the man] unite with his wife, and the two will become one flesh? So, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate. (Barker, 1995, Matthew 19:3-6)

Advantageously, when couples complete a Christian premarital education program taken through a religious organization, there is hope from a religious organization that the couple will reduce their risk of divorce and increase their possibility of a successful marriage. Couples'

relationships grow more robust and spiritually as their religious involvement increases with a church marriage ministry (Istratii & Ali, 2023). The benefits of establishing a religious lifestyle among African American couples are providing exposure to moral messages about the importance of marriage, enhancing traditions towards idealizing and prioritizing marriage, and strengthening individual beliefs about the importance of a marital relationship. Burdette et al.'s (2012) study addressed the gap in research on the role of religion in predicting self-reported reasons for nonmarriage by sampling 524 African American, Hispanic, and White participants. The results indicated church involvement reduces perceived barriers to marriage (Burdette et al., 2012). Furthermore, a religious lifestyle ultimately promotes and grants single adults and marriage-minded dating partners access to marriage-oriented social events, hoping to be an influence in an individual's life to live by religious morals and ethical beliefs that converge into unbreakable commitments of revered distinctiveness (Burdette et al., 2012). Individuals identifying with a religious organization such as a church ministry tend to conform to the norms of the messages taught about marriage with a high priority to fulfill the church's doctrine (Burdette et al., 2012).

African Americans and Christian Premarital Counseling

African Americans present as highly religious people but have comparatively low rates of marriage success and relationship satisfaction (Burdette et al., 2012). Burdette et al. (2012) regarded this as the African American religion-married paradox. The study revealed that not all African Americans attend the same denomination or church ministry, but African Americans continue to value similar religious practices and doctrines institutionalized through the family origin (Burdette et al., 2012). The African American church maintains a vital role in promoting and granting single adults and marriage-minded dating partners access to marriage education

programs. However, the African American church induces stress in premarital relationships with outdated doctrines and practices regarding sex and having children (Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008). The outdated doctrines and practices consequently create a barrier for today's African American couples seeking premarital education and couples therapy (CT) toward having a successful marriage.

African American couples actively involved in a religious organization's marriage ministry do not equate to a successful marriage. African American couples continue to battle everyday controversial and challenging norms of society alongside their spiritual journeys. Fincham et al.'s (2011) study analyzed 487 participants from both urban and rural southeastern sections of the United States to explore the relationship between the spiritual experiences of African American partners and their marital quality using the actor partner interdependence model (Kenny et al., 2006). According to Fincham et al., African Americans who regularly attend church tend to have a spiritual and religious lifestyle that does not always present as a cohesive pair. "Spirituality is a buffer for African American couples with life stressors such as oppression, racism, and economic deprivation. In contrast, religion allows individual commitment to honor God through beliefs and doctrine within a faith community" (Fincham et al., 2011, p. 260). Consequently, based on this research from Fincham et al., one could reasonably argue that religion does not allow African American couples to dissolve conflict but does allow couples to self-evaluate motives and behaviors.

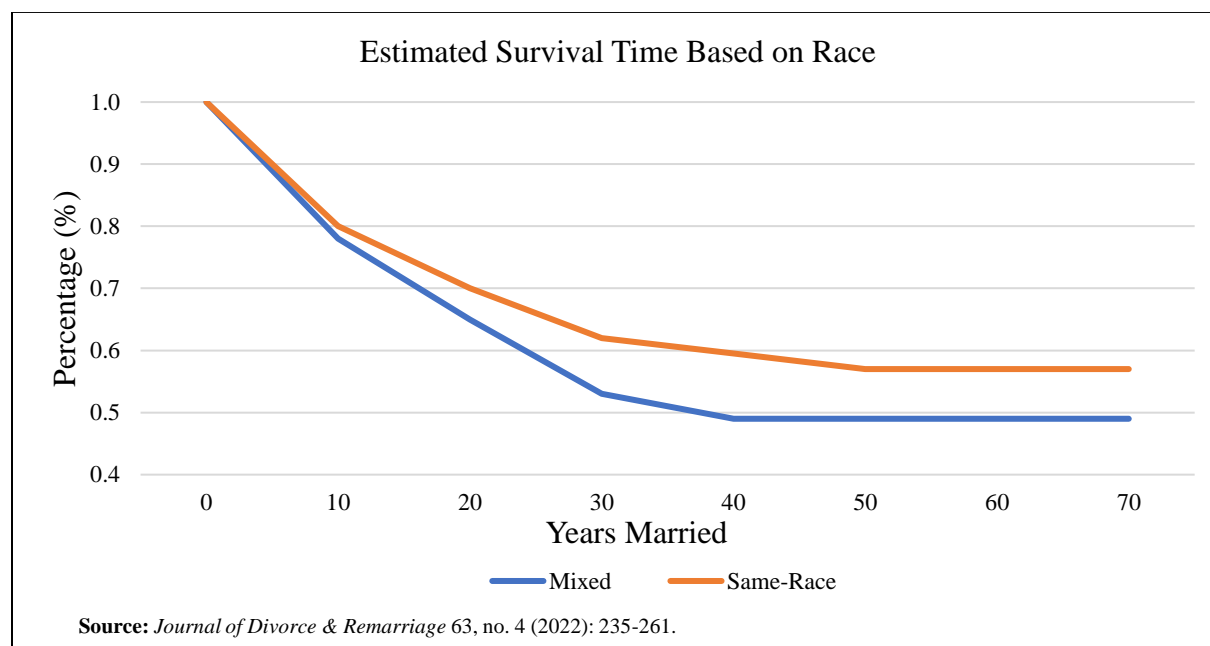
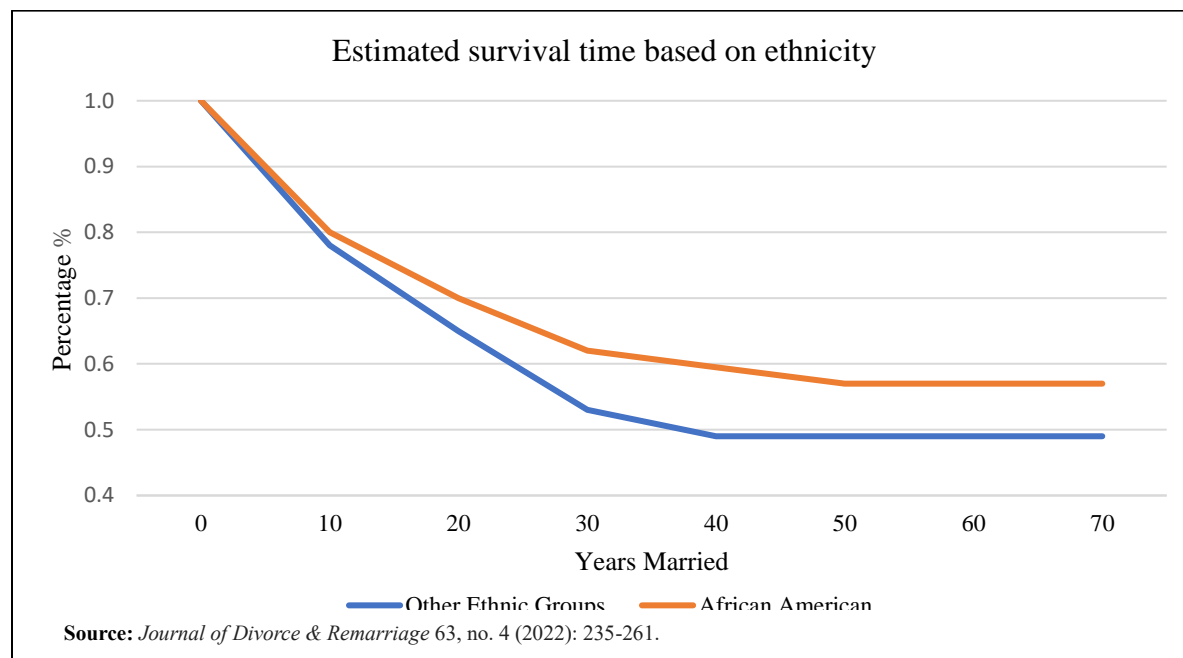
Spirituality allows African American couples to seek to work in harmony, whether the outcome is positive or negative and whether beneficial or non-beneficial for the couple. As African American couples become less active in church attendance and less involved with ministry activities, the couples deinstitutionalize their relationship with the church and its

religious practices (Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008). Therefore, deinstitutionalization allows secular norms to settle into the couples' relationship. Both Wolfinger and Wilcox (2008) and Fincham et al. (2011) agreed these secular norms allow freedom of choice and the ability to become less committed in the relationship, which is the opposite of the norms within the religious message and practice for marriage. The contrast between religious practices and social norms may gravitate couples toward an unsuccessful relationship. It is estimated that 40% to 50% of marriages in the United States end in divorce (Hilton et al., 2024). To illustrate this point from the literature, Fincham et al. reported,

Most African Americans value marriage, and yet the rate of African Americans residing in married-couple families has declined dramatically in recent decades, while the divorce rate of African Americans within the past ten years of marriage exceeds that of Whites, 47% to 32%. (p. 259)

According to Abdel-Sater (2022), in efforts to exhibit the impact of ethnic and social norms on marriages, Figure 3 shows that

60% of same-race marriages are more likely to survive over a period of 40 years; in contrast, only 49% of mixed-race marriages last over the same time period. Results in Figure 4 show that 50% of African American couples are still married as compared to 60% of couples from other ethnic groups during the same period of time. (pg. 249)

Figure 3*Estimated Survival Time based on Race***Figure 4***Estimated Survival Time of Marriage*

Challenges in Utilizing Premarital Education

Couples perceive improvement in their relationship in multiple groupings. Today's couples have a challenging time affording nonessential services and finding time to participate in events outside of work and caretaking of family. Two critical areas to consider for this research are cost and time for couples to progressively grow a successful marriage. Given some couples may be low-income and work extremely long hours, premarital counseling is a service that must be effective to overcome the challenges of cost and time (Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

Cost

Cost is one of two identified critical constraints for African American premarital couples, especially if the couple is a low-income couple. Affordable education and counseling impact attitudes toward couples seeking relationship help and attending premarital education. In 1999, the premarital education counseling fee was \$30 per session, and in 2016, the charge for premarital counseling rose by 35% to \$43 over 17 years (Burr et al., 2017). Data retrieved on March 3, 2022, from www.thumbtack.com showed the rate of a premarital counselor serving the Newark, New Jersey area varied and estimated the average charge for a single session ranged between \$85 - \$1,125 per session. Today's average cost has grown out of reach for low-income couples. Thus, the inflated rate prevents distressed and disillusioned couples from attending convenient premarital education and relationship counseling to experience increased relationship satisfaction (Williamson et al., 2016). The longer couples cannot afford help, the more disadvantaged couples embed distress into their relationship.

Cost continues to present a constraint for low-income families; however, community agencies continue to receive funding from federal government programs to assist premarital education program availability and increase relationship satisfaction and fidelity (Burr et al.,

2017). Assistance with infant care and the cost of the premarital education program are leading factors for couples when seeking programs with incentives. Incentives may help couples attend sessions. A popular incentive is that a few states offer marriage licenses at cut-rate costs for couples when they complete a premarital education program (Burr et al., 2017).

Time

Time is the second of two critical constraints for African American premarital couples. Couples live busy lives, and every category of their life, including their family, competes for time. An easily accessible premarital education session can assist couples in their decision-making process on when to attend a session (Burr et al., 2017). Given that the couples live busy lives, the couple's availability to attend sessions may be scarce. The length and duration of sessions required to complete a program are often issues. Hawkins et al. (2012) researched the average time required to provide positive results from any religious education program and concluded that 9-20 hours of premarital education is optimal for achieving positive results (Hawkins et al., 2012).

Similarly, other researchers reported that four to seven weeks of premarital education is sufficient, and eight to 14 hours is sufficient to achieve positive results (Burr et al., 2017). By combining the two independent studies projects, the couple should attend eight to 20 hours of premarital education over four to seven weeks. The combined suggested hours and duration equates to three hours per week of premarital education.

Alternative methods of delivering premarital education could benefit couples living busy lives. The COVID-19 pandemic helped present alternative methods to counseling services, telemedicine screening, and education via telephone and internet services such as FaceTime,

Free Conference Call, Microsoft Teams, or Zoom (Markman & Rhoades, 2012). These alternative methods have allowed couples to attend sessions at their convenience.

Consequences of not Participating in Premarital Counseling

Despite research findings that premarital education improves the couple's probability of having a successful marriage and supports clinical implications of increasing the African Americans' disproportionately low marriage rate, some couples refuse to engage in a premarital education program Chambers & Kravitz (2011). Nonparticipation in a premarital education program fosters a couple's ability to act out negative behaviors, such as retaining negative reaction patterns, lacking emotional flexibility, reinforcing poor communication, and increasing ongoing cycles of misunderstanding and disconnection (Nightingale et al., 2019). These behaviors present as constraints, where "a couple or family cannot manage their differences, organize, interact, and develop appropriately" (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011, p. 650).

According to Chambers and Kravitz (2011), when couples determine premarital education is unattractive to their growth as a couple, the couple opens the threshold of endless possibilities of marital dysfunction. On average, couples journey through troubled relationships for at least six years, enduring anger and emotional and physical pains, becoming withdrawn and found hopeless before seeking professional help (Nightingale et al., 2019). As couples wait to obtain professional relationship help, the couples develop "a complex matrix of social and psychological and interpersonal constraints" (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011), which may lead to relationship distress requiring intervention to recover from the negative emotionally focused behaviors effectively.

Emotion-focused therapy for couples (EFCT) provides a 70-75% empirically supported intervention rate to effectively reduce relationship distress while encouraging, strengthening, and

reattaching relationship bonds (Nightingale et al., 2019; Worthington & Ripley, 2014). Emotion-focused therapy for couples seeks to prevent relationship separation or divorce. According to an interdisciplinary study group commissioned by the National Institute of Mental Health, “prevention methods are to ‘provide the knowledge base and intervention strategies to prevent or ameliorate’ a wide range of personal and interpersonal disorders” (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). First-time premarital couples’ satisfaction will increase while using Emotion-focused Therapy (EFCT). “Emotion-focused therapy for couples emotionally softens and increases the secure attachment between partners, particularly for full forgiveness” (Worthington & Ripley, 2014). In essence, the couple learns to apologize meaningfully. Nevertheless, the couple needs to address the hurt in the relationship to stop the ongoing hurtful pain by someone they love. “Some couples will have considerable resistance and fear of extending benevolence and repairing hurts out of fear that they are vulnerable to future hurts” (Vernick, 2013).

Negative Attributes of Not Having Premarital Education

Couples can avoid negative attributes such as poor communication and listening skills, unidentified problems, and lack of respect for one another in their marriage by completing a premarital education program. “The goal of a premarital education [counseling] program has four components as such: (1) teach couples about marriage life, (2) enhance communication skills, (3) develop conflict resolution skills, and (4) learn to talk about sensitive topics” (Murray & Murray, 2004). If a couple chooses to forgo participating in a premarital education program, then the couple encounters negative attributes that may generate marital distress, negatively impacting a person’s mental well-being, physical health, and work productivity (Stanley, 2001). Furthermore, when couples develop negative attributes in their relationship from not having

premarital education, “the development of marital distress focuses on negatives over time leading to a decline in satisfaction” (Markman et al., 2010, p. 290).

Premarital education informs couples of possible risk factors that increase marital distress and relationship failures. Without premarital education, couples inefficiently identify and address damaging risks. According to Stanley (2001), risk factors exist for couples who have not participated and have not completed a premarital education program. Four critical risk factors present are difficulties in leisure activities and sexual relations, communication withdrawal and invalidation, escalation of defensiveness and withdrawal, and difficulties in communication and problem-solving (Stanley, 2001).

Communication and education reduce marital distress while eliminating risk factors. According to Markman et al. (2010), a lack of communication and premarital education seduces couples toward divorce because couples lack training in resolving conflicts, preventing infidelity, lacking relationship commitment, and preventing their relationship from growing apart (p. 289). Couples lacking efficacious communication skills increase relationship risk factors and become highly vulnerable to developing significant relationship problems. As the couples’ risk factors increase, the couple’s prediction for relationship satisfaction declines, and as the couple’s relationship satisfaction declines, predictions increase for the couple to divorce shortly after marriage (Markman et al., 2010).

Community-based and religious organization premarital education programs provide couples with skill sets to manage conflicts and communication. Although African American married couples participate in premarital education programs, African American couples continue to separate and divorce (Skipper et al., 2021). Research shows that a premarital education program can help prepare couples to remain happily married. Muluha Keverenge et

al. (2020) found that premarital education and couples counseling steered couples toward a successful marital union while encouraging couples to revisit a marital therapist to avoid separation. Unfortunately, not all couples heed the advice provided in premarital education programs, particularly those attending premarital education and counseling as a requirement rather than a desire before marriage. Among African Americans, marriage is a well-respected union, and the vast majority of African Americans still value and desire marriage all over the world (Skipper et al., 2021). Scholars believe the premarital counseling conception's main objective is to assist families in re-evaluating their views about marriage and its values to experience marital harmony (Muluha Keverenge et al., 2020). Unfortunately, marital disharmony leads couples to divorce and downgrades the marriage institution worldwide.

Summary

In summary, the review of the literature demonstrates that premarital counseling educates African American couples seeking to have a successful marriage and satisfying relationship. Even though African American marriages are uniquely different from other races, premarital education provides an understanding of educating communities on marriage and family-building dynamics through various resources. The literature reveals the gap in understanding the African American history of premarital support for stability and quality. Numerous key factors can influence African American marital satisfaction, such as communication, conflict management skills, income, time, available resources, cultural and religious norms, and personal desires.

The literature has established that premarital education and premarital counseling can increase relationship satisfaction, reduce relationship distress (Williamson et al., 2014), and help couples learn how to reduce relationship risk factors while improving the couple's relationship quality and life experience (Stanley, 2001) by teaching communication and conflict management

skills. Although research has shown the efficacy of premarital education, the focus of premarital counseling has been primarily on developing a lifestyle of effective communication and conflict resolution skills to reduce the African American divorce rate. Premarital counseling in the African American culture has been severely lacking in providing proactive and purposeful training tools in preparing couples to build strong emotional bonds for long-term marriage and happiness. Premarital education is a valuable tool to help couples build and endure a healthy marriage that passes benefits down to the couple's children (Kruenegel-Farr et al., 2013). Until this study, there was no research on the lived experience of African American couples after completing a premarital counseling program.

This transcendental phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of African American couples who completed a premarital counseling program through the theoretical framework of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory. This research study answered the central question of how couples experienced premarital counseling through the following questions: 1) How do participants describe their expectations for premarital counseling before participating in the premarital counseling program? 2) How were the participants' expectations met, and what were the unexpected outcomes experienced while participating in the church's premarital counseling program? 3) How do participants describe the short-lived and enduring influences of their premarital counseling experience? Based on this study's results, the couples may strengthen their life experiences with strong emotional bonds for long-term marriage and happiness and endure a healthy marriage that passes benefits down to the couple's children, ultimately reducing the African American divorce rates.

Chapter Three: Methods

Overview

Chapter Three provides a comprehensive explanation of the research design, analysis, and procedures used in this qualitative study. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore African American couples' lived experiences of premarital counseling in New Jersey. The data collected described the lived experiences of a select group of African American couples' premarital counseling administered to couples seeking a successful marriage. Chapter Three describes the purpose of the transcendental phenomenological research design, the research questions, the setting of the research, the selection of the participant, the researcher's role, both data collection and analysis methods used, the steps taken to ensure trustworthiness, and concludes with ethical considerations

Methodology and Design

Design

For this qualitative study, the researcher applied the transcendental phenomenological research method to describe the African American experiences of the couples who attended premarital counseling in an African American community in New Jersey. The study's qualitative method is a phenomenon that is used to identify the relation (associated with) one or more themes (Allwood, 2012). Phenomenological research is conducted in two methods known as the transcendental approach and the hermeneutical approach. The hermeneutical approach identifies the appearances of the participants' full understanding of the literature given and taught during counseling (Moustakas, 1994, p. 9). In the transcendental approach, the researcher translates the participants' reflections from a historical perspective of the experiences throughout the premarital counseling process (Husserl, 1970).

As this study was a transcendental phenomenological research design, its conceptual framework brought supplementary dimensions to the study of human experiences through qualitative research (Sheehan, 2014). The transparent method is known as epoche or bracketing, providing a deeper understanding and more meaningful parallels that emerge from the couple's lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). The data collected from the research questions evaluated the lived experiences of African American married couples who completed premarital counseling.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the research for this transcendental phenomenological study:

Core Research Question

How do African American Couples describe their experiences attending a premarital counseling program in the African American church?

Sub question One

How do participants describe their expectations for premarital counseling before participating in the premarital counseling program?

Sub question Two

How were the participants' expectations met, and what were the unexpected outcomes experienced while participating in the church's premarital counseling program?

Sub question Three

How do participants describe the short-lived and enduring influences of their premarital counseling experience?

Setting

This study focused on the lived experiences of African American married couples who attended premarital counseling through predominantly African American churches in New Jersey. The premarital counseling consisted of a local community church pastor providing marriage counseling and spiritual guidance. The participants' actual names were omitted and replaced with pseudo names by order of the interviews conducted and their correlating letters in the alphabet. For example, the 1st couple would be Couple A, then pick two names that start with A, 2nd couple = B, and so on. This study's interviews took place virtually using Zoom, a telecommunication software. Due to COVID-19 health concerns and the random geographical locations throughout New Jersey, Zoom was the most effective method for interviewing the participants. The participants were in a location of their choosing, a comfortable environment that allowed the participants to express themselves freely.

Participants

This study focused on African American married couples within a local church of mixed nationalities. All participants had to be heterosexually married and were not considering divorce. All participants had to be 21 years old and older, must have attended premarital counseling, and must have been married for a minimum of two years. The researcher recruited the volunteer participants via a flyer attached to a posting through the researcher's Facebook and Instagram social media accounts and through email sent to various local churches in the New Jersey African American community areas marriage ministry and posted flyers on bulletin boards throughout the church. The flyer contained detailed contact information for the participants to participate in a married couple's research interview. The research focus group comprised of 10 – 12 African American married couples. This study was held through online interview questions

via Zoom to all participating couples.

Procedures

Before I initiated the study, I submitted my application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application to Liberty University's IRB for approval. I emailed the demographic questionnaire using the DocuSign application (Appendix F) once the approval was granted from Liberty University's IRB (Appendix A). DocuSign became a popular platform application for signing documents during the COVID-19 pandemic, remote signing, and tracking (Marques et al., 2021). Next, I contacted a select group of local churches throughout New Jersey's local African American community to begin recruiting and selecting appropriate premarital couples to become participants in the study. I sent out an email or corresponded through the private local churches' Facebook or Instagram group with a flyer attached requesting participants needed for a married couple's participation in a study regarding the lived experiences of having engaged in a premarital education program to a select group of local churches (Appendix C). I requested the local churches to post the same flyer on each church bulletin board (Appendix B).

Once I identified the premarital couples, I sent an email to the candidates inviting them to participate and explained the purpose and processes of the research study (Appendix D). The couples who accepted to participate completed the online demographic questionnaire to capture their demographic information and information about their lived experiences with premarital counseling. The couples selected to participate were emailed a welcome letter with an informed consent document attached (Appendix E). The informed consent letter included information about the purpose of the study, procedures and expectations of the participants, the known risks and expected benefits of the study, an explanation of how their confidentiality was protected, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I collected the data using demographic questionnaires, cognitive representation drawings, and semi-structured interviews (Appendix G). I facilitated the interviews utilizing Zoom's telecommunication software. I recorded all data collection electronically, and I stored the data on a two password-protected personal computer. I gave all the participating couples pseudonyms in the transcriptions to protect their confidentiality.

The Researcher's Role

In a qualitative research design, the researcher plays a vital role as they play a part in a theatre scene as the research instrument (Collins & Stockton, 2022). The reason the researcher is seen as the instrument in qualitative research is that the researcher is involved in a series of roles (facades), which, when decrypted, can provide significance in all phases of interaction in the study, such as defining a concept to design, conduction in-person interviews, performing transcription of audio recordings, providing an in-depth analysis of the couples experiences, finalizing verification and reporting the concepts and themes (Collins & Stockton, 2022; Sanjari et al., 2014). Collins and Stockton (2022) defined an interview as focusing on the participants and their deepest values, beliefs, and experiences on the topic being explored. Due to the researcher being the primary research instrument, the objective of the research is to apply the way Goffman addresses conflicting roles in the context of everyday life and put it in the specific role of a researcher conducting an interview (Collins & Stockton, 2022) through being transparent of his roles, experience, assumptions, traits, and interests that might impact the research and the study's outcome (Yin, 2011). The researcher's critical function in the research is to know their limitations within the role of the interviewer.

As this study is a transcendental phenomenological research design that brings added dimensions to the study of human experiences through qualitative research (Sheehan, 2014), the

transparent method is known as epoche or bracketing, providing a deeper understanding and more meaningful parallels that emerge from the couples' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). Epoche/bracketing is where the researchers set aside thoughts, beliefs, judgments, roles, experience, assumptions, traits, and interests to understand best the lived experiences of the study's participants anew for the first time (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Sheehan, 2014; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015).

While this researcher had some ideas about the benefits of attending premarital counseling and counseling, the researcher was determined to set aside subjective opinions to focus on the participants' lived experiences in this study. Before the recruitment of the participants, the researcher had no interaction or relationship with the participants to ensure trustworthiness for this study.

Data Collection

I conducted a transcendental phenomenological study to describe the lived experiences of African American married couples who attended premarital counseling. Upon approval from the IRB from Liberty University, I approached volunteer participants to commence the data collection. I endeavored to collect data through each online interview from 10 – 12 voluntary African American married couples with a minimum of two years of marriage experience after completing premarital counseling. I acquired data using three different methods: questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, and cognitive representation drawings. This triangulated process enabled me to authenticate the themes from the data, which added trustworthiness to this study (Creswell, 2013).

Demographic Questionnaire

A demographic questionnaire (Appendix F) was provided to all volunteer participants for the sole purpose of identifying qualified married African American couples. The goal of the questionnaire was to identify 10-12 African American couples that participated in premarital counseling. The participants completed a demographic survey assessing the length of time they had been married, the gender, race, age, date of premarital counseling and status, and the name of the facilitating organization. This demographic questionnaire included questions about their knowledge of premarital counseling and asked the premarital couple to reflect on their counseling and share their most memorable, meaningful moments. By considering the responses to the questionnaire, I was able to determine which couples to select. I selected participants based on their premarital counseling experiences to gather full, more extravagant depictions of their experience, whether positive or negative.

Interviews

In qualitative research, the interview is seen as the most powerful method of collecting data through shared experiences that are best understood through joint interviews (Skipper et al., 2021). This study used semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions to understand the African American couples' shared experience of the phenomenon (Appendix G). Throughout the interviews, the researcher characterizes the participants as the source of answers to the experiential questions (Schwandt, 2015). The researcher's goal with the qualitative research interview was to collect data from the participants to understand the world from the African American couples' point of view and discover the meaning of the African American couples' lived experiences of premarital counseling (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Once the interview questions were finalized, the semi-structured interviews for data collection began. Prior to beginning each meeting with each couple, I explained the reason for the research, the procedures of the interview, how I protected their confidentiality, their rights to withdraw, and the significance of the participants being genuine and frank. Participants were allowed to ask questions or voice their concerns at any time during the interview.

Interviews were scheduled for approximately 90 minutes, allowing enough time for answers to be fully expressed. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed afterward by a professional transcription software application. To practice reflexivity, I documented my thoughts after each interview to clearly describe our (participants and myself) contextual intersecting relationships (Dodgson, 2019).

Open-Ended Semi-Structured Interview Questions

The following is the formal list of in-depth questions that were used in the semi-structured interviews:

Opening Questions

1. Please tell me a little about yourself as if we were meeting for the first time.
2. How did you meet?
3. What made you decide to become engaged?
4. How would you describe your relationship with your parents or parental figures growing up?
5. How would you describe your parent's marriage while growing up?

I. Questions Related to the Experience of the Moving In Phase

6. Please describe your experience of learning about premarital counseling. What were your initial thoughts when you heard about premarital counseling?

7. Please describe the process you took as a couple to decide to participate in premarital counseling. What were the circumstances surrounding your decision? What was the appeal of the premarital counseling that helped sway you to say yes?

8. After registering for premarital counseling, what were your expectations prior to attending premarital counseling?

9. How would you describe your relationship before attending premarital counseling?

II. *Questions Related to the Experience of the Moving Through Phase.*

10. How were your expectations met while attending premarital counseling?

11. What challenges did you experience while attending premarital counseling?

12. What were some unexpected experiences you encountered while attending premarital counseling? Were they positive? Were they negative?

13. While attending premarital counseling, how would you describe your experience with the interactive exercises of premarital counseling?

14. While attending premarital counseling, what did you experience, or what were your thoughts, emotions, and feelings as you learned the material that was being presented?

15. While attending premarital counseling, how would you describe your relationship?

III. *Questions Related to the Experience of Moving Out Phase*

16. As you look back at your premarital counseling experience, how would you describe your experience with premarital counseling? Was it an overall positive experience or negative, and why?

17. How do you feel that you, your spouse, and your relationship benefitted (or did not benefit) from you completing the premarital counseling?

18. How would you describe your relationship since attending premarital counseling?

19. What would you tell other premarital couples considering attending premarital counseling?
20. Is there anything else related to your premarital counseling experience that you would like to add that we have not already discussed?
21. Would it be okay if we did a follow-up or a clarifying interview if needed?

The semi-structured interview questions were developed and divided into four categories. The first category was opening questions, consisting of Questions 1-5 and intended to capture further background information about the participants. Questions 1-3 were designed to let the participants get comfortable with the interview process by answering facts about themselves and their relationship with one another that were easy to answer. Question 4 was designed to capture information that may reveal each participant's attachment styles while growing up and the style they might bring into the relationship. Question 5 was designed to understand what type of marital relationship was modeled to the participants as they grew up. An individual's childhood and relationship with one's parents can impact the quality of adult marital relationships (Reczek et al., 2010).

The next three categories aligned with Schlossberg's transition model's three distinct phases of a transition – *Moving In*, *Moving Through*, and *Moving Out* (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg et al., 1989). Questions 6-9 were designed to elicit information about the premarital couple's *Moving In* phase. Specifically, the questions sought information about the participants' experiences with becoming familiar with premarital counseling's rules, regulations, norms, and expectations (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg et al., 1989). Questions 10- 15 addressed the participants' experiences with Schlossberg's transition theory's (1981) *Moving Through* phase. The researcher was looking for data about how the participants "knew the ropes" (Anderson et

al., 2012, p. 57) and how they faced “issues such as how to balance their activities with other parts of their lives and how to feel supported and challenged during their new journey” (Schlossberg et al., 1989, p. 16). Questions 16- 21 referred to the participants’ experiences attending an experiential, premarital counseling in the *Moving Out* phase. Since the participants have entered in, gone through, and emerged out of a growth process, it is vital to learn about its impact (Anderson et al., 2012). The questions also sought how they integrated lessons learned as they moved forward to the next transition process, including marriage (Anderson et al., 2012).

Cognitive Representations

Toward the end of the couple’s interview, the researcher asked them to mentally portray their viewpoints and sentiments about their experiences of going through premarital counseling. The researcher gave the couples a few minutes to reflect upon their thoughts and feelings and then gave them a sheet of blank paper and a box of crayons. The couples received instructions to create a colored picture or pictures, regardless of words, to capture a propositional representation of their feelings and considerations about their lived experiences of premarital counseling (Frederiksen, 2002; Hubach, 2020). The cognitive representation was accomplished toward the end of the interview to offer a method for communicating anything they might not have had the option to communicate verbally during the interviews. After around 10 minutes, or when the participants let the researcher know they had completed the drawing, the participants depicted and made sense of their drawings to each other and the researcher. The researcher recorded their remarks.

Data Analysis

Following the data collection, the researcher approached the data utilizing a manual approach through an inductive and deductive coding process (Chandra & Shang, 2019) to

conduct data analysis. The researcher developed a manual chart to organize the raw data by plotting first-order coding and open coding. The chart consisted of Primary Themes, Number of Open-Code Enumerations in Subthemes, and Subthemes. The data analysis involved various levels of coding, comparison analyses, reading and re-reading of transcripts and field notes, reflecting, listening to interview transcriptions, and grouping emerging themes from the data collected from the interviews and demographic questionnaires. This study used a phenomenological approach, and the data analysis was composed of structural and textual analysis. According to Padilla-Díaz (2015), “Textual analysis refers to the description of what is expressed by the participants in the interview. Structural analysis refers to the interpretation of how it is expressed by the participants” (p. 105).

This researcher audio recorded and transcribed all the interviews using the Otter app tool (www.Otter.ai). The Otter app allowed the researcher to capture the participants’ rich phenomenological descriptive lived experiences (Vishnevsky & Beanlands, 2004). The researcher shared the transcripts during member checking to allow the participants and the researcher to review the notes taken to make corrections and provide final details, which is intended to be a moral and ethical methodological credibility enhancement to the research (Goldblatt et al., 2011).

The Otter app collected keywords during transcribing, allowing the researcher to identify informal, conversational recorded themes and subsuming themes. The themes identified allowed the researcher to formulate statements capturing the participants’ lived experiences and ability to code all the data collected into appropriate themes based on what the participants discussed regarding their relationship experiences and each other (Boeije, 2002). Descriptive statistics allowed the research to compare and contrast the data while discerning conceptual similarities

and patterns. All recordings and transcripts were double locked on a thumb drive in a numerical locking safe in a locked private office.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative and quantitative research share the commonality of establishing trustworthiness in research. The degree of confidence in the data, interpretation, and methods employed to assure the quality of a study is referred to as the study's trustworthiness or rigor. (Connelly, 2016). This study established the necessary procedures to consider this research worthy by readers. This study established research credibility, dependability and conformity, and transferability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) outlined acceptable criteria for qualitative research primarily to ensure credibility in establishing trustworthiness.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the internal validity of qualitative research with confidence in the truth of the study and the findings (Connelly, 2016). According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), credibility lays out whether the research discoveries address conceivable data drawn from the members' unique information and is a right translation of the members' unique perspectives (p. 121). This research measured what is intended to keep the study's findings congruent to the reality of the participants' experiences. To ensure this study's credibility, the researcher engaged in member checks, prolonged engagement, and persistent observation (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Prolonged exposure was accomplished by the researcher establishing the trustworthiness of developing a rapport and spending sufficient time establishing a relationship over time with the participants and understanding how the experiential solution-focused and attachment-based premarital counseling functioned and the participants' lived experiences (Shenton & Hayter,

2004). To accomplish persistent observation, the researcher identified the most relevant information to the study of the phenomenon and filtered out any misinformation collected in the process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Finally, the researcher first transcribed the interview notes and verified the data interpretation's accuracy by sending the interviews to the members to review and send back. Then, the researcher checked in with the members by soliciting on-the-spot feedback (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015).

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of the data over time and over the conditions of the study, which the researcher ensures that the collected data analysis is within the chosen research design (Connelly, 2016; Cope, 2014; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Confirmability is concerned with neutrality, or the degree findings are consistent, repeatable, and the researcher's ability to demonstrate that the interpretation is derived from the data, not the researcher's biases or viewpoints (Connelly, 2016; Cope, 2014; Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

This study followed the logical progression of the transcendental research design method, which included the purpose of the study, the selection of the participants, the setting, the process of data collection, how the researcher conducted the analysis, and strategies to ensure trustworthiness (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). An audit trail is a strategy that was used to accomplish dependability and confirmability, and all steps were documented. This information was available for all inquiries and audits to verify the data and methodology that led to the dissertation's completion. A reflexive journal was kept composing the researcher's thoughts, feelings, and reactions to bracket any biases or presuppositions. While interacting with the participants, the researcher took on the role of a reporter to let the participants speak for themselves and not guide or lead their answers.

Transferability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) lists transferability as one of the four criteria of a research study's trustworthiness. Transferability is the extent to which findings are useful to persons in other settings, whereas readers determine how applicable the study findings are to their situation (Connelly, 2016). For a qualitative research study to be transferable to another context or population, the researcher must provide a thick, rich description and sufficient descriptive data of the phenomena (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). This research made all the research data of the phenomena as descriptive as possible for the study to benefit other contexts and populations.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to any data being collected, Liberty University's IRB approval was obtained. Ethical considerations were addressed in this research because it is fundamentally necessary in any qualitative research that the researcher applies concern to all ethical issues during each phase of the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once IRB approval was obtained, I selected participants from the demographic questionnaires to identify the maximum variation in population for the entire research study. All information obtained from participants who completed online questionnaires was kept in a secured location. All participants' identities were protected by assigning pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. All participants received and signed an informed consent letter, which included information about the purpose of the study, procedures, and expectations of the participants, the known risks and expected benefits of the study, an explanation of how their confidentiality was protected, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All data collection were stored electronically on a two password-protected personal computer.

Summary

Chapter Three provided a comprehensive explanation of the research design, analysis, and procedures used in this qualitative study. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore African American couples' lived experiences of premarital counseling. Chapter Three described the purpose for the transcendental phenomenological research design, the research questions, the setting of the research, selection of the participant, the researcher's role, both data collection and analysis methods used, the steps taken to ensure trustworthiness, and concluded with ethical considerations.

For this qualitative study, the researcher applied the transcendental phenomenological research method to describe the African American experiences of couples who attended premarital counseling in an African American community. The study's qualitative method is a phenomenon studied to identify the relation (associated with) one or more themes (Allwood, 2012). As this study was a transcendental phenomenological research design, its conceptual framework brought supplementary dimensions to the study of human experiences through qualitative research (Sheehan, 2014). The data collected from the research questions evaluated the lived experiences of African American married couples who completed premarital counseling.

The following questions guided the research for this transcendental phenomenological study: **Core Research Question** - How do African American couples describe their experiences attending a premarital counseling program in the African American church? **Sub question One** - How do participants describe their expectations for premarital counseling before participating in the premarital counseling program? **Sub question Two** - How were the participants' expectations met, and what were the unexpected outcomes experienced while participating in the

church's premarital counseling program? **Sub question Three** - How do participants describe the short-lived and enduring influences of their premarital counseling experience?

This study focused on the lived experiences of African American married couples who attended premarital counseling through predominantly African American churches. The participants' actual names were omitted and replaced with pseudo names by order of their interviews conducted and their correlating letters in the alphabet. This study's interviews took place virtually using Zoom. Due to COVID-19 health concerns and the random geographical locations, Zoom was the most effective method for interviewing the participants. The participants were in a location of their choosing.

The researcher's role provided significance in all phases of interaction in the study, such as defining a concept to design, conducting in-person interviews, performing transcription of audio recordings, providing an in-depth analysis of the couples' experiences, finalizing verification, and reporting the concepts and themes (Collins & Stockton, 2022; Sanjari et al., 2014). The researcher focused on the participants and their deepest values, beliefs, and experiences on the lived experiences through attending premarital counseling. While this researcher had some ideas about the benefits of attending premarital counseling and counseling, the researcher set aside subjective opinions to focus on the participants' lived experiences in this study. This study used semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions to understand the African American couples' shared experience of the phenomenon (Appendix G). The researcher's goal with the qualitative research interviews was to collect data from the participants.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of African American couples who completed a premarital counseling program through the African American church. The research questions that directed the data analysis process included: How do African American couples describe their experiences attending a premarital counseling program in the African American church? How do participants describe their expectations for premarital counseling before participating in the premarital counseling program? How were the participants' expectations met, and what were the unexpected outcomes experienced while participating in the church's premarital counseling program? How do participants describe the short-lived and enduring influences of their premarital counseling experience?

In this chapter, the couples who agreed to participate are introduced. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the couples. Following the participants' introductions, the results from the data collected from the demographic questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and the focus group discussion are presented. The themes were created by coding and clustering following Moustakas' (1994) method of phenomenological reduction. Chapter Four concludes with a summary of the findings from the data collection.

Participants

This study was conducted with the assistance of African American couples describing their lived experiences of completing premarital counseling by sharing their stories of their experience. I emailed pastors and posted my recruitment flyer on social media platforms of African American churches and social media married groups and received a list of interested

participants. This allowed me to reach out to 6 social media sites, 9 local churches and pastors, and 36 couples for potential participants by email and enlisted participants to help in reaching out and recruiting other couples to participate. The pastors were able to secure the interest of 10 couples. Ten couples filled out the demographic questionnaire and met the criterion to participate in the research study. One of the interested couples did not participate in answering the semi-structured interview questions because, at the time of the multiple scheduled interviews, the couple was experiencing marital difficulties.

Although one married couple at the time when the research was conducted did not complete the interview, the other nine couples provided rich data to the study. Their valuable input is described further in the subtheme of Selective. The nine couples recruited were given the pseudonyms of Abe and Amy (Couple A), Carl and Carla (Couple C), Duke and Dazie (Couple D), Ed and Eva (Couple E), Fred and Freda (Couple F), Greg and Gina (Couple G), Herbert and Helen (Couple H), Ike and Ida (Couple I), and Red and Big Texas (Couple RBT). Pseudonyms were selected as the couples completed their interviews and aligned with the letters in the alphabet in descending order. The table below presents a comprehensive overview of common and individualistic characteristics prevalent within the study group.

Table 1*Participants Demographics*

Couple's Pseudonym	Age	Relationship Status at the time of the Premarital Counseling	Current Relationship Status	Length of Relationship	Premarital Counseling Date	Premarital Counseling Format
Abe & Amy	27/31	Engaged	Married	5 Years	2020	In-Person
Carl & Carla	50/50	Engaged	Married	18 years	2018	In-Person
Duke & Dazie	65/67	Engaged	Married	39 years	1984	In-Person
Ed & Eva	45/45	Engaged	Married	22 years	2008	In-Person
Fred & Freda	51/43	Engaged	Married	18 years	2005	In-Person
Greg & Gina	60/61	Engaged	Married	37 years	1986	In-Person
Herbert & Helen	45/45	Engaged	Married	9 years	2018	In-Person
Ike & Ida	53/55	Engaged	Married	28 years	1995	In-Person
Red & Big Texas	34/49	Engaged	Married	7 years	2018	In-Person

Abe & Amy

Abe and Amy met in college through the online app *Tinder*. Amy earned her master's degree in fashion design but works as an educator, and Abe does not have a degree but has created four businesses. Abe is from a foreign country, and he has obtained his American Citizenship. He came to America seeking health care and treatments he could not get in his home country. Abe's parents were married during his childhood, and they are currently married. However, Abe's mother was very abusive physically and verbally to both her children and her husband. Abe's father was very passive and loving to his children. Amy's mother and father never married. Her father was abusive physically and verbally to both his children and Amy's mother. Amy grew up witnessing her mother work two and sometimes three jobs, earn a

master's degree, become an educator, and love her and her brother tremendously. They both did not have a marriage role model to follow for a happy and satisfying marriage.

Abe and Amy dated for three years before getting married. Abe stated the reason he knew Amy was the one for him was because "they had shared experiences, he loved her personality and character, and she saw something more than just a friend." Amy stated, "Believed Abe has a big heart, and he was challenging. He is extremely sweet and traditional to include he showed a lot of interest and went out of his way to make her happy."

Carl & Carla

Carl and Carla met through two mutual friends who were dating. They met at one of Carla's friends' backyard bar-b-queue. Carl showed up and caught Carla's eye because he was the only person who ate the random food brought by Carla. Over time, they saw each other in passing, but neither had an attraction to the other. Carla was a single mother who wore many hats. Carl was a truck driver. They both had children, all boys, but nonbiological together. They dated and lived together for 11 years before getting married. Carl felt he was running his life in a muck and felt he was losing his relationship and was on the verge of losing Carla, so he decided to marry her. He bought a ring for her to propose to her, but before he could ask her, Carla's son broke the news to her. Carla described their living situation as "fun with no pressure" given both were previously married.

Carl and Carla's parents were not together long. Carl's parents were never married, however, when they separated, they became the best of friends. Carla's parents were married for five years but divorced due to clashing personalities and disagreements. Carla is close to her mother, and her father is deceased. Carl is the baby of his family and was very spoiled by his

mother up until she developed dementia. Carl's father tried his best to raise him and his siblings, but he was a ladies' man and not a good communicator with Carl.

Duke & Dazie

Duke and Dazie met in Europe while Duke was active-duty. Navy and Dazie worked at the base pass and tag station. Duke and Dazie are unique in that they did not do premarital counseling together but did it as a prerequisite from their church as part of their spiritual development. They do not have the same religion, yet they both understood they needed to learn how to be a good person first before they go out seeking someone to marry. Dazie's parents had a good marriage through her father's passing. Her grandparents were living with them, and she stated, "Her grandmother taught her a lot and had a really close family as she grew up." Duke's parents were married and divorced after 15 years. Duke stated, "My parents became better friends after their divorce, and I learned a lot from my father of what not to do in a marriage."

Duke and Dazie both shared marriage values and desired to have a long-lasting love relationship. Duke chased Dazie for one year before she would go on a date with him. Duke liked her conversations and how Dazie carried herself. The feeling was mutual for Dazie in respect to how Duke carried himself and resiliently pursued her for one year. Dazie stated, "He was very polite and good with her family." They each had one unwavering rule they followed: Duke said, "No arguing," and Dazie said, "No alcohol."

Ed & Eva

Ed and Eva met at the movie theater. Eva knew Ed's immediate family before she knew Ed. Ed was in the military and was home on leave. His brother and one of Eva's friends were in a courtship. Ed and Eva were invited to go to the movies with Ed's brother and Eva's friend. Ed and Eva really did not want to be a third wheel on their date but caved in and went. Ed talked to

Eva throughout the entire movie. Eva stated, “I like to pay attention and just watch the movie.” After the movie, they exchanged numbers and called each other every now and then on the phone, according to Ed.

Ed was in the military stationed in another state far away from Eva, and he was finishing the final year of his contract. During that one year, Ed continued to call and visit when he could. Eva enjoyed the phone calls, emails, and going to the movies and dinner when he came home to visit family. Eva stated, “We started off as a true friendship.”

Ed decided to get engaged to Eva because he prayed to God for confirmation that she was the one. Ed took time to wait for God’s response for one year after they had been in courtship for one year. At the three-year mark of their relationship, Ed believed in his heart that since everything was going well, she must be the one. Ed and Eva were together for five years before they got married. Eva was very patient and followed the role model of her parents. Ed witnessed constant arguing from his parents before his mother passed away. Ed was not close to his father but extremely close with his mother, who taught him how to treat a lady. Ed considered himself to be a momma’s boy because he went to her for everything, including how to be a responsible male. Ed’s dad was always there for him but raised Ed with a country-style mentality.

Fred & Freda

Freda and Fred have been married for 18 years. Freda is a teacher, and Fred is an Assistant Principal. Fred is also a local pastor. They have five kids. Fred is the stepfather of three of their children. Freda is President of one of the ministers’ wives and widows’ associations, and Fred is the Vice President of one of the united clergy associations. They met in Newark, NJ, when Fred was a teaching assistant at a charter school, and Freda was a parent. Fred soon

became the Minister of Music at the church Freda was attending. Freda was the President of the Youth Choir at the time. Fred stated,

Freda always had my back when it came to several different situations that came upon my life. She did not have to do it, but she was nice enough to do it and help me at the school and church.

Freda grew up with her parents, but they were not married, and her grandparents, who were married. Freda stated, “It wasn’t always easy because I saw a lot of things, but there was always love in the house.” Fred stated, “I grew up with my parents. It was great. Many of my friends did not have their parents living with them, so I was blessed.” When it came to describing his parent’s marriage, he stated,

Well, I did not really see them hug one another or kiss one another, not even on the cheek, but they were raised in the South, so they only did what they saw. I knew they loved each other because they would always have each other’s back.

Greg & Gina

Greg & Gina are born-again believers who both were born in Brooklyn, New York, and have been residents of New Jersey since 2018. They met at a mutual friend’s birthday party. As time passed, with good company, they decided to become engaged. Gina wanted to get married because they were living in cohabitation and were parents to a two-year-old daughter, which led them to believe and decide that the time was right. They both enjoyed fruitful and healthy relationships with their respective mothers; both lived in a single-parent household and had no experience of seeing what a marriage looks like. Gina did not speak too much. She is a quiet person. Greg is lively but reserved with personal and intimate emotions and experiences. Both work for their church and volunteer throughout the community.

Herbert & Helen

Helen was raised in Georgia, and Herbert in New York. Helen has lived in the South most of her life and ran track and field at the University of Mississippi and works at the CDC (Centers for Disease Control) and has a doctorate in health education. Herbert is a personal trainer and loves helping people reach optimal health through nutrition and exercise. He moved to Atlanta over 18 years ago. They love to travel together and try to prioritize it in their relationship. They met online in 2016 and bonded over their love of sports, both having twin siblings, and meaningful conversations on dates. They got along very well with each other, and there was a level of peace each of them had about their relationship that they had not experienced before. Herbert proposed because he “knew where his bread was buttered” and understood the strong connection and mature relationship they had developed.

Helen told her family that Herbert had a great personality and gave her a level of peace that made her more secure in the relationship, unlike any other. She stated he was kind to her, funny, and fun, consistently engaged in daily conversations with her, and made dating enjoyable. Herbert told his family Helen was different than the type of woman he would typically go for (into fitness all the time, dominating personality, and had a certain “look,” but after a divorce, he wanted better for himself and decided that being shallow or focusing on only aesthetics was not serving him well at all. Herbert said Helen was funny, driven, accomplished, and fun to be with.

Helen’s mother was a single mother, and her father was mostly not present in her and her twin sisters’ lives. There were few role models of a healthy and happy marriage, and the only close resemblance to a healthy marriage was her maternal grandparents, with whom she spent a lot of time. Herbert’s parents are still together. He saw what he thought was a healthy marriage and saw his parents work together to provide for their family. He did not see them fight in front

of him, and when his father was consumed with spending most of his free time playing golf and his mother hanging out with her best friend during her free time, he saw them eventually come together to ensure fair time was shared with the kids and home responsibilities. Herbert saw that even in challenging times, a compromise was eventually made for the good of the family.

Ike & Ida

Ike and Ida meet in church on the praise and worship team. Ike was raised in church and felt they did not need premarital counseling but participated because the pastor made it a requirement. He also stated, “I was raised by Christian men and women who always taught me how to do things right and how to treat people right.” Ike’s mother played a significant role in how he always treated women and how a man should respect his wife. Ida stated, “I had no clue what premarital counseling was about and didn’t believe we needed it.” Ida was more into just being nice to everyone and working with everyone to resolve any differences. Ida’s mom was extremely tough on her and her sisters about making sure to carry themselves like a respectable lady and always respect and honor their husbands as God instructed.

Ike and Ida were drawn to each other through their observations and teamwork in serving God, the church, and others. Ida loved listening to Ike sing and preach. Ike loved listening to Ida sing and minister to others. Ike and Ida were drawn together by each other’s God-given light. They now pastor a local church, raise their kids, and facilitate premarital counseling before they marry a couple as a requirement.

Red & Big Texas

Red, born in New Jersey, was the youngest of two in her family. Red was a praise dancer from childhood and danced in 30 or more professional musical productions such as The Nutcracker. She went to college to become a Licensed Professional Counselor to work with at-

risk children. Red was also a cheerleader throughout college. Big Texas, born in Texas, was the youngest of five siblings, he was an all-star football player, and an honor student. Big Texas joined the Army after high school graduation and began his college education while serving. Big Texas earned two master's degrees and one bachelor's degree. Big Texas recently graduated with a Master of Theological Study and teaches at a small seminary institute. Red and Big Texas met at Red's church when Big Texas was looking for a local church to join when he moved from Texas to New Jersey. Both are alumni of Liberty University. Red and Big Texas solidified their relationship over good preaching with great praise and worship. One of the things that Red stated they did not like and how it helped them in their relationship was poor biblical teaching and sermons. Red shared her dream with us about God's vision for her: "While I was sleeping, God spoke to me and said, you will marry a preacher, and I will elevate you." At the time of the interview, they just finished celebrating their 5th wedding anniversary; Big Texas is a pastor, and Red is an officer in New Jersey's local Women's Baptist Association.

Results

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of African American couples who attended premarital counseling in African American communities facilitated through local churches. The results were collected from the eight couples' responses to the demographic questionnaires, the semi-structured interviews, and the focus group discussion.

Theme Development

As outlined in chapters three and four, participants were recruited with the help of pastors and social media platforms. The pastors emailed their members on my behalf to inform them of the research study and invited them to participate. When a couple responded to the pastors that they were interested, the pastors forwarded me the participants' contact information. I emailed

the participants the invitation letter that explained the purpose of the research study, the processes of the research study, and the SurveyMonkey link for them to complete the demographic questionnaire. Once I received notice that the demographic questionnaire was finished, I reviewed it to see if they were viable candidates to participate in the research study. When a candidate met the criteria, they were sent two more emails: 1) the first thanking them for their interest, as well as beginning correspondence to schedule the semi-structured interview, and 2) an email from DocuSign that provided a link for them to fill out the informed consent document electronically.

The researcher utilized Zoom, a teleconferencing platform, to conduct semi-structured interviews and to assist couples with developing their cognitive representation of their relationship at the time of moving through their premarital counseling. Following the interviews, within 48 hours of each interview, the audio file was submitted to Otter.ai, a professional transcription service. After receiving the transcription, the accuracy was verified by cross-referencing with the audio file and making necessary corrections. Once the transcription was confirmed, a second copy was made, and pseudonyms were assigned to replace real names. The pseudonym transcripts were converted into qualitative data analysis utilizing a manual approach using an inductive and deductive coding process (Chandra & Shang, 2019, p. 91).

After reading and understanding how to approach the data with inductive reasoning, I developed a manual chart to organize the raw data by plotting first-order coding and open coding. This process was difficult as I was unable to see the various theoretical dimensions leading to broadening themes after reading multiple times, and I decided to seek help from my Chair. After seeking guidance from my Chair and receiving clarity on how to read the data and create three primary themes following Schlossberg's (1981) *Moving In, Moving Through*,

Moving Out phases, I closely reviewed the data, made notes, combined the data, and began marking the couples' interview passages and text with coding. I organized the data in a visual outline form using the primary themes, generating clear subthemes.

Themes

While the purpose statement and theoretical framework guided this research study, data analysis was driven by the research questions and the theoretical framework. Data analysis revealed three primary themes: *Before Premarital Counseling*, *During Premarital Counseling*, and *After Premarital Counseling*, each having two or more subthemes. The first theme of Before Premarital Counseling contains the subthemes of Attitudes and Expectation. During Premarital Counseling, the second theme includes the sub-themes of the Pastor's Attitude and the Pastor's Approach. The sub-themes of Relationship Growth, Overall Experience, and Recommendations are included in the third theme, *After Premarital Counseling*. Table 2 presents a catalog of themes, subthemes, and the total number of open-code enumerations identified within the subthemes

Table 2

Organization of Themes, Subthemes, and Enumerations

Primary Themes	Number of Open-Code Enumerations in Subthemes	Subthemes
Before Premarital Counseling	25	Attitudes
	44	Expectations
During Premarital Counseling	35	Pastor's Attitude
	58	Pastor's Approach
After Premarital Counseling	58	Relationship Growth
	49	Overall Experience
	45	Recommendations

Before Premarital Counseling

The first primary theme discovered is *Before Premarital Counseling*, which aligned with Schlossberg's (1981) *Moving In* phase. Specifically, in this phase, the questions asked sought information about the participants' experiences with becoming familiar with premarital counseling's rules, regulations, norms, and expectations. In addition, two subthemes emerged: *Attitudes* and *Expectations*.

Attitudes. At the beginning of the interviews, the participants were asked to express their thoughts about participating in premarital counseling. The participants' attitudes fell into two categories: *Needed Premarital Counseling* and *Did Not Need Premarital Counseling*.

Needed Premarital Counseling. This category represents those couples seeking guidance and support before marriage as an essential proactive measure to experience successful marriages. Five of the nine interviewed couples reported having needed premarital counseling before getting married. Abe and Amy, Ed and Eva, Fred and Freda, Herbert and Helen, and Red and Big Texas communicated that they would be able to identify potential barriers with the help of a professional counselor by seeking guidance and support before premarital counseling.

Abe and Amy, being the youngest couple interviewed, stated, "We had a great yearning for premarital counseling to show us how to have a loving and forever marriage given we both came from dysfunctional and abusive households." Herbert and Helen stated, "We eagerly wanted premarital counseling because we saw couples who had gone through the process and through the church and all the useful tips they learned." Helen said, "Premarital counseling is something I want whenever the time comes to marry." Duke and Dazie explained that their exposure to premarital counseling was through their respective family churches before getting married, and the mothers of the churches provided the counseling. Duke said, "I was taught to

love and respect my future wife,” while Dazie stated, “I was taught to follow my future husband.” Both shared similar statements of wanting premarital counseling because they both had difficult childhoods with their parents, and they wanted something different.

The category “Needed Premarital Counseling” in premarital counseling also represented the mindset of each partner being open to positive change and growth before marriage. The couples in this research study had parents as role models and experiences with prior personal love relationships. Herbert and Helen stood out from the group because Herbert was divorced. Before taking premarital counseling, Herbert stated:

Prior to dating and after my divorce, I was pursuing counseling for myself to decipher the behaviors and habits I had that contributed to the failure of my first marriage. I felt premarital counseling would fill a big void that was missing in my first marriage, and I wanted to enter this subsequent marriage better and get counseling as a couple before getting married.

The couples interviewed in this study faced unique challenges portrayed to have been due to that would negatively impact their relationships. Red and Big Texas said, “We were having difficulties and personal problems going on and wanted help from the pastor.” Fred and Freda stated, “Our relationship was challenging, and we felt that premarital counseling would help make things work out.” Ed and Eva sought help to “learn how to talk to one another and deal with issues.” Greg and Gina, along with Ike and Ida, said, “We do not know what we need, but we want support.”

Additionally, those who *Needed Premarital Counseling* represented couples’ excitement after learning about premarital counseling. Four couples had interesting remarks about why they were excited about premarital counseling. Abe and Amy shared that they wanted premarital

counseling so they could sit down and work through their current issues because they thought it was necessary to understand each other, why they are a good fit for each other, and God's expectations of their roles as husband and wife spiritually. Eva stated,

My initial thought of hearing about premarital counseling, I thought it was a clever idea. You know, just to get it just to get somebody's thought process on how it can seem like a good marriage should be, you know, like the flow of things, how you can work things out, you know.

Helen stated, "For the most part, getting to ask and get answers to questions I may have missed asking during dating was an exciting opportunity for me." Red stated,

I was thrilled and excited to hear and learn about premarital counseling because it looked beyond the surface of the other person. I was raised with the saying look out for the wolf in sheep's clothing, everybody wants to make a great first impression and almost never show their true intentions, but after a while, they always reveal themselves.

Did Not Need Premarital Counseling. This category represents couples who felt they did not need support or guidance before marriage. This research showed that four of the nine couples interviewed felt that they did not need premarital counseling. Duke and Dazie stated, "We are going to rely on God and nothing else." Carl and Carla, Greg and Gina, and Ike and Ida all shared this distinct perspective, as they mentioned they felt they did not need premarital counseling. Carl and Carla specifically stated, "We do not need premarital counseling. We know each other." However, Carl said, "We prepared ourselves to go through a process and expected to learn something to improve." Greg and Gina stated, "The church made it a prerequisite, and it was all a mystery to us, but we understood the need for it." Ida stated, "I only ever thought premarital counseling was an option for Christian couples. However, I feel everyone thinking of

getting married should do it. I felt it was a promising idea.” Ike, on the other hand, was more like Carl and Carla, as he stated, “Growing up in a Godly home, I was already aware of premarital counseling. My thoughts about doing premarital counseling were fine with me.” Carl stated, “We thought we knew each other; we lived in the same house for 11 years, and you would think that you knew every single thing about each other, and we were wrong.”

Expectations. The second subtheme of the *Before Premarital Counseling* theme is *Expectations*. Regarding expectations, the participants fell into two main groups: those who *Had Expectations* and those who *Did Not Have Expectations*.

Had Expectations. This category included couples who had expectations of premarital counseling. Nine couples expressed that they believed effective communication, conflict resolution, roles in marriage, guidance and support, and maintaining marital satisfaction were crucial aspects of premarital counseling. Greg and Gina, along with Ike and Ida, expected that couples could strengthen their relationship and conquer future challenges with positive habits by attending premarital counseling.

Communication. Abe and Amy, Duke and Dazie, Ed and Eva, and Ike and Ida agreed that couples who communicate effectively should expect to have a successful marriage. Duke stated, “Our communication kept us together when we were thousands of miles away from each other. Communication is vital to the survival of any relationship.” Ed stated, “I want us to have communication like we had growing up. We sat at the dinner table and had open family communication so we can learn how to talk through differences in any difficulty.” Ida stated, “We both understood and agreed that communication is on the top of our priority list regarding marriage.” Amy stated, “We needed to learn how to communicate more about us rather than Abe’s illnesses because we are limiting our communications and relationship growth.”

Conflict Resolution. In participants' interviews, three couples shared how they felt about dealing with conflicts. Herbert and Helen, Carl and Carla, and Red and Big Texas believed that conflict resolution skills are vital for couples, and expected to learn how to manage conflicts, as conflicts are inevitable in any relationship. Herbert and Helen shared, "We learned how our communication styles needs to be considered, especially when dealing with conflict." Herbert stated, "Helen was less likely to hash it out immediately and needed time to process her thoughts in order to communicate effectively and respectfully." Helen stated, "Herbert, instead, liked to approach issues immediately." Herbert and Helen stated,

We decided that is was best to not let issues linger for days, but also not approach the situation immediately and give each other a few minutes to process their thoughts and decipher if this is a perceived issue or a real issue that must be addressed.

Moreover, Hebert and Helen believed that gathering tools and insights can help couples navigate complex issues such as racial discrimination and trauma.

Carl stated,

I was a street guy, so I ran the streets and bars. I was in that mindset of just out there, that is where I was at in my life. Okay. Well, so what that did was made our relationship rough. So, it was new, we were at a point where we were not going to make some changes happening.

Carla stated,

You know, when we first met, it was fun, right? And we were just hanging out. And then I think, individually, we were not on the same page. And I think that is what happened. So, you know, I met Carl and Carl was who he was, and then a couple of years into it, I am like, okay, this is not fun for me anymore. And I, you know, I started to grow individually.

And I think Carl remained the same for quite some time. And so, I think that is where the disconnect with us happen is because Carl was not growing up. And I was and I was looking for more and not necessarily marriage but for him to individually kind of mature a little bit faster and kind of leave the thoughts things behind. And I think that was where, where the conflict with us came from.

Carla stated, “So we were living in the same house. We eat dinner together, we would do things together, but we just would not talk to each other like would not communicate which is like, not good.” They both decided to utilize premarital counseling as the vehicle to help them through their conflicts. Carl wanted to learn about how to handle relationships, and what he needed to do to make a relationship work. Carla wanted to learn how to communicate and develop their relationship in an intimate and understanding fashion. Through the premarital counseling, both of their expectations were met. Carl and Carla stated,

We think we had a lot more in-depth conversations than we expected. We did not know exactly what to expect when we started, but we think as we were in the process of it, we had some meaningful discussions, and after the counseling and throughout the month until we met with Pastor again, our discussions were a lot more in-depth and a lot more intentional.

Red and Big Texas had several conflicts going on prior to premarital counseling. They agreed and stated, “We were having conflicts and difficulties. Our relationship was rocky, we both had our own personal problems going on and we are addressing them separately.” Red stated, “We never addressed our conflict, we just stopped communicating and separated for a little while.” Big Texas stated, “I would just stop talking and let the situation calm down, but I never brought up the situation to resolve it. I thought that since we separate for a little while and

come back together that everything was ok.” Red and Big Texas’ conflicts were never addressed independently of premarital counseling nor during premarital counseling.

Roles in Marriage. Fred and Freda expected premarital counseling to offer marital satisfaction by enabling them to know how to keep a strong and fulfilling relationship. They agreed and shared Freda’s comment that marital satisfaction is a critical component of premarital counseling. We are expecting to learn how to understand what we need to do to keep our relationship strong and fulfilling.

Guidance and Support. This study found that couples consult and seek guidance and support from their pastors before marriage via premarital counseling. The couples expected the pastor to provide premarital counseling to assist them by leading them to successful marriages and providing a platform for seeking guidance from their pastor, which would significantly benefit them. During premarital counseling, the participants were expected to discuss important topics and potential issues in a supportive environment with guidance and learn meaningful life and marriage skills and tools to navigate challenges in the present and the future. Eight of the nine participating couples sought guidance and support from a pastor who depicted a positive attitude to enable them to build a stronger foundation for their marriage, which led to a fulfilling and lasting marriage. Carl and Carla, Duke and Dazie, Fred and Freda, Greg and Gina, and Ike and Ida expected to receive guidance and support from their pastor as they felt the pastors were supportive and knowledgeable and trusted them. Carla stated,

I think the one thing we both agree on about our pastor is that he is super thorough, and we are always going to get something out of it. Right. So, that was the expectation just based on how he operates. We knew it was going to be thorough, it would not be short. Because we are passionate, if you will. So, it was just a process, and I think we had just

prepared ourselves that it was going to be a process and there was an expectation that we would learn something, but I do not think we knew what that was.

Dazzle shared a conversation she had with her pastor. She said,

The only guidance and support my pastor told me because he knew Duke was military. He said to me, “Okay, you going to marry this young man? And if he goes somewhere, are you going? And I said, “Yes, I am.” And he said, “That is what I wanted to hear you say because in order for your marriage to work, you need to be with your husband. You said you are marrying him then you go where he goes.

Fred stated, “Our pastor at the time suggested that we have pre-marital counseling with him and his wife to discuss the pitfalls in a marriage.” Greg stated, “When the pastor told us we needed to participate in the process, we obliged. He said, ‘We need to understand that in participating, we would be better equipped to have a successful marriage.’” Ike stated, “My expectations with our pastor was to get a clear understanding of my fiancé’s expectations and thoughts of what she believed she was seeking in a husband and father to our children. Abe and Amy, Ed and Eva, Herbert and Helen, and Red and Big Texas expressed that seeking guidance and support from their pastor, especially one familiar to them, was an expectation during premarital counseling. Eva stated,

My expectations are that we are really going to get the tools and understanding of how a good godly marriage should be, the pastor would help us and learn how to keep God the center of our relationship. I expect to learn how to talk to one another and deal with issues in the correct way. So, we sought out our pastor for premarital counseling, and I

just knew that we were just walking out of it, you know, with great tools to use in our marriage.

Herbert stated, “We wanted to be equipped with practical strategies and tools to develop and maintain a healthy and mutually respectful partnership.” Red and Big Texas stated,

Our expectation of the pastor’s support and guidance was unmet because of how little the pastor said and did to prepare us for marriage. The pastor did not know how to provide premarital counseling and did not have any materials to share with us, leaving us with a negative experience of premarital counseling.

Red stated, “I want to do premarital counseling over with someone who knows how to provide premarital counseling because I feel cheated out of experiencing the joy of developing a successful marriage.”

Did Not Have Expectations. This category contains couples who lacked expectations of premarital counseling. Among the interviewed couples, only three did not have expectations. Duke and Dazie stated, “We are going to rely on God and nothing else.” Fred and Freda stated, “We want good communication and marital satisfaction, but we do not have an expectation to get that from the premarital counseling.” Greg and Gina stated, “All this is a new concept, and we do not have expectations, but we know we will get something good out of it.”

During Premarital Counseling

The second primary theme is *During Premarital Counseling*, which correlates with Schlossberg’s (1981) *Moving Through* phase. The researcher was looking for data about how the participants faced “issues, how they felt supported, and what challenges they experienced during their new journey. Two subthemes emerged that described the couples’ experience of *Moving Through*: The Pastor’s Attitude and the Pastor’s Approach.

Pastor's Attitude. The Pastor's Attitude played a key role in the outcomes of the participants' premarital counseling experiences. The couples determined the pastor's attitude was either positive or negative.

Positive. From the results, the researcher noted how the participants characterized a pastor's positive attitude during premarital counseling by the pastor's active engagement and investment in the couple's wellbeing. The couples expected their pastor to listen to their concerns carefully, provide thoughtful feedback, and help them work through any issues. Two out of the nine couples responded that they had experienced a positive attitude from their pastor during premarital counseling. Four of the nine couples expressed they had a positive experience with premarital counseling but did not elaborate on the pastor's attitude. Abe and Amy, along with Carl and Carla, stated they had an attentive pastor who took the time to get to know them personally, which allowed the pastor to tailor the counseling sessions to the couple's specific needs. Their pastor taught Carl and Carla that couples can manage complex issues by attending workshops, reading books, and participating in support groups to build healthy relationships and overcome barriers unique to African American couples. Abe and Amy stated, "By us being proactive and ambitious at attending premarital counseling, we were able to start conversations and actively listen to each other's thoughts and feelings with the pastor's guidance." Amy's cognitive representation of their relationship while going through premarital counseling was depicted as clarity with cosmic understandings of two worlds, first coming with the willingness to sit down and understand one another (See Figure 8). Amy and Abe laid out the most important things to each other and pointed out things they could not live without. Amy stated, "Choosing a qualified professional can ensure we receive effective, safe, and confidential counseling." Amy also stated, "We made great progress because our pastor was good and got Abe to open up." Abe

stated, “Everything the pastor said about marriage and what will come up has been happening while we have been living together, and we plan to handle it the way he taught us.” Abe and Amy and Carl and Carla felt they had an attentive pastor who took the time to get to know them personally, which allowed the pastor to tailor the counseling sessions to their specific needs.

Carl and Carla believed they had the best premarital counselor. They stated, Our Pastor has been a blessing in our life. It brought us so much closer to building our relationship. Furthermore, we are very thankful that even though we did not think we needed it, he presented premarital counseling as a requirement to us and did not make it an option. Because it did enrich our experience and our lives.

Carla stated,

Pastor was outstanding and got Carl to take off his mask for a moment to allow her to truly see him and have an opportunity to learn more about him. The pastor helped us get a deeper understanding of each other.

Negative. From the findings, a pastor or premarital counselor with a negative attitude displayed less interest in the welfare of a couple. As a result, they did not offer sufficient guidance or assistance because they could be less inclined to listen attentively to the couple’s apprehensions and may not take the initiative to establish a personal connection with them. Three of the nine couples said they had encountered a negative pastor’s attitude during their premarital counseling. Ed and Eva were excited to participate in the premarital counseling because they witnessed how excellent their friend’s communication was because of the education they received through premarital counseling on how to communicate. However, they commented that their pastor did not go deep enough into providing premarital counseling. Ed stated,

There were no fundamental exercises implemented because it was time to get up by the time we sat down. The pastor was exceedingly popular and had a hectic schedule, and their sessions were noticeably short. There was not enough time.

Eva stated, “I believed the pastor judged our relationship from the outside looking in because we did not present with any problems; therefore, we were fine.” Red and Big Texas stated,

Our pastor did not know how to provide premarital counseling and did not have any materials to share with us, and maybe because he always saw us in church and looking fine, we did not have any problems. He did not spend time with us.

This type of not-so-attentive counseling led Ed and Eva, along with Red and Big Texas, to an unsatisfactory counseling experience, leaving the couples feeling neglected and their issues unresolved. They were hoping, in general, for their pastor to be conscientious in facilitating a constructive and advantageous premarital counseling session for them. Red and Big Texas were suffering from poor communication prior to participating in premarital counseling. Red stated,

We were having difficulties. It was rocky. We both addressed our problems separately, but we did not necessarily understand that they still affected the relationship with the other person. Our expectation of learning to communicate with each other was unmet.

From Red and Big Texas’ experiences, the study revealed that their pastor’s style during premarital counseling shaped how the couple experienced premarital counseling. The couples found that a pastor’s style was crucial when deciding to participate in premarital counseling to match a couple’s preferences and needs. Herbert and Helen had an unpleasant experience during their premarital counseling sessions with their pastor. Helen stated, “It seemed like my pastor was being judgmental of my fiancé because he had been divorced.”

Pastor's Approach to Premarital Counseling. This subtheme involves how a pastor conducts premarital counseling. All the couples said that the approach of a pastor was significant. The following participants shared their assessment of a pastor's approach to providing premarital counseling. Abe and Amy, Ed and Eva, Herbert and Helen, and Red and Big Texas expressed that the pastor's approach in premarital counseling is integral to equipping couples with the necessary tools for a lifelong commitment in marriage. The couples believed that a comprehensive premarital counseling approach includes communication skills, conflict resolution strategies, expectations for marriage, and spiritual beliefs. They expected to gain valuable insights and practical tools to build a more robust and healthier relationship. They saw premarital counseling as an opportunity to establish a firm foundation for a fulfilling and successful marriage that will endure a lifetime.

Three Approaches to Education. Education was a critical area for eight of the nine couples in this study, and they based their consensus on wanting to learn all they could to prepare themselves for marriage better. They aimed to avoid pitfalls, have educational tools for every situation, and share knowledge with others seeking premarital counseling. Few couples in this study lacked interest in premarital counseling and hence did not push for the issue of lacking premarital education materials.

Within the sub-theme of the Pastor's Approach to Premarital Counseling, three categories were identified that described the type of education the couples received during the *Moving Through* phase: *Bible and Curriculum*, *Bible and No Curriculum*, and *No Bible and No Curriculum*.

Bible and Curriculum. This research showed that there are couples who opt for secular approaches, thus choosing counseling materials not rooted in any specific religion. The *Bible and*

Curriculum type offer a balanced perspective, allowing couples to identify potential relationship issues and learn effective communication, compromise, and future planning skills. Four of nine interviewed couples expressed that they have utilized bible and curriculum premarital materials. Fred and Freda shared that having a curriculum and using the bible helped them communicate their affection in a way that resounds with their partner. Fred stated, “Using the bible with a curriculum allowed us to be honest with each other and gave us some work to do when the session ended.” Herbert and Helen shared, “The curriculum allowed us to have intimate discussions about what we can do to improve as a couple and individually.” By understanding each other’s love language, couples can prevent misunderstandings and conflicts. Greg and Gina felt nervous going through the premarital counseling and learning from the bible and curriculum on how to be a married couple. However, Gina stated, “As time passed, it became more and more understandable.”

Greg and Gina, along with Fred and Freda, had similar experiences with their premarital counseling. Fred and Freda agreed that during their premarital counseling, they got to express their views on marriage and how to have relationships while learning from the curriculum how to communicate in one accord. Greg and Gina stated, “We began to understand from the Bible and curriculum how important it is to express our individual views of a marriage and relationship with God to each other through mutual communication efforts.”

Carl and Carla used the *Five Love Languages*, written by Dr. Gary Chapman, as their curriculum as a requirement from their pastor to learn how to communicate and understand each other. Carla stated, “I had to learn his love language and understand why it was his love language.” Herbert desired to learn to communicate better because he did not have premarital counseling in his previous marriage. Herbert stated, “We learned how our communication style

needs to be considered, especially when dealing with conflicts. We decided it is best not to let issues linger for days but not to approach the situation immediately.” Herbert and Helen learned conflict resolution through traditional couples counseling with the bible and curriculum from their pastor. Mutual and open communication with a traditional counselor is a guided approach to helping couples understand what is stated and received.

Carl and Carla appreciated reading, sharing, and understanding the book *The Five Love Languages* by Dr. Gary Chapman. Ike and Ida shared that they learned that understanding your partner’s love language is crucial for a successful marriage. However, Ike and Ida and Red and Big Texas did not have any materials to review during the premarital counseling. Fred and Freda shared that premarital counseling materials help one to communicate their affection in a way that resonates with their partner. Fred stated, “It allowed us to be honest with each other and gave us some work to do when the session ended.” Therefore, the study shows that learning about love languages during premarital counseling can help one understand their partner’s emotional needs and how to fill them. Herbert and Helen shared that they were having intimate discussions about what they could do to improve as a couple and individually. They discovered that couples could prevent misunderstandings and conflicts by understanding each other’s love language.

Greg and Gina felt nervous going through the premarital counseling and learning how to be a married couple, but Gina stated, “As time went on, it became more and more understandable.” They alluded that learning about love languages was an essential educational tool for creating strong and healthy relationships. The couple added that the love language education they received was vital in their premarital counseling.

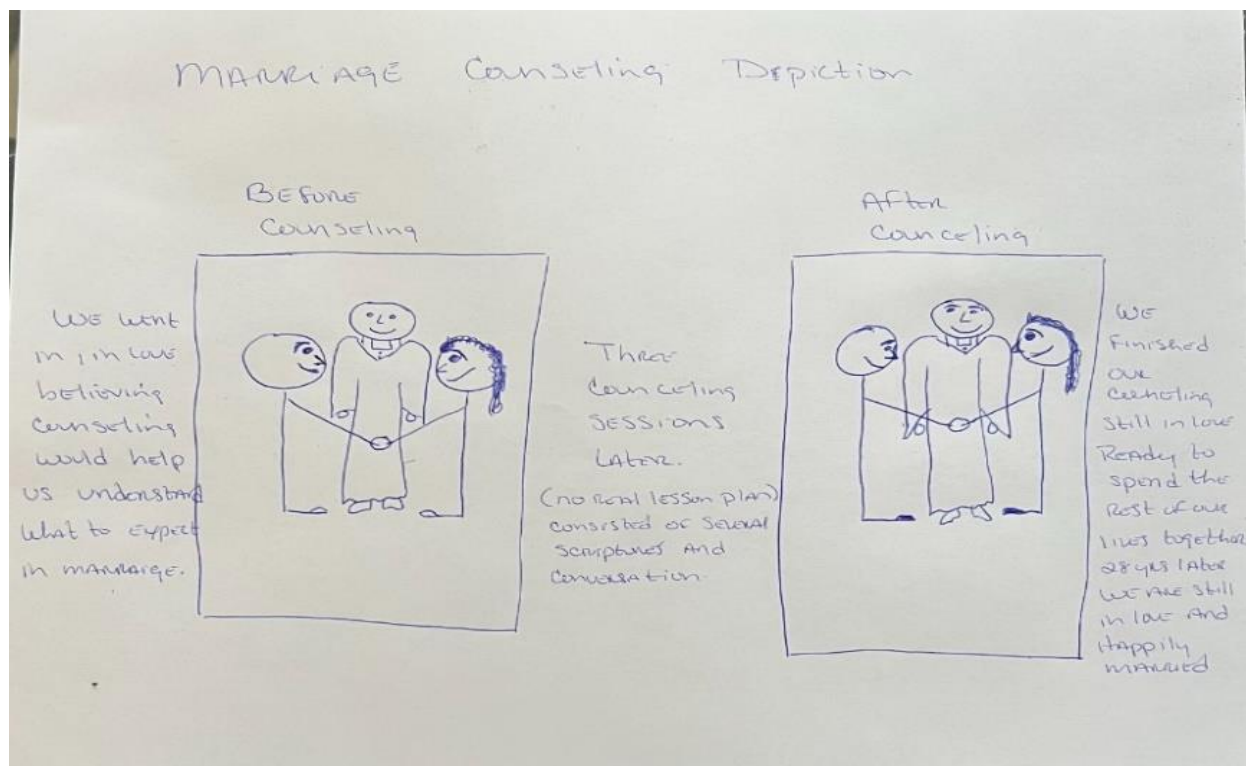
Bible & No Curriculum. This category involves using the bible and no premarital curriculum materials. Four of nine of the interviewed couples reported to have used the bible

solely and no curriculum based on their religious beliefs. Abe and Amy, Duke and Dazie, Ed and Eva, and Ike and Ida only used the Bible scriptures as the pastor taught them how to love and communicate with each other biblically. Duke and Dazie's pastors did not provide a curriculum but provided scriptures in line with their wish to rely on God's word and nothing else. Ed and Eva relied on biblical scriptures for guidance, such as Genesis 2:18-24 to understand two individuals becoming one through God and to understand each other's convictions, expectations, and responsibilities they will share when married. Abe and Amy stated, "By looking up scriptures during our premarital counseling with the pastor's guidance, we started learning to understand and address situations with each other." Although Abe and Amy did not have a curriculum to follow, Amy bought the book *Men Are from Mars and Women Are from Venus*, written by John Gray, at the suggestion of their pastor to help them understand what they say to each other but not as a supplement to their premarital counseling.

Dazie and Ida indicated that their mothers and pastors primarily instructed them through the bible about being a good wife according to Proverbs 31:10-31; counseling was not encouraged before and after they married. Ida stated, "Mom was extremely tough on me and my sisters about making sure to carry ourselves like a respectable lady and always respect and honor our husbands as God instructed." Ike and Ida did not have any materials to review during the premarital counseling.

Ike and Ida's cognitive representation captures their before and after premarital counseling to the present day. Ida's drawing emphasized:

We did not have a lesson plan, but our session consisted of several scriptures and conversations. We were in love before the premarital counseling, and when we finished, we were still in love and ready to spend the rest of our lives together.

Figure 5*Ida's Cognitive Representation*

Note: Ida's drawing of what came to her mind when she thought of her premarital counseling experience.

No Bible & No Curriculum. This category involves using no bible and no curriculum for the premarital materials. One couple from the study reported they did not use any curriculums or the bible in their premarital counseling session. Red and Big Texas stated, "We found it hard to accept that our prominent pastor did not provide us premarital counseling in the form of scriptures or a curriculum." Red and Big Texas believed that the pastor training was inadequate to facilitate premarital counseling. "Our premarital discussion with the pastor was positive in deliverance but negative in experience." Red emphasized that she wanted to do premarital counseling again but with a trained facilitator so they could have a positive experience of premarital counseling and learn new tools to enrich their marriage. Although they did not get

support and education from premarital counseling, they sought out other avenues to learn about marriage and how to communicate through the learning of the Five Love Languages by Dr. Gary Chapman and attended online premarital programs. Red and Big Texas stated that they felt their pastor should participate in adopting a comprehensive approach to premarital counseling because it is crucial, as it thoroughly explores and resolves all aspects of the couple's relationship. Red and Big Texas agreed with and stated, "Our pastor left us with a negative experience of premarital counseling."

After Premarital Counseling

After Premarital Counseling was the final theme developed from the data, which involves the transition theory in premarital counseling, which aligns with Schlossberg's (1981) *Moving Out* phase. This phase referred to the participants' experience attending experiential, premarital counseling since the participants entered, went through, and emerged from a growth process. This phase also sought how they integrated lessons learned as they moved forward to the following transition process of marriage. Three subthemes emerged from the participants' descriptions of After Premarital Counseling: *Relationship Growth*, *Overall Experience*, and *Recommendations*.

Relationship Growth. The couples identified relationship growth as critical for building a strong and healthy relationship. The subtheme represents the couple's relationship growth in three categories: *A Deeper Understanding*, *Learning to Improve Communication*, and *Benefits*. The study aimed to understand the impact of premarital counseling during the Moving Out phase on the participants and how they integrated the lessons learned during the growth process into their following transition process, such as marriage. The couples' starting point varied from having a good foundation with benefits to struggling with communication or other issues.

Regardless of their starting point, premarital counseling focuses on aiding couples in constructing healthy and sustainable relationships. Couples discovered that they did not know or understand each other until they journeyed through premarital counseling with their pastors. The study found that couples in a Not So Good relationship growth category suffered from poor communication before participating in premarital counseling. On the other hand, couples in the Good relationship growth category found that premarital counseling strengthened their communication skills, helped them understand each other, and improved their relationship.

A Deeper Understanding. Within this category, the couples expressed that they gained a deeper understanding of their individual and partnership needs. Continued education with the couples' local church pastor through premarital counseling helped the couples in this research gain a deeper understanding of each other's needs. Abe and Amy agreed and shared the same feeling when Amy stated, "We could not understand each other and felt a weight on our shoulders." Amy said, "We need help progressing because Abe does not like to open up." Abe stated, "We need help from the pastor because what and how we are trying to handle situations is not working." Carl emphasized that they learned so much about each other on a deeper level. Ed and Eva said, "We needed help to learn how to talk to one another and deal with issues." Greg and Gina utterly understood how much they loved each other and transitioned into peace and comfort with their questions answered. Ike and Ida agreed they were in love before the premarital counseling, and when they finished their counseling, they were still in love and ready to spend the rest of their lives together.

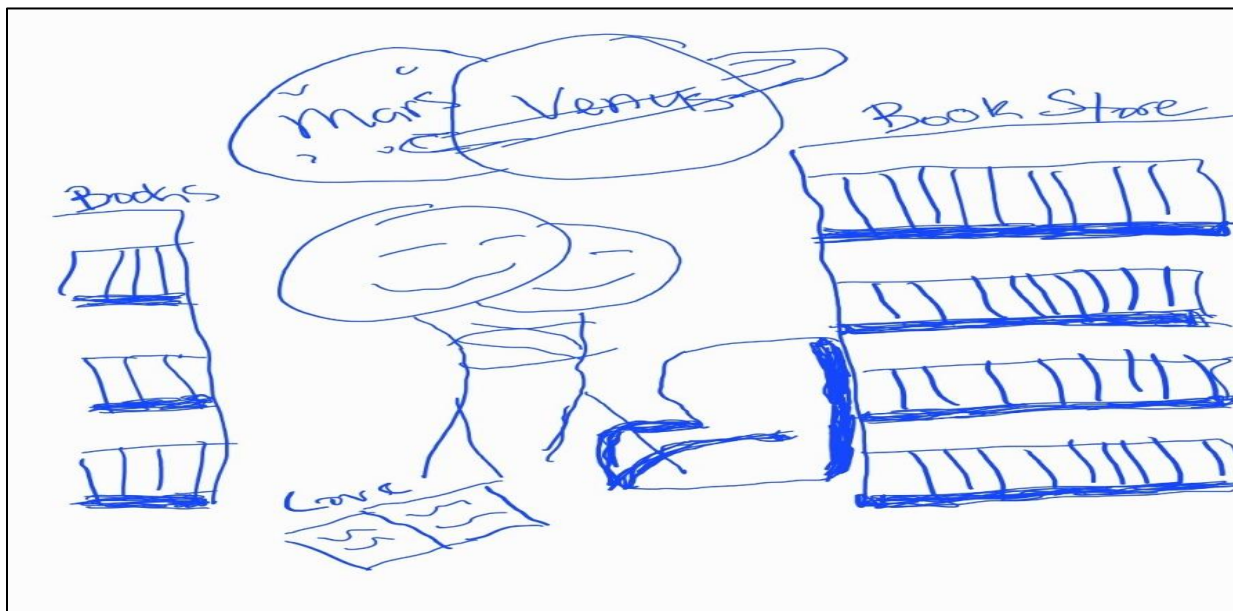
Ike and Ida stated, "Our communication was very good, and we were able to communicate our emotional needs to each other regularly." However, Ike stated, "Premarital counseling helped both of us get a clearer understanding of what each of us expected from one

another.” Ike wanted to ensure he knew what Ida wanted and provide her with everything she asked for. Duke and Dazie and Ike and Ida are two of the three senior couples in years of marriage among the participating couples. These couples reached 25+ years of having a relationship, and according to Duke and Ike, premarital counseling was not present in their respective church programs and as a viable support for African Americans seeking to get married.

A few of the couples’ cognitive representations helped solidify this sub-theme. Amy drew how premarital counseling led her and Abe to a deeper understanding and stated: “I felt a cosmic understanding of two worlds first coming together, the willingness to sit down and understand one another, laying out the most important things to each other, and pointing out the things we cannot live without.”

Figure 6

Amy’s Cognitive Representation

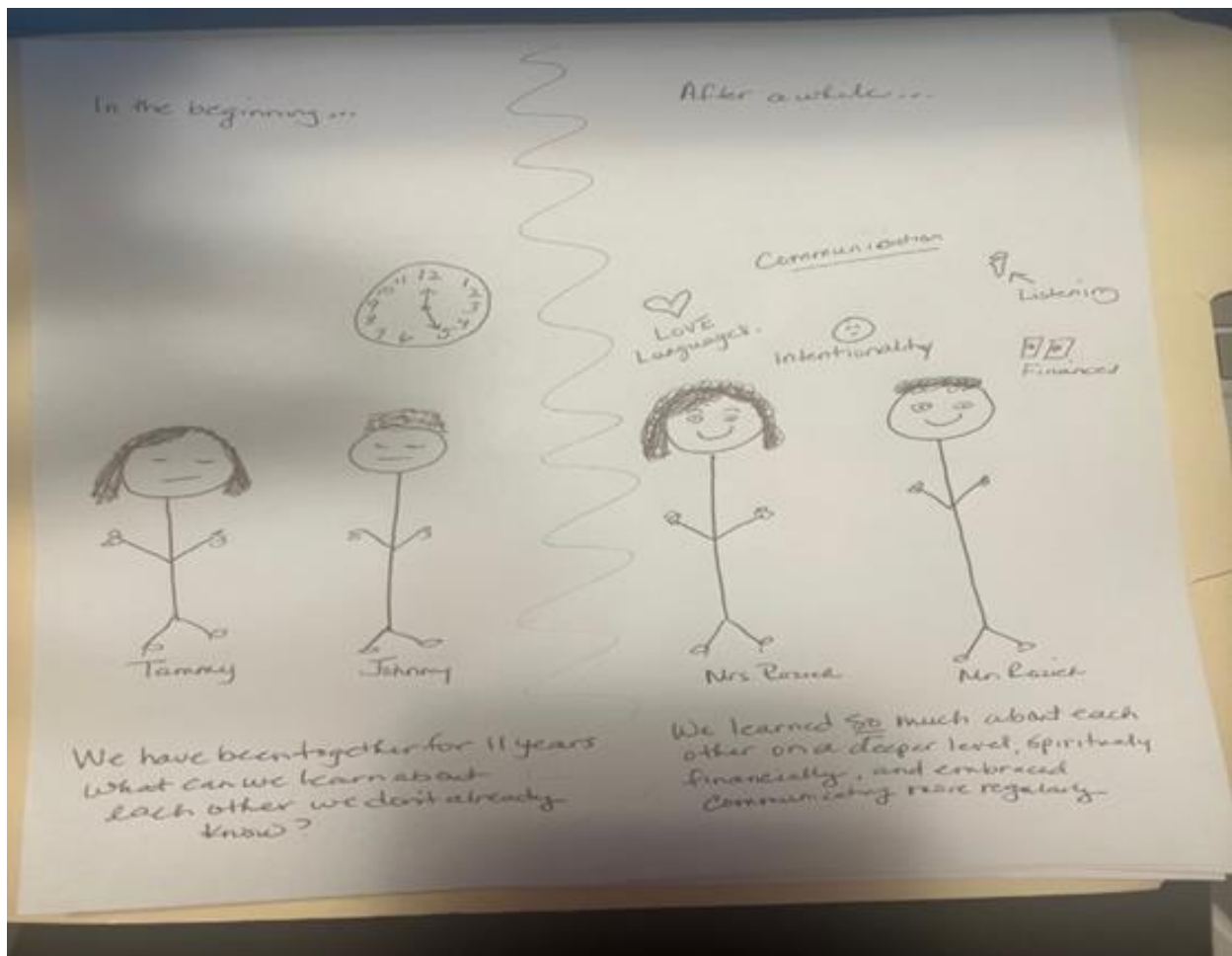


Note: Abe and Amy’s drawing of what came to her mind when she thought of her premarital counseling experience.

Carl and Carla also felt that they gained a deeper understanding of each other. Carla gave voice to this when she explained her cognitive representation: “What can we learn about each other that we already know versus we learned so much about each other on a deeper level during premarital counseling.”

Figure 7

Carla's Cognitive Representation



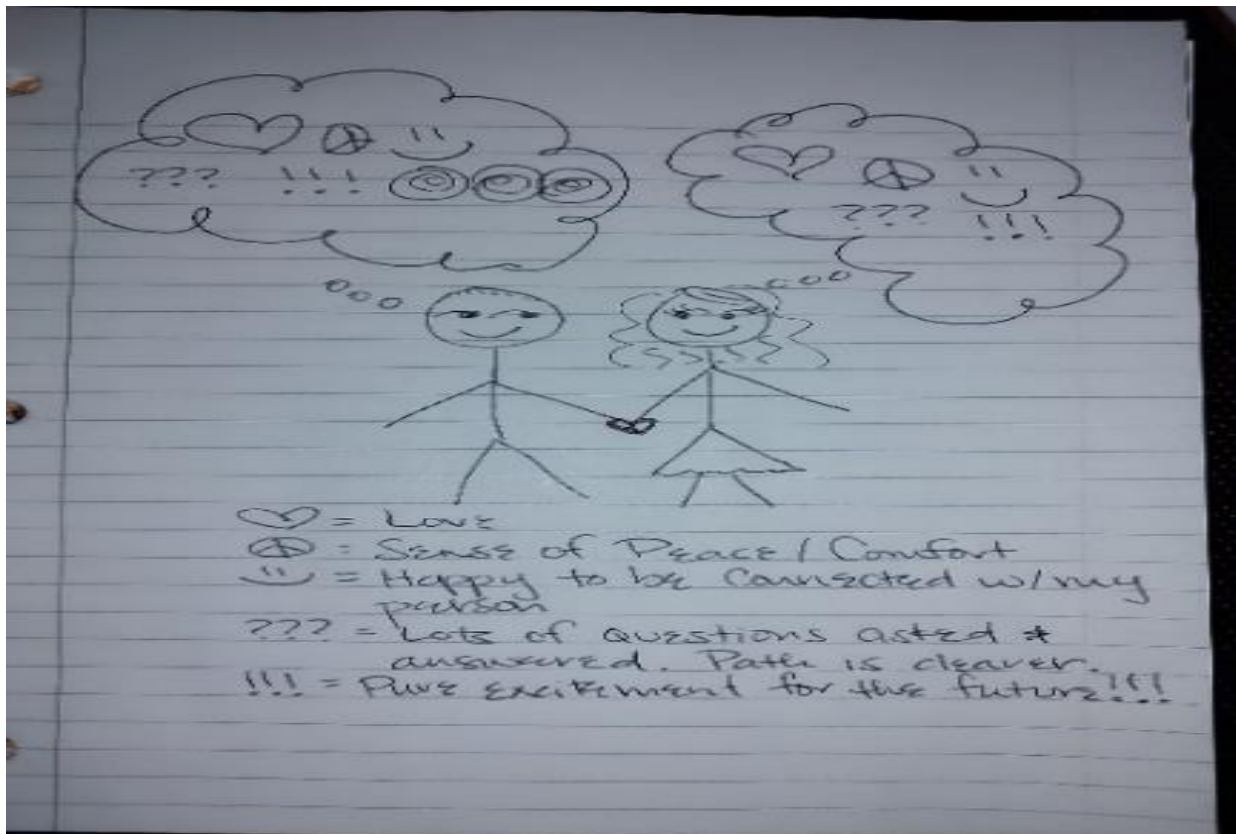
Note: Carla's drawing of what came to her mind when she thought of her premarital counseling experience.

Herbert and Helen's cognitive representation furthered this theme when she described her cognitive representation. Helen stated: “We utterly understood how much we loved each other

and transitioned into peace and comfort with our questions answered. We are extremely excited about what our future holds for us.”

Figure 8

Herbert and Helen's Cognitive Representation



Note: Helen's drawing of what came to her mind when she thought of her premarital counseling experience.

The couples also expressed gaining a deeper understanding of others' expectations. This study found that couples working together and with their pastor help gain a deeper understanding of others' expectations. Carl expressed a profound appreciation for the pastor and Carla's help in getting him through discouragement and dark places of not living up to being the head of the household in the relationship. He stated that Carla would always bring him back where he needed to be, and the pastor helped him understand how to acknowledge Carla for all her efforts

to win together. Ed and Eva decided to find relationship-building tools to satisfy their joint desire to be better for each other. Helen was excited to resolve old topics and explore new ones to enhance their love and marriage experience. Ida felt their premarital counseling experience closed their gap on becoming one unit by agreeing to put each other first because they are a team, and they decided they would get through everything working together and keeping God first. Fred and Freda stated,

Our relationship was challenging, and we felt premarital counseling would help make things work out. Knowing that we could not solve everything independently and that it was okay to ask for help. Now we are going on our 19th year of marriage.

Learning to Improve Communication. All nine couples attributed their current style of marriage and relationship to the communication style they learned through premarital counseling and their determination for a successful marriage. The couples' experience from premarital counseling equipped them to communicate and deal with conflicts immediately and lovingly. They were developing effective communication and conflict-resolution skills.

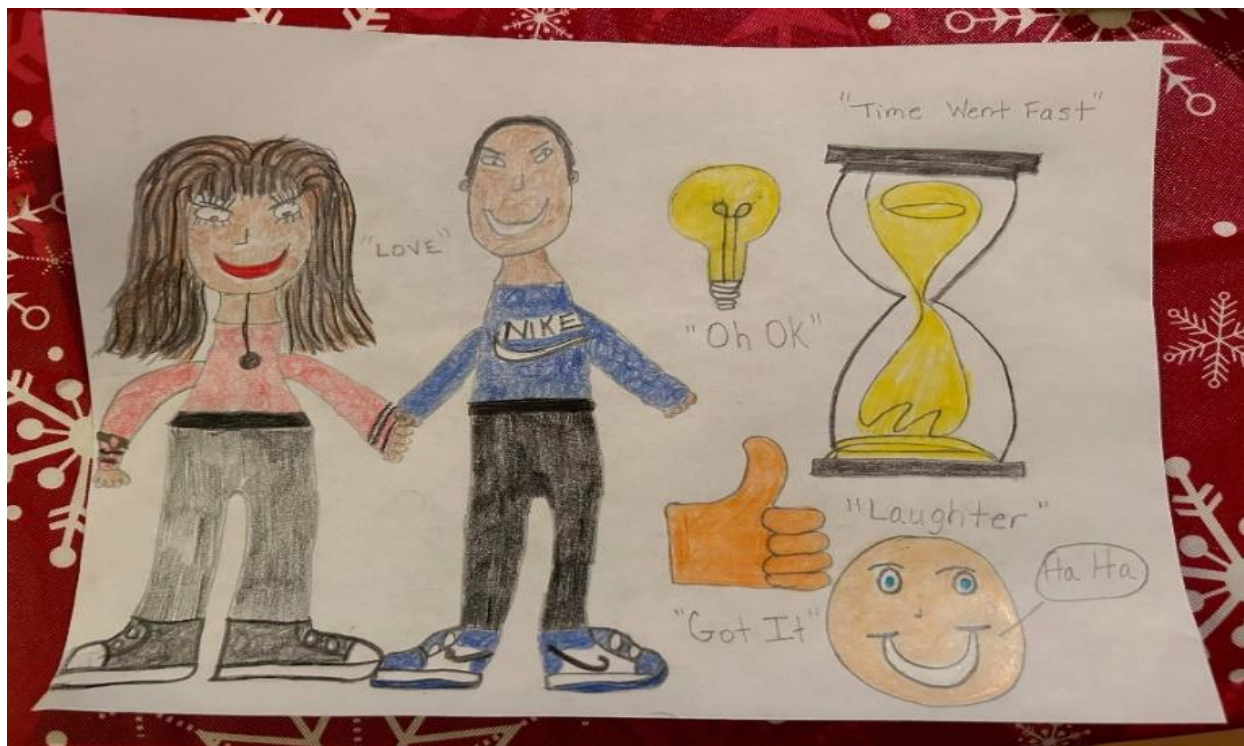
Ed shared that communication, compromising, and just being willing to be comfortable enough to share his feelings have been getting better every day since premarital counseling. Fred and Greg understood they needed to improve their communication skills to share their feelings and thoughts with their partners without being offensive. Fred stated, "We did not always see eye to eye. We both had to make changes we are not used to and figure out a healthy plan for success."

Freda stated, "We learned to communicate effectively without tearing someone down. Communication is the key!" Abe and Amy, along with Carl and Carla, felt they learned to communicate more effectively and empathetically, which helped them build a more substantial

and intimate connection. Carl stated, “We had some hiccups here and there because we were not trying.” Carla said, “We needed effective communication. We need to know how to share our feelings and expectations.” Duke and Dazie and Red and Big Texas have their dynamics, goals, and communication styles. Herbert and Helen said, “We were struggling in some areas with our conversation.” They understood they could get through communication conflict by seeking God and following the bible. The differences helped the couples identify potential conflicts and find ways to resolve them. Ed and Eva’s cognitive representation displayed they learned to improve their communication. Eva described her drawing: “During the quick sessions, two love birds enjoyed and understood how to communicate with one another.”

Figure 9

Ed and Eva’s Cognitive Representation



Note: Eva’s drawing of what came to her mind when she thought of her premarital counseling experience.

Overall Experience. After going through premarital counseling, this study found it essential to reflect on the overall experience of attending premarital counseling. Seven of the nine couples expressed that their premarital experience was positive, while two couples' overall premarital counseling experience was negative. Carl stated, "Positive experience – we lean on some of the resources and things we learned along the journey." Ed and Eva said, "Premarital counseling was positive but did not go deeper to build us up." Greg and Gina stated, "It was positive and informed us of the utter importance of marriage and communication." Ida said, "Our premarital counseling was positive because we both believe and trust God." Duke and Dazie stated that their premarital counseling was positive, but they got no benefit from premarital counseling. "We did not listen to them. We understood each other and found we were made for each other. As Christians, God will give you your heart's desire."

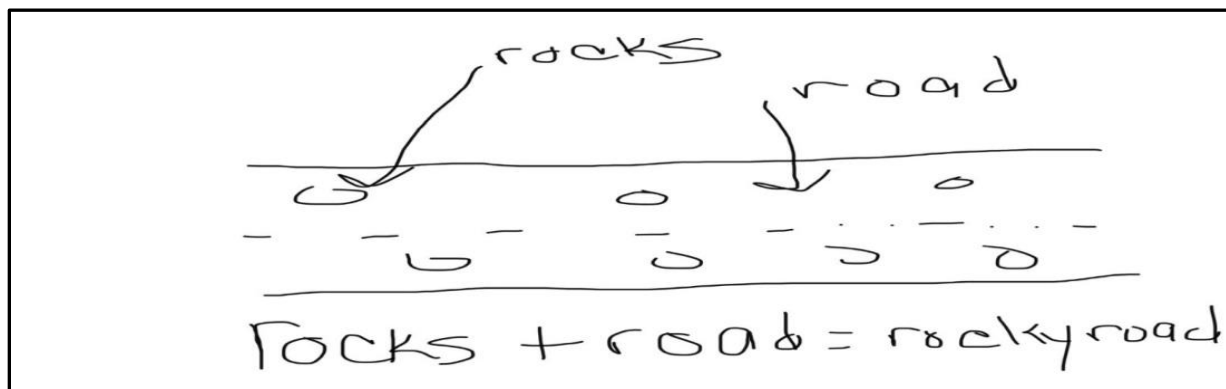
Red and Big Texas described their experience as negative and were not prepared for marriage. Red and Big Texas knew they needed help and were hoping that premarital counseling would make them better communicators and understand each other and about marriage. Red was hoping to have a magical experience like she saw in a movie and stated, "It was a funny movie but educational being though he [the pastor] gave them assignments, exercises that pushed them to think if marriage was for them and if they truly loved each other through the good, bad, and ugly." Red thought her premarital counseling would be excellent. She said, "I was excited to hear and learn about premarital counseling because it looked beyond the surface of the other person." Big Texas stated, "When I first heard of premarital counseling, I thought it would help since I did not have it in my first marriage." Big Texas had two failed marriages and believed he would still be in his first marriage if he knew how to communicate. However, he revealed that he tried counseling in the first marriage, and his spouse did not want to communicate during the session.

He and his second spouse attended premarital counseling and marriage counseling, but his spouse barely said a word to the pastor. Big Texas wanted his third marriage to work out and have effective communication. He was excited to learn that Red was just as eager as him to get into premarital counseling. Unfortunately, Red and Big Texas stated, “We were disappointed and unprepared for marriage.” They did not benefit from premarital counseling as they did not receive literature to study, no homework assignments, no scheduled sessions, and no communication tools to work through conflicts or how to understand each other. Their premarital counseling commenced after a church service in the pastor’s office, where he instructed them to “put your money together and you will have more, keep people out of your business, and serve the Lord together.” Nevertheless, they sought out other avenues to learn about marriage by reading self-help books and attending online premarital programs.

Eight of the nine couples saw the premarital counseling experience as a starting point for their relationship. Fred and Freda's cognitive representation is a rock-bed analogy. Freda described her drawing as “Knowing that we could not solve everything independently and asking for help was okay. Now, we are going on our 19th year of marriage.”

Figure 10

Fred and Freda’s Cognitive Representation



Note: Fred and Freda’s drawing of what came to their minds when they thought of their premarital counseling experience.

Duke and Dazie’s cognitive representation is a drawing of how premarital counseling was the beginning of a wonderful marriage. Duke stated: “Going through premarital counseling and staying married drills down to saying two words every day and meaning them: I Do!” Dazie shared her joy describing the blessing over the years: “It has been 38 magical and wonderful years of marriage, having four babies, seven grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.”

Figure 11

Duke and Dazie’s Cognitive Representation

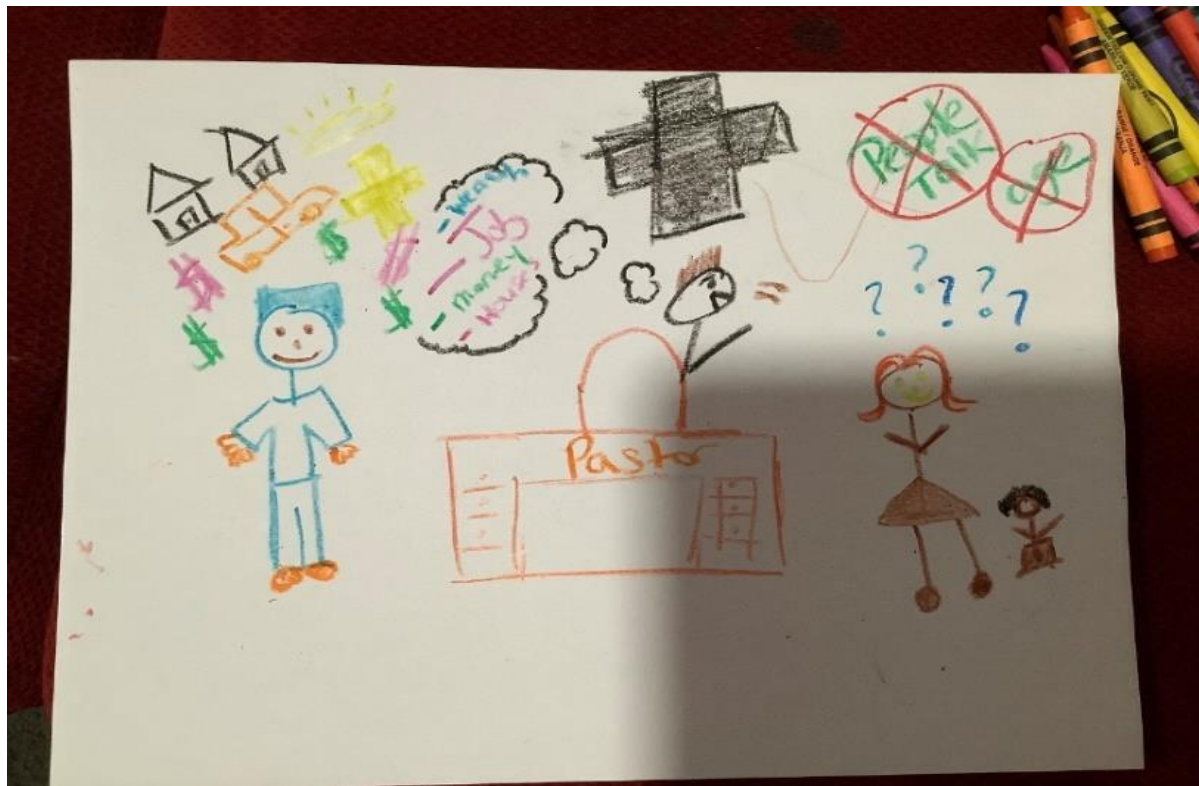


Note: Duke’s drawing of what came to mind when he thought of their premarital counseling experience.

Although Red and Big Texas did not have a wonderful experience, Red still saw it as a starting point for their relationship. Red's cognitive representation is of the life she imagined having with Big Texas. Red stated: "The start of a good life."

Figure 12

Red and Big Texas' Cognitive Representation



Note: Red and Big Texas Cognitive Representation.

Recommendations. Recommendations for premarital counseling were alluded to by the couples interviewed to be constructive for couples seeking to get married. All the couples said that after completing counseling, they felt more confident in their ability to handle challenges that came their way. The couples in this research study shared their selective experiences of selecting the best source for premarital counseling, seeking support, and choosing the right facilitator to learn how to communicate effectively, listen actively, set realistic expectations, and work through conflicts together. Additionally, they found it crucial to be equipped with

persuasive communication and conflict resolution skills. They can achieve these skills through premarital counseling, self-education, or seeking advice from trusted sources. By developing these skills, couples could strengthen their relationship and prevent misunderstandings and conflicts from arising.

Fred and Freda described premarital counseling: “It will make the couple think about things they never thought of before. Premarital counseling will help you plan out your future and how to deal with the bumps in the road in a marriage.” Herbert and Helen said, “Communication tools, tools, tools! We did the premarital counseling and found out we were still struggling in some areas with our conversation.” Abe and Amy stated, “We were able to understand each other, and after going through premarital counseling, we felt a weight lifted off our shoulders.” Fred and Freda stated, “Couples need to have an open mind and do not hold back when presenting concerns they may have for their partners.” Carl said, “Premarital counseling will open you up and expand your mind and thoughts about your partner and your relationship.” Ike and Ida stated, “Make premarital counseling a priority. Premarital counseling is important for a solid marriage, but only if both parties are open and honest about the process.”

Be Selective. In this category, the participants shared their views on selecting a trusted source for premarital counseling. Additionally, the participants believed choosing the right person as a counselor is crucial. The quality of the counselor or pastor providing the service, as determined by the participants, heavily influences the effectiveness of premarital counseling. All nine couples reported that getting a trusted professional for their premarital counseling was significant. Herbert and Helen shared their painful experience of discord with their pastor’s behavior and comments. Helen had high hopes for her marriage and stated,

Our relationship is still as strong as it was before we got married, if not stronger. We want our marriage to be seen by others as a “ministry” and show others they can have fun, conflict, and healthy communication without destroying the union.

Seeking guidance and support from a trusted source, whether it is a pastor or a premarital counselor, was emphasized to be a valuable resource for couples to gain deeper understanding and insights into their relationship. Herbert shared, “Couples should consider one-on-one or small group counseling for a more personalized experience.” Ed and Eva were passionate about telling others to have marriage mentors, people in your life who can help you and guide you through the tough times. Ike stated, “I believe we could have chosen better.” Red and Big Texas did not benefit from premarital counseling, as discussed above.

Duke was vastly different from the others. He stated, “When it comes to doing premarital counseling, do not use your church. What you get from premarital counseling depends on who you go through it with. Make sure that the premarital counseling is Christian based.” Carl and Carla believed they had the best premarital counselor. Freda wanted couples to understand that they needed to pray to God for the right premarital counselor. Herbert stated,

Some premarital counselors may not have experience working with couples in which one partner or both partners have been through a divorce or death with a spouse. Allow God to lead you to the right premarital counselor to prepare for a marriage, not just a wedding ceremony.

All nine couples shared that choosing a qualified professional can ensure that the couples receive effective, safe, and confidential counseling. Amy stated, “We made great progress because our pastor was good and got Abe to open up.” Abe stated, “Everything the pastor said about marriage and what will come up has been happening, and we are trying to handle it the way he taught us.”

Premarital counseling was said to be a vital process that couples undergo prior to their wedding day, where they can recognize probable issues in their relationship, comprehend each other's expectations, and acquire communication skills necessary for the growth of a healthy and enduring relationship. The couples emphasized that it was significant to carefully choose the type of premarital counseling they received.

Response to Research Questions

In this section, the research questions are addressed using the primary and subthemes provided from the data collected from the participants' interviews, demographic questionnaires, and cognitive representations. One central research question guided the focus of this phenomenological study:

How do African American couples describe their experiences attending a premarital counseling program in the African American church? The participating African American couples responded to the central research question in three phases: *Before Premarital Counseling (Moving In)*, *During Premarital Counseling (Moving Through)*, and *After Premarital Counseling (Moving out)*.

The data discussed in the primary theme of "Before Premarital Counseling" and two subthemes of "*Attitudes*" and "*Expectations*", which emerged from interviews with couples seeking premarital counseling. The "Needed Premarital Counseling" category represents couples seeking guidance and support before marriage as a proactive measure to experience successful marriages. The couples interviewed in the study faced unique challenges that would negatively impact their relationships. By being open to positive change and growth, couples were able to identify potential barriers to their relationship and work through them with the help of receiving assistance from their pastor.

The data discussed in the second primary theme of *During Premarital Counseling (Moving Through)* highlighted two subthemes - the pastor's attitude and approach. The participants noted that the pastor's attitude played a key role in their premarital counseling experience. A positive attitude was characterized by active engagement, investment, and a willingness to provide thoughtful feedback. On the other hand, a negative attitude was seen as less attentive, less inclined to listen to the couple's concerns, and not taking the initiative to establish a personal connection. The couples hoped for conscientious facilitation of a constructive and advantageous premarital counseling session.

The data discussed in the third primary theme of *After Premarital Counseling (Moving Out)* and three subthemes of *Relationship Growth*, *Overall Experience* and *Recommendations* focused on the impact of premarital counseling on couples during the Moving Out phase and how they integrated the lessons learned into their following transition process. The participants identified relationship growth as critical for building a strong and healthy relationship, which involves continued education in the category of *A Deeper Understanding*. The subtheme represents the couple's integration of lessons learned as they moved forward to the following transition process of marriage. Couples discovered that they did not know or understand each other until they journeyed through premarital counseling with their pastors.

The data collected also discussed the importance of premarital counseling for couples seeking to get married. The couples interviewed emphasized the significance of selecting a trusted and qualified source for premarital counseling. They believed that choosing the right person as a counselor heavily influences the effectiveness of premarital counseling. The participants shared their experiences of seeking support and choosing a facilitator to learn effective communication, active listening, and conflict resolution. They emphasized that

premarital counseling is a vital process for couples to comprehend each other's expectations, recognize probable issues, and acquire communication skills necessary for a healthy and enduring relationship.

Three sub-questions emerged, providing additional focus to this research study: 1) How do participants describe their expectations for premarital counseling before participating in the premarital counseling program? 2) How were the participants' expectations met, and what were the unexpected outcomes experienced while participating in the church's premarital counseling program? 3) How do participants describe the short-lived and enduring influences of their premarital counseling experience?

How do participants describe their expectations for premarital counseling before participating in the premarital counseling program? The primary themes of *Before Premarital Counseling, During Premarital Counseling, and After Premarital Counseling* provided detailed narratives of what the couples experienced going through the premarital counseling experience. The *Before Premarital Counseling* theme uncovered what the couples discovered about premarital counseling, the importance of having an open mind about receiving premarital counseling, and what actions to take as the couple seeks out premarital counseling. The *During Premarital Counseling* theme explained what the couples learned, a new way to communicate, and what they learned about their relationship through cognitive representation drawings from the premarital counseling experience. The *After Premarital Counseling* theme allowed the participants to recall and share their experiences, discuss the positive and negative attributes of premarital counseling and counseling, how the premarital counseling improved their relationship, and how premarital counseling will benefit other premarital couples.

How were the participants' expectations met, and what were the unexpected outcomes experienced while participating in the church's premarital counseling program?

The couples' response to this question was found within the first primary theme of *Before Premarital Counseling* and *During Premarital Counseling*. The couples did have expectations. As stated earlier, six of the nine couples expected to learn how to communicate better with their spouse. Three couples had a slightly unique perspective as to why they were going to rely on God and nothing else. One couple only had the general expectation of learning something new, and the couple did not have a whole lot of expectations but knew they would get something good out of premarital counseling. The second expectation was that the couples would benefit relationally by learning conflict resolution skills and when and how to apply them. The consensus of the nine couples is that they believed conflict resolution skills are vital for couples, as conflicts are inevitable in any relationship. Handling disagreements healthily and constructively is crucial to maintaining a strong and lasting marriage. Three of the couples' expectations were not met. The couples' responses can be found in the second primary theme of *During Premarital Counseling*. Each couple reported negative interaction with their pastor in each of the three described expectations.

How do participants describe the short-lived and enduring influences of their premarital counseling experience? The response to this question can be found within the third theme of *After Premarital Counseling* throughout the subthemes. The couples recounted that they experienced and retained positive momentum within their relationships toward building a healthy and successful marriage. The couples reported their communication styles have improved with positive openness and honesty with each other, and their ability to understand each other better than before premarital counseling.

Summary

This chapter discussed the findings from the lived experiences of African American couples who completed a premarital counseling program through the African American church. The participants were described as couples. Through demographic questionnaires, semi-focused interviews, and cognitive representations, the couples recalled their experiences. Three primary themes were discovered as the data was analyzed: *Before Premarital Counseling*, *During Premarital Counseling*, and *After Premarital Counseling*. These themes emerged from analyzing the data in accordance with Schlossberg's (1981) *Moving In*, *Moving Through*, and *Moving Out* phases. Before Premarital Counseling experience unveiled the subthemes of the participants' "Attitudes and Expectations". During Premarital Counseling theme, participants revealed the "Pastor's Attitude to Premarital Counseling and the Pastor's Approach to Premarital Counseling". Finally, After Premarital Counseling theme revealed the participants' "Relationship Growth, Overall Experience, and Recommendations."

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

This transcendental phenomenological study described how African American couples describe their experiences attending a premarital counseling program in their local African American church. This chapter includes a summary of the findings and a discussion of the results in relation to Chapter Two's literature review. There is also a discussion of the research study's theoretical, empirical, and practical implications and the study's delimitations and limitations. Lastly, the chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

This transcendental phenomenological study described the lived experiences of African American couples who attended premarital counseling through an African American church. The description of the shared phenomenon questions was added by the participants completing a demographic questionnaire, answering semi-structured interview questions, and drawing a cognitive representation. Data from the couples were collected from the participants, drawn by the participants, or transcribed by a professional transcription service. Moustakas' (1994) process for data analysis produced three main themes: *Before Premarital Counseling*, *During Premarital Counseling*, and *After Premarital Counseling*.

Research Questions Addressed

The research questions that guided this study resulted in developing themes that aligned with Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory. The primary research question for this study was: How do African American couples describe their experiences attending a premarital counseling program in the African American church? The response to this question is present through all three primary themes.

Summary of Theme 1

The first theme, Before Premarital Counseling, shed light on how participants described their expectations for premarital counseling before participating in the premarital counseling program, their motivation for signing up, and their expectations after signing up. The couples either learned about premarital counseling by seeking relationship help or heard about premarital counseling through a married couple, church, or professional relationship counselor/facilitator. The couples' attitudes varied but fell within two categories: *Needed Premarital Counseling* and *Did Not Need Premarital Counseling*. Finally, the couples attending premarital counseling expected that they would learn how to improve their Communication with each other and their relationship.

Summary of Theme 2

The second theme, During Premarital Counseling, highlighted the couples' experience of the *Pastor's Attitude* and the *Pastor's Approach* to Premarital Counseling the couples encountered during premarital counseling. The couples who participated in premarital counseling experienced challenges and unexpected experiences. Within this theme, four categories revealed what the couples learned: the *Pastor's Attitude* was positive or negative and the *Pastor's Approach* to Premarital Counseling with one of three approaches: Bible and Curriculum, Bible and No Curriculum, and No Bible and No Curriculum during premarital counseling. The couples relentlessly expressed their varied learning experiences. The couples also learned that conflict resolution skills are vital, as conflicts are inevitable in any relationship. The couples also learned that handling disagreements healthily and constructively is crucial to maintaining a solid and lasting marriage.

The couples also described their desire for education while attending premarital counseling. Education was a critical area for the couples. The couples' unanimous consensus was that they wanted to learn all they could to better prepare themselves for marriage by avoiding pitfalls, having tools for every situation, and having knowledge to share with others seeking premarital counseling. During premarital counseling, the participants sought to discuss important topics and potential issues in a supportive environment with guidance, as well as learn meaningful life and marriage skills and tools to navigate challenges in the present and in the future. However, the *Pastor's Attitude* and *Pastor's Approach to Premarital Counseling* variables are critical in the couples' premarital counseling journey. Three couples had negative experiences with their pastor, resulting in a lack of premarital counseling and education.

Summary of Theme 3

The third and final primary theme was After Premarital Counseling. This theme focused on the couples' experiences after attending premarital counseling. This theme also discovered the couple's ability to recall the learned material since attending premarital counseling. Three subthemes emerged from the data collected: *Relationship Growth*, *Overall Experience*, and *Recommendations*. After going through premarital counseling, the couples reflected on both the positive and not-so-positive aspects of the experience is essential. The couples described their overall premarital counseling experience, relationship growth, and recommendations. The couples also shared their perceived negatives and positives of their premarital counseling. The positive aspects can serve as a reminder of the valuable insights and skills gained during the counseling sessions, reinforcing the benefits of premarital counseling and motivating couples to practice their learned experiences and new skills.

Eight of the nine couples expressed that their premarital experience was positive. They shared their selective experiences of selecting the best source for premarital counseling, seeking support, and choosing the right facilitator to learn how to communicate honestly, listen actively, set realistic expectations, and work through conflicts together. In contrast, one couple's overall premarital counseling experience was negative. The one couple described their perceived experience as "Overall negative, shocking of how little the pastor said and did to prepare us for marriage." The couples understood and believed the best advice to share with other aspiring premarital couples is to be honest with their feelings and expectations through effective communication.

The couples also recommended that new couples have effective communication because it is a crucial aspect of building a successful marriage and to recognize the importance of communication skills and tools in their relationship. Intentionality can also help identify potential barriers and develop coordinated efforts to overcome them, increasing the likelihood of a successful marriage. The couples expressed that effective communication is critical to building a successful marriage. As the couples completed the premarital counseling journey, they discovered that their relationship growth was critical to building a strong and healthy relationship and gaining a deeper understanding of individual and partnership needs to improve communication styles. Being intentional about gaining a deeper understanding and insight into the relationship is crucial for couples, especially African American couples, as it can help them establish clear goals and expectations for their marriage. Relationship growth is vital for building a strong and healthy relationship, representing the couple's continued education in the following category: A Deeper Understanding. Recommendations for premarital counseling can be constructive for couples seeking to get married; as former premarital couples expressed, they are

now able to resolve any challenges that come their way. The participants shared their selective experiences of selecting the best source for premarital counseling, seeking support, and choosing the right facilitator to learn how to communicate honestly, listen actively, set realistic expectations, and work through conflicts together. It is significant for couples to choose the type of premarital counseling they receive carefully.

Research Sub Question One: How do participants describe their expectations for premarital counseling before participating in the premarital counseling program? The participants described their expectations of premarital counseling through the first theme, *Before Premarital Counseling*. As Chapter Four mentioned, the *Attitude* subtheme emerged as an essential proactive measure before premarital counseling. Participants who needed premarital counseling expressed their eagerness to identify potential barriers and work through them with the help of a professional counselor. Additionally, the second sub-theme, Expectations, was identified representing those couples that *Had Expectations* with the mindset of being open to positive change with actions necessary to prepare for premarital counseling and those that *Did Not Have Expectations*.

Proactive measures in premarital counseling improved communication and conflict resolution. The participants emphasized the importance of addressing communication, conflict resolution, and family finances before marriage to establish healthy habits and expectations. The participants' expectations for premarital counseling included effective communication, conflict resolution, and marital satisfaction. While most couples had common expectations, three had unique perspectives and experiences. Premarital counseling aims to help couples build a healthy and sustainable relationship, regardless of their starting point. Two of the nine couples expressed positive experiences and strengthened relationships due to premarital counseling, while others

faced challenges and sought help to improve their communication and relationship dynamics. Despite the varying experiences, the participants recognized the value of premarital counseling in preparing for successful marriages.

Research Sub Question Two: How were the participants' expectations met, and what were the unexpected outcomes experienced while participating in the church's premarital counseling program? The participants answered this research question throughout the second primary theme, *During Premarital Counseling*. The *Moving Through* phase is a primary theme correlated with Schlossberg's (1981) model. This phase emphasizes the importance of premarital counseling preparation for a successful marriage. The subthemes highlighted in this phase included *Pastor's Attitude* and *Pastor's Approach to Premarital Counseling*. African American couples face unique challenges in their marriages, and premarital counseling is deemed effective in addressing these challenges. The study emphasized that premarital counseling equips couples with communication, conflict resolution, and monetary management skills, establishing healthy relationship habits. Couples also learn the importance of seeking guidance and support and proactive and ambitious communication. The couples highlighted the role of pastors or counselors in providing attentive support and education during premarital counseling. Additionally, the study identified varied approaches to education, including the use of the *Bible and Curriculum*, *Bible and No Curriculum*, and *No Bible and No Curriculum*. The study underscored the significance of premarital counseling in equipping couples with essential tools and skills for a lasting and fulfilling marriage.

Research Sub Question Three: How do participants describe the short-lived and enduring influences of their premarital counseling experience? Each couple recounted how they felt their relationship benefitted from attending premarital counseling in meaningful ways:

- Abe and Amy: Cosmic understandings of two worlds first come with the willingness to sit down and understand one another.
 - Carl and Carla: We learned so much about each other on a deeper level.
 - Duke and Dazie: Staying married boils down to saying two words every day and meaning them: “I Do!”
 - Ed and Eva: Two love birds enjoying and understanding how to communicate with one another.
 - Fred and Freda: Knowing that we could not solve everything independently and that it was okay to ask for help.
- Greg and Gina: No cognitive representation was provided.
- Herbert and Helen: We utterly understood how deeply we loved each other and transitioned into peace and comfort with our questions answered.
 - Ike and Ida: We were in love before the premarital counseling, and when we finished it, we were still in love and ready to spend the rest of our lives together.
 - Red and Big Texas: The start of a good life.

Discussion

This section discusses the results of this study as it relates to the empirical and theoretical literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The findings of this study verified and extended the literature regarding transition theory, the 4S system of coping with transitions and three distinct phases of transitioning, and premarital counseling and education. It also added to the body of research on transition theory and its application to premarital counseling.

Empirical Literature

This section discusses the results of the lived experiences of African American couples who completed premarital counseling in a local church. This section also discusses the findings correlated to the empirical and theoretical literature discussed in Chapter Two. The findings of this study are also discussed, verified, and extended in the literature review in this study's theoretical framework.

Discussion of Empirical Literature

Chapter Two provided a background to the need for a qualitative research study of the lived experiences of African American couples who completed a premarital counseling program. This study explored the lived experiences of African American couples who completed a premarital counseling program, leading African American couples to a successful marriage. This study centered around the fact that African Americans' divorce rate is high compared to non-Hispanic Whites. This study explored the African American couples' lived experiences of participation in premarital counseling and provided valuable comprehension that confirmed the premarital counseling program's effects of the transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981) of what African American couples endure before, during, and after completion, and confirmed the existing literature on the relationship enhancement and conflict resolution techniques offered in premarital counseling. Premarital counseling centers around the partners' positive qualities, including self-openness, trustworthiness, and love, so they can be kept up with to serve the marriage however much as could be expected (Alkhazaleh & Alkhawaldeh, 2023). However, according to Saulter-Carney (2024), "The literature by Moeti et al. (2017) and Scott et al. (2018) indicated that there is a diminishing interest in premarital counseling" (p. 190).

The findings of this study are associated with prior premarital and marriage research and collaborate with the current literature on the potential benefits of premarital counseling. The study's participants improved their communication and relationships, highlighting the beneficial influence of premarital counseling in preparing for a successful marriage (Osei-Tutu et al., 2020).

Transition Theory. In Chapter 2, Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory defines transitions as occurrences that build into life changes in relationships, roles, or routines. These changes present challenges, and Schlossberg's transition theory helps researchers understand the transition model of three types of transition: The 4S system of coping with transitions and three distinct phases of transitioning (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 2011; Schlossberg et al., 1989). Transition theory was originally established within the business world to define how dealing with the loss of a job affects a person; the transition theory defines a life-changing experience, whether positive or negative, which changes one's role, relationship, routine, or assumption (Leibowitz & Schlossberg, 1982). The framework for providing cognitive information on transitions from African American premarital counseling couples to married African American couples was most effectively set by interviewing African American couples who have already experienced similar transitions, which provided valuable insights for discussion of the issues they faced, what was helpful, what was not helpful, and what they wished they had known (Leibowitz & Schlossberg, 1982).

According to Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory, premarital counseling functions through this theory and is believed to help African American premarital couples move through marriage continually experiencing change and transition, which in this study, resulted in new successful marriage relationships, behaviors, and self-perceptions requiring the participant of this

study to adapt to their change in life. In the transition process, African American premarital couples develop expectations and experiences before, during, and after the change. The participants adapted and coped with changes during the transition phase through a support system. A system of coping with transition is critical

since people react and adapt so differently to transitions and since the same person can react and adapt so differently at different points in life, a system of coping with transitions is needed to help adults as they face the inevitable but nonpredictable transitions of life. (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 3).

Three Types of Transition. Life transitions come in three types: anticipated, unanticipated, and nonevent. Schlossberg (2011) defined the three transitions as life experiences that alter lives, and the critical point of the transitions cements how much an event alters a life by one of the three transitions. The first transition is the *anticipated* transition, an expected event that an individual prepares for, such as planning for marriage through premarital education. The second transition is the *unanticipated* transition that unexpectedly disrupts a person's life, such as a spouse needing emergency surgery. The third transition is the *nonevent* transition, where an expected event does not occur, such as a spouse applying for a promotion and not receiving it. These three transitions formulate “the transition model for understanding transitions, coping with transitions, and applying the model to work-life transitions” (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 159), a coping system since people react and adapt so differently to transitions. The participants in this study aligned with the first transition of anticipated transition. The results confirmed that all participants were anticipating receiving something beneficial from premarital counseling to help improve their relationship and prepare for marriage. The couples did not have unrealistic expectations and any reluctance to participate.

The 4Ss System of Coping with Transitions. As people transition differently, their uncertainty about what is next may become a big mystery and become their misery. An individual needs to have a system to cope with the transition in a systematic format that helps the individual identify four critical resources to aid in a decision-making process: situation, self, support, and strategies. People transitioning will benefit from a coping system using a transitioning model to identify where the individual is in the transition process, whether moving in, moving through, or moving out of the process (Schlossberg, 2011). While this study focused on premarital counseling with a pastor in a local African American church, the premarital counseling consisted of coping techniques to adapt to the curriculum, expectations, roles, and understanding each other deeper than before. Therefore, premarital counseling is designed with coping through transitioning African American couples from a single person's life to a successful marriage.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the results correlated with the 4 Ss System of Coping with Transitions, verifying that the transition from single to married takes time. African American couples must have a realistic perspective of their situation, self, support, and strategies. Furthermore, an African American couple's support system consists of people who are likely to help and are accessible, as the moment of transition is crucial to one's perception of well-being (Schlossberg, 2011). This research stands as a springboard to developing and adding to existing literature on how African Americans can have a successful marriage after completing pre-marital counseling with proper pre-marital counseling facilitation.

Three Distinct Phases of Transitioning. A person develops lived experiences while participating in transitions. Individuals following the transition model develop lived experiences gained before the transition event, during the transition event, and after the transition event.

Schlossberg (2011) stated, “Adults continuously experience transitions, and we know for certain that all adults experience changes that require a new network of relationships and a new way of seeing oneself” (p. 3). Each phase, as discussed in chapter four, allows the individual to experience factors that influence adaptation to the event experienced.

Phase 1. The individual develops a perception of an event before going through the transition. In phase 1, the results uncovered what the couples discovered about premarital counseling, the importance of having an open mind about receiving premarital counseling, and what actions to take as the couple seeks out premarital counseling. The participants expressed their desires to build and endure a healthy marriage that passes benefits down to the couple’s children (Kruenegel-Farr et al., 2013, p. 99).

Phase 2. During the event, the individual creates a new presumption of the transition. During phase 2, the results explained what the couples learned: a new way to communicate and what they learned about their relationship through cognitive representation drawings from the premarital counseling experience. The couples did not have a plethora of expectations. As stated earlier, six of the nine couples desired to learn to communicate better with their spouse. Three couples had a unique perspective on why they relied on God and nothing else. One couple only had the general expectation of learning something new, and the couple did not have many expectations but knew they would get something good out of premarital counseling.

The second expectation centered on the couples' benefit relationally by learning conflict resolution skills and when and how to apply them. The findings of this study revealed that the consensus of the nine couples in this study was that they believed conflict resolution skills are vital for couples, as conflicts are inevitable in any relationship. Handling disagreements healthily and constructively is crucial to maintaining a solid and lasting marriage. Three of the couple’s

expectations still needed to be met. The three couples reported negative interaction with their pastor in each described expectation. Although the three couples had negative experiences with the pastor of the church, Fox and Shriner (2014) reported that participating couples receiving premarital education from ministry leaders allowed them to detect an honest association with a steady body of faith, which decidedly supported their relationship. The couples continued their journey to marriage.

Phase 3. The individual combines the before and during thoughts of the transitions to determine how to utilize the learned experience to adapt to the event experienced. In this study, the participants recounted that they experienced and retained positive momentum within their relationships toward building a healthy and successful marriage. The couples reported that their communication styles have improved, with positive openness and honesty with each other and their ability to understand each other better than before premarital counseling. Through this study, the participants confirmed that premarital counseling significantly enhanced their communication skills and overall relationship satisfaction with a deeper understanding of each other, as per Carlson et al.'s (2020) research. Carlson et al.'s research strongly supported the notion that premarital counseling programs positively influence couples.

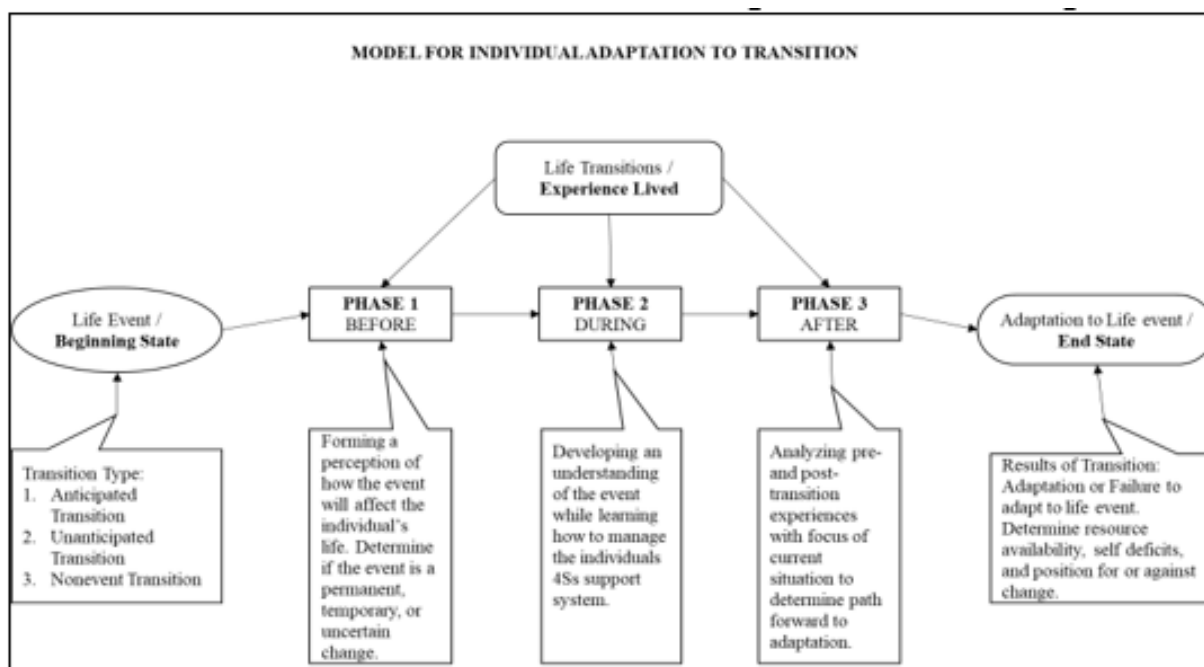
The findings of this study fill this information gap by exploring the lived experiences of African American couples who completed premarital counseling in a local church as they moved in, moved through, and moved out of premarital counseling. The findings described how the couples found premarital counseling meaningful and intentional in building a successful marriage.

Theoretical Literature

Schlossberg's transition theory (1981) provided an excellent theoretical framework to explore how a couple moves in, moves through, and moves out of premarital counseling in an African American church. This study added to the body of research about Schlossberg's transition theory (1981) by being applied to premarital counseling and remembering that transition is defined as an event that necessitates a change in the individual's assumptive world and a change in the individual's relationships. Each couple experienced a transition when attending premarital counseling. By examining this study's primary themes and subthemes, one can explicitly describe the three stages of transition of attending premarital counseling through the participant's eyes, as displayed in Figure 13.

Figure 13

The Transition Process of Attending Premarital Counseling



Note. Jamie Pettis created the chart to show the Moving In, Moving Through, and Moving Out process.

Implications

In research, researchers use implications to explain the significance of the study results for scholars and specific populations or subgroups, extending beyond the primary data and interpretation of findings (Drisko, 2005). Furthermore, it is imperative to thoroughly examine the specific intersection of researcher identities (e.g., race, sexual orientation, gender, and social class) and their implications for the interviewee-interviewer dynamic (Goldberg & Allen, 2015). This phenomenological study provided results with Theoretical Implications, Practical Implications, Empirical Implications/Future Research Implications, and the Implications of the Christian Worldview. This section describes the four listed implications and the impact of the following stakeholders: 1) the researcher of premarital counseling, 2) the premarital facilitator, the pastor, and 3) future premarital couples.

Theoretical Implications

This study provided results that have theoretical implications for researchers of premarital counseling and transition theory. Using Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory provided the framework that allowed the descriptions of what couples experienced as they moved in, moved through, and moved out of premarital counseling. The findings of this study revealed that couples went through a positive and transformative experience that required them to learn new ways to communicate and, go deeper into understanding each other, be intentional with selecting who will facilitate their premarital counseling. The three primary themes and seven subthemes provided descriptions of each stage of transitions as well as the 4S system, which included situations, self, supports, and strategies.

Situations

All the couples in this study anticipated attending premarital counseling. Whether hearing about premarital counseling through family, friends, or the church seeking out premarital counseling, each couple had to make a conscious decision to attend. Each couple had distinct types of motivation to attend, including intentional motivation to identify potential barriers and how to work through them, motivation to have premarital counseling before marriage, and church requirements without waivers.

Self

Once the couples made a conscious decision, they had expectations that they hoped premarital counseling would meet. There was a common expectation that the couple would need premarital counseling essentials for proactive measures that African American couples can take to prepare for successful marriages through the local church. Herbert and Helen stood out from the group because Herbert had a prior marriage before taking premarital counseling. Herbert stated,

Prior to dating and after his divorce, pursuing counseling for himself to decipher the behaviors and habits he had that contributed to the failure of his first marriage felt premarital counseling would fill a big void that was missing in his first marriage, and he wanted to enter his next marriage better and get counseling as a couple before getting married.

Red and Big Texas said, “They were having difficulties and personal problems going on and wanted help from the pastor.” Fred and Freda stated, “The relationship was challenging, and we felt premarital counseling would help make things work out.” Carl and Carla said, “We prepared ourselves to go through a process and expected to learn something to be better.” Ed and Eva

sought help to “learn how to talk to one another and deal with issues.” Greg and Gina, along with Ike and Ida, said, “We do not know what we need, but we want support.”

Supports

Schlossberg (2011) described that the different supports consist of people who are likely to help and are accessible as the moment in time of transition is crucial to one's perception of well-being. This positive impact appeared in the results of this study. As couples began to engage in premarital counseling, eight of the nine couples reported that they had support. By having premarital counseling facilitators available for help, the couples embraced their support and engaged in premarital counseling. As the couples continued to receive the support and experience, they became confident in themselves and increased confidence in their partners. Two couples even mentioned that by being in a positive and supportive setting, they were encouraged by the feedback from their pastor. As the couples utilized the help of the pastor, they were able to experience positive transformative experiences within their relationship.

Strategies

Each couple had to develop coping strategies to move in, move through, and move out of the transition process of attending premarital counseling. The most common coping strategy was to reduce the stress of getting married and participating in premarital counseling. The couples also showed they used one of Sargent and Schlossberg's (1988) three major coping strategies: creatively cope by changing the situation. The couples' coping strategies also included the following modes of coping: couples taking direct action through negotiation or assertiveness when dealing with difficult stressors.

Empirical Implications

Marriage is a vital part of the African American culture, as many African American couples recognize its importance (Gallup, 2006; Simpkins, 2013). However, the road to a successful and long-lasting marriage is often tumultuous for African American couples. While studies have explored the factors that can lead to divorce or trouble in African American marriages, very few have empirically examined the experiences of successful African American couples and used them to guide others (Chaney, 2014; Marks et al., 2010). This research highlighted the enduring lived experiences of premarital counseling of African American couples and made their unique advice on communication and marital issues available to everyone. The findings revealed that effective communication, a clear understanding of roles to include each other, and seeking the right premarital counselor are the most crucial pieces of advice these couples have to offer. Though these factors can contribute to premarital stress for any ethnicity, they are particularly significant for African American couples (Boss et al., 2016; Dew et al., 2012; Markman et al., 2010). This study, therefore, has significant implications for African American couples seeking to get married after completing premarital counseling from a well-equipped and trained premarital counseling professional. By utilizing the lived experiences of successful African American couples, this study can help African American couples build strong, enduring marriages that stand the test of time (Vaterlaus et al., 2016).

Implication for Christian Worldview

The American Christian worldview is the same as it was from the beginning of time when God created Adam and God created Eve for Adam. The Bible tells us what God has put together to let no man separate. The world sees African Americans as having the highest divorce rates in the US nation. The Christian perspective is that African Americans do not need

counseling. Unfortunately, the church nor independent premarital counseling facilitators have been able to stop or reduce the divorce rate of African American couples. The Christian worldview says that when a man and woman unite in holy matrimony, nothing should separate them. However, how can a man and a woman understand the meaning of marriage if they do not know about it, and what does it take to stay married? Premarital counseling provides that vehicle to deliver knowledge to man and woman to unite, stay married, and have a satisfied relationship until death do them part.

Between the 1990s and 2000s, African American divorce rates steadily increased by 14% for first-time marriages (Rosenfeld & Roesler, 2024). Research suggests that a considerable proportion of marriages (24%) begins with low levels of quality and satisfaction, putting them at greater risk for divorce (Clyde et al., 2020). These findings highlight the need for effective interventions to support couples in building healthy and fulfilling relationships. One promising strategy is premarital counseling, which has been shown to improve marital satisfaction and reduce divorce rates among diverse populations (Clyde et al., 2020). Given the high rates of divorce among African American couples, it is especially important to explore the potential benefits of premarital counseling in this population. By investing in premarital counseling, counselors can empower couples to build strong and resilient relationships that stand the test of time. Premarital counseling helps couples gain the necessary skills to put into practice to develop, build, and cultivate a satisfying relationship marriage (Kariuki, 2018; Navabifar et al., 2020).

Approaching marriage from a Christian worldview perspective, it is highly recommended to go through premarital counseling. This helps couples to proactively address issues and conflicts that may arise in the future and to establish a stronger foundation for their marriage.

The Bible teaches that marriage is a sacred covenant between a man and a woman, and therefore, it should be taken seriously. Premarital counseling provides an opportunity for couples to address potential issues and conflicts that may arise in the future and to develop a stronger foundation for their marriage (Baker, 2019). The Christian worldview says a successful marriage is a marriage until death does the couple part. However, just because a couple stays together until death does them part, which is what the couple planned to do, does not mean they were happy while married.

According to the Christian worldview, premarital counseling is highly recommended for couples who are planning to get married. According to Skipper et al., “The U.S. Census Bureau reports that only 29% of African Americans are married” (2021). Research has shown that couples who take part in premarital counseling are 30% more likely to achieve a successful marriage than those who do not (Kepler, 2015).

The research into African American marriage satisfaction could reveal possibilities and avenues on how to write a successful marriage guide, given the fact that a couple stays married to death. If asked today, the surviving partner would have to rate how the marriage was on a regiment scale. The Christian worldview prior to the premarital counseling movement was that the couple understands the meaning until death do us part is a successful marriage (Wallerstein, 2019). When the survivance partner is asked to rate the marriage, that is a one-dimensional picture of that marriage; therefore, that testing might be inconclusive, so it might be needed to back it up to see the average length of a marriage till death does them part. Many couples have celebrated their milestones of 50 years, so would we be able to say that if a couple stays married for 50 years, that is, without question, a successful marriage? If that is the case, then the Christian world view should be able to measure the marriage satisfaction of a couple who

completed premarital counseling 50 years ago and redo the testing of what this researcher has done to examine the life of an African American couple who completed premarital counseling and completed 50 years of marriage without separation or divorce.

The Christian worldview sees a marriage between a man and a woman, united under God with tools and skills within them to effectively communicate, effectively get through conflict resolution, and grow together with a better understanding of each other. The African American population is presumptively known to be highly spiritual, meaning that they honor and follow God and God's word; however, African Americans have the highest divorce rate in the United States (Gregory, 2019). Therefore, one cannot presume that an African American couple participating in a local church and completing premarital counseling can, indeed, have a successful marriage. African Americans, in general, along with the African Americans participating in a local church, have lived by the code of the culture that African Americans do not seek counseling nor attend counseling (Whitefield, 2021). So, those African American couples that seek premarital counseling and complete the counseling often support premarital counseling, as well as have a lasting love relationship because of the tools that were received doing premarital counseling. These tools help those African American couples succeed in their marriage. The couples that do not seek premarital counseling and get married often revert to single status due to the lack of skills, knowledge, and ability to work through conflicts, have effective communication, and grow together. Now, the question arises: if African American couples who completed premarital counseling within their local church honors and follow God and his word, then why are African American couples divorcing?

Practical Implications

This study produced practical implications for premarital couples and future premarital couples. Below are implications and recommendations for pastors, premarital facilitators, and premarital couples:

Communication has remained a vital skill in premarital counseling programs designed to improve the African American couple's relationship outcomes. However, most of the research on African American couples' premarital counseling experience lacks extensive examinations of the communicative patterns between African American couples (Barton & Bryant, 2017). The few studies that explored this phenomenon of the lived experience of African American couples who completed premarital counseling have concluded that improved communication can contribute significantly to the relational stability of African American couples-case specific, even beyond the significance level for other ethnicity couples (Barton & Bryant, 2017). Qualitative findings from this research suggest and recommend that African American couples should learn and utilize strategies to master open and effective communication. This finding is parallel to other findings in empirical research that highlight the criticality of communication in building strong and lasting marriages (Williamson et al., 2014). Although there is no guide to building a solid and lasting marriage for African American couples, it is recommended that the participants' lived premarital experiences with relational communication could benefit those seeking advice from strong African American couples.

All the couples in this research shared that marriage is a two-way communication that identifies problems and works through each issue. Communication is vital in marriage, and its role stresses the importance of learning how to communicate during premarital counseling to instill effective communication skills during counseling. Historical studies support this claim that

premarital counseling improves communication for African American couples (Williamson et al., 2014). However, learning how to communicate during premarital counseling can be effective for any couple. Given the current divorce rate of African American couples, the risk of divorce and lack of marital satisfaction for African Americans puts forth a persuasive case for emphasizing and recommending the need for highly effective and practical communication skills be taught in premarital counseling.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations

When reporting a research study, a researcher must disclose the delimitations and limitations. This reporting provides the reader with an understanding of the study's precision and reliability, thereby enhancing the reader's trust in the data analysis and the consequent themes. Additionally, the delimitations and limitations outlined below can guide future research studies:

Delimitations represent deliberate choices made by the researcher to define or restrict the study's boundaries to fulfill its objectives. In this study, age 18 was automatically delimited due to the requirement for adult participants, as the researcher focused on couples undergoing experiential premarital counseling within the framework of Schlossberg's (1981) three-phase *Moving In, Moving Through, and Moving Out* phases. Another delimitation involved the time elapsed since attending premarital counseling, as a sufficient transition duration was necessary for the couple to undergo the *Moving Out* phase. A minimum two-year period was appropriate and required for the couple to complete the *Moving Out* phase while providing a comprehensive account of their experiences. Finally, the delimitation specified that the couple had to still be in a relationship at the time of the interview, enabling them to reflect, evaluate, and describe the effects of premarital counseling on their relationship.

Limitations

Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018) defined limitations as weaknesses beyond a researcher's control. In qualitative research, limitations are associated with validity and reliability (Simon & Goes, 2013). This study encountered three limitations: Firstly, the researcher recruited 10 African American couples who had completed premarital counseling at the time of the study. Despite the prevalence of African American marriages facilitated by the African American church, few couples were willing to participate in the study due to limited availability, reducing the participant pool. The limited number of African American couples attributed to participation and the fact that most target participants were either no longer married or had not undergone premarital counseling.

Another limitation was the consistency in the duration of interviews. Although the goal was to interview 10 couples within 90 minutes, seven participants took 120 minutes or longer. The limited participant pool necessitated continuing the study with fewer than 10 participating couples. Additionally, an unintended finding revealed that a couple did not receive counseling but instead received an invitation to seek advice from the pastor, which limited the generalizability of the research findings to the participating couple.

A third limitation was the inability of most qualitative methodologies to be replicated under controlled experimental conditions, hindering their verification (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). This study's transferability and applicability were limited because it focused on a specific population and area of concern. Including a more diverse research sample in terms of population and areas of concern would enhance the applicability and transferability of the study's results to a broader population (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018).

Recommendations for Future Research

The focus of this study was on the lived experiences of African American couples who completed premarital counseling. Below are the researcher's four recommendations for future research proposals based on the results of this study:

Recommendation #1

Reducing the age limit for future phenomenological studies of African American couples' premarital counseling given that this study was one of the first of its kind and recently researched. The couples that participated in premarital counseling consisted of premarital couples' active status in their respective churches. This researcher recommends that future research consist of any African American premarital couple with a minimum of one year of marriage due to time elapsing and participants begin to experience difficulty recalling specifics of each transition phase (Kasten, 2022). Future research should recruit diverse age groups to safeguard a good variation within the study's participants. Also, within the study, the research transferability increases by increasing the variation of the participants. It will be beneficial to explore the lived experiences of various age groups.

Recommendation #2

Utilize mixed method research to generate quantitative baselines when measuring research questions, communication satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction with compare and contrast of before and after premarital counseling and measure the quality and quantity of the premarital counseling program to include the facilitator's performance. By conducting a mixed method of quantitative and qualitative research, the study could produce a nuance of understanding of the multiple variables (Savoia et al., 2024).

Recommendation #3

Conduct the same research on African American pastors' training in premarital counseling. The findings in this research revealed that four of nine pastors provide premarital education with a Bible and a curriculum, four of the nine pastors provide premarital education with the Bible and no curriculum, and one of nine pastors did provide premarital education with no Bible and no curriculum. Among the nine pastors, the participants did not confirm that their pastor had formal training in premarital counseling. Those who used the Bible and curriculum provided a systematic approach to providing premarital counseling. Researching pastors' qualifications and training can yield results that can help determine the quality of a local church's premarital education program and the pastor's performance level in providing premarital counseling. According to Avent and Cashwell (2015), pastors must acquire a comprehensive understanding of the Black Church and African American religion and spirituality for a pastor to deliver competent counseling. Therefore, when a pastor does not have the intellectual capital in premarital counseling, the pastor hinders the couple's premarital counseling experience and individual counseling assessments.

Recommendation #4

Utilizing an assessment tool for African American premarital couples will yield a focused premarital counseling approach to the individual and couple's premarital counseling needs. This research did not ask if the participants completed a premarital counseling assessment. For best practice, it would be beneficial to compare and contrast the quality of this transcendental phenomenological study describing how African American couples describe their experiences attending a premarital counseling program in the African American church against African American couples who have had a premarital assessment and completed premarital counseling in

the African American church. Conducting an inventory prior to premarital counseling offers a wide scope of critical factors that are vital for African American premarital couples (Riles, 2016).

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of African American couples who attended premarital counseling in an African American church. The couple's voices resonated as the researcher used the transcendental phenomenological methodology, providing three primary themes and seven subthemes. The first primary theme was Before Premarital Counseling. The first theme revealed two subthemes experienced by the couples: Attitudes and Expectations. The second primary theme was During Premarital Counseling, which had two subthemes. The couples described their Pastor's Attitude and their Pastor's Approach while moving through premarital counseling. Lastly, the third primary theme had three subthemes: The Couple's Relationship Growth, their Overall Experience, and their Recommendations.

All couples utilized their pastors rather than a premarital counseling facilitator or workshop. The couples were eager to learn how to have a successful marriage and satisfying relationship. The pastors varied in their attitudes and approaches, which impacted the couples' overall experiences. All couples received a version of premarital counseling, whether as a requirement or voluntary. All pastors were willing to help the premarital couples.

Premarital counseling provides a form of a premarital prevention program to educate noncoupled individuals on how to avoid divorce after marriage. Through premarital counseling, the African American couples in this study explored their commitment to marriage and developed behaviors and characteristics to diminish the African American marital disruption gap (Clarkwest, 2006). Research has shown that the overall positive effects of participating in a

premarital counseling program are “to improve couple communication and prevent deterioration in relationship well-being” (Williamson et al., 2014, p. 112). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of African American couples who completed a premarital counseling program through the African American church. The theory guiding this study was Schlossberg’s (1981) model of transition. This model offered a theoretical framework for understanding the experiences that African American couples endured in the transition from single to married.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

July 10, 2023

Jamie Pettis
James Kasten

Re: IRB Approval - IRB-FY22-23-1396 A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Lived Experience of African American Couples Attending Premarital Counseling

Dear Jamie Pettis, James Kasten,

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: July 10, 2023. If you need to make changes to the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit a modification to the IRB. Modifications can be completed through your Cayuse IRB account.

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

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. [45 CFR 46.101\(b\)\(2\)](#) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

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,


Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B: Research Flyer Research Flyer

Research Participants Needed

A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Lived Experience of African American Couples Attending Premarital Counseling

- Are you African American?
- Are you 18 years of age or older?
- Are you heterosexually married for a minimum of two years?
 - Have you attended premarital counseling?

If you answered **yes** to all of these questions, you may be eligible to participate in a research study.

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe African American couples' lived experience of premarital counseling in African American churches. Participants will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, participate in a one-hour audio and video-recorded interview online, and participate in an audio and video-recorded focus group with the researcher. It should take no longer than 2 hours to complete the procedures listed. This study does not provide compensation and is completely confidential and voluntary. Participants may withdraw at any time.

The study is being conducted via email and through Zoom. To participate, please contact Rev. Jamie J. Pettis at the information below to receive a consent document and a demographic survey, as well as to set up an interview. Please return your signed consent document along with the completed survey at the time of the interview.

Jamie J. Pettis, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Community Care and Counseling, School of Behavioral Science at Liberty University is conducting this study.

Please contact Rev. Jamie J. Pettis at [REDACTED] for more information.

Appendix C: Church Approval Letters

July 14, 2023

[REDACTED]

Pastor

Calvary Baptist Church

[REDACTED]

Dear Pastor [REDACTED],

As a graduate student in the Ed. D. program in the School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education in Community Care & Counseling: Pastoral Counseling degree. The title of my research project is **A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Lived Experience of African American Couples Attending Premarital Counseling**, and the purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe African American couples' lived experience of premarital counseling in African American churches. The data collected will illuminate the effectiveness of premarital counseling offered to African American couples seeking a successful marriage via administered surveys and in-person interviews.

I am writing to request your permission to utilize your membership list to recruit participants for my research.

Participants will be asked to complete a demographic survey, participate in an online, audio and video-recorded interview, and participate in an in-person, audio and video-recorded focus group. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please respond by email to [REDACTED]. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Rev. Jamie J. Pettis
Doctoral Candidate

[REDACTED]

July 14, 2023

[REDACTED]
Pastor

Providence Baptist Church
[REDACTED]

Dear Pastor [REDACTED],

As a graduate student in the Ed. D. program in the School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education in Community Care & Counseling: Pastoral Counseling degree. The title of my research project is **A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Lived Experience of African American Couples Attending Premarital Counseling**, and the purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe African American couples' lived experience of premarital counseling in African American churches. The data collected will illuminate the effectiveness of premarital counseling offered to African American couples seeking a successful marriage via administered surveys and in-person interviews.

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Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please respond by email to [REDACTED]. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Rev. Jamie J. Pettis
Doctoral Candidate
[REDACTED]

July 14, 2023

[REDACTED]
Pastor

Ebenezer AME Church
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED],

As a graduate student in the Ed. D. program in the School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education in Community Care & Counseling: Pastoral Counseling degree. The title of my research project is **A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Lived Experience of African American Couples Attending Premarital Counseling**, and the purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe African American couples' lived experience of premarital counseling in African American churches. The data collected will illuminate the effectiveness of premarital counseling offered to African American couples seeking a successful marriage via administered surveys and in-person interviews.

I am writing to request your permission to utilize your membership list to recruit participants for my research.

Participants will be asked to complete a demographic survey, participate in an online, audio and video-recorded interview, and participate in an in-person, audio and video-recorded focus group. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please respond by email to [REDACTED]. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Rev. Jamie J. Pettis
Doctoral Candidate
[REDACTED]



Calvary Baptist Church

Telephone: [redacted] – Fax [redacted]

[redacted], Senior Pastor

Email: [redacted]

CBC Website: [redacted]

“Equipping, Educating & Evangelizing the World”

[redacted]

Chairperson, Deacon Ministry

[redacted]

Chairperson, Trustee Ministry

[redacted]

Church Clerk

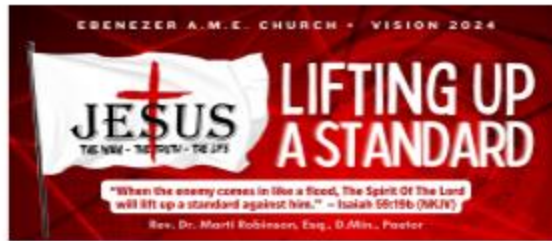
Rev. Jamie Pettis
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University
School of Behavioral Sciences

Dear Rev. Jamie Pettis,

We at Calvary Baptist Church are excited for you as you take this journey towards your Doctoral Degree. Thank you for considering Calvary as a place to conduct your marriage study. We extend to you permission in respect to your research with our married couples. If you need further assistance, please feel free to reach out to us. Praying for your success.

IHS,

[redacted], Pastor
[redacted], Pastor



May 17, 2024

Rev. Jamie J. Pettis, Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University



Dear Doctoral Candidate:

As always, I hope and pray that all is well with you and your entire family as you are completing the requirements for a Doctor of Education in Community Care & Counseling: Pastoral Counseling Degree.

You are seeking permission from Ebenezer A.M.E. Church in Rahway, N.J. to conduct a study with married couples as it relates to your research project which is entitled: A Phenomenological Study Exploring The Lived Experience of African American Couples Attending Premarital Counseling.

I am pleased to inform you that permission has been granted with respect to your research.

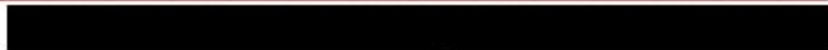
Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

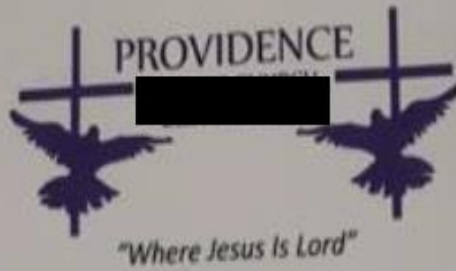
Take Care & God Bless,



Pastor

Ebenezer A.M.E. Church





Reverend [redacted] Pastor

[redacted] Assistant to the Pastor
 [redacted] Chairman of Deacons
 [redacted] Scott, Chairman of Trustees
 [redacted] Church Clerk

[redacted]
 Church Phone [redacted]
 Church Fax [redacted]

July 20, 2024

Rev. Jaimie J. Pettis
 Doctoral Candidate
 Liberty University
 School of Behavioral Sciences

Dear Doctoral Candidate,

I am so pleased that you considered using married couples from our congregation here at Providence Baptist Church to participate in your research study. I understand you are looking for couples who received counseling prior to their marriage. We are granting you permission to meet with couples who are willing to be a part of this important work.

If you require any further assistance please contact me at your earliest convenience.

In His Service

[redacted signature]

Rev. Dr. [redacted] Pastor

Appendix D: Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear Potential Participants

As a doctoral candidate in the School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University. I am conducting a research project as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education in Community Care & Counseling: Pastoral Counseling degree. The purpose of my research study is to describe African American couples' lived experience of premarital counseling in African American churches, and I am writing to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be African American, 18 years of age or older, heterosexually married for at least two years, and must have attended premarital counseling. Participants, if willing, will be asked to complete a demographic survey, participate in a one-hour, one-on-one audio and video recorded online interview with the researcher, participate in an in-person audio and video recorded focus group. It should take approximately two hours for you to complete the procedures listed. Names and other identifying information will be collected as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, contact me at [REDACTED] to confirm your eligibility and schedule an interview. Please return the attached survey and consent form to me at the time of the interview.

A consent document will be provided to you before the interview that contains additional information about my research. Please sign the consent document and return it to me along with the survey before the interview.

Sincerely,

Rev. Jamie J. Pettis
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix E: Consent

Title of the Project: A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Lived Experience of African American Couples Attending Premarital Counseling

Principal Investigator: Jamie J. Pettis, MSM, MTS, Ed. D Candidate, Department of Community Care and Counseling, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be African American, 18 years of age or older, heterosexually married for a minimum of two years, and must have attended premarital counseling. 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 phenomenological study is to describe African American couples' lived experience of premarital counseling in African American churches. The data collected will illuminate the effectiveness of local African American churches' premarital counseling offered to African American couples seeking a successful marriage.

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. Complete a demographic survey (15 minutes).
2. Participate in an audio and video-recorded online interview with the researcher. The interview will take place through Zoom, a video conferencing software (1-1.5 hours).
3. Participate in an audio and video-recorded focus group with the researcher and other study participants. The focus group will take place in an online chat room or group text software format, therefore allowing you to respond to the focus questions at your convenience. The invitation will be sent after completing the one-on-one interview with the researcher and will be conducted with the other participants from other churches who attended premarital counseling (30-45 minutes).

It should take approximately 2 hours to complete the procedures listed.

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:

- Helping describe benefits of premarital counseling.
- Providing a description of African American couples attending premarital counseling.
- Participating in a qualitative research study

Additionally, findings from this study may be published and potentially prove beneficial to premarital educators, African American couples who may attend future premarital counseling, and help strengthen the building of a lasting marriage in the African American Culture.

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, recordings, and associated transcripts will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms. Assigned pseudonyms will be used in all written or electronic records and reports to protect participant identity. All pseudonyms will be kept on a list stored separately from the data in a separate password-protected folder.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- Written and hard copy records will be kept in a secure file cabinet until such time that they are converted to electronic form and stored on a password-protected computer. All electronic files will be backed up using an online backup service. Access to data will be limited to the researcher and will not be used for purposes outside of this study without the additional consent of research participants. After three years, all hardcopy records will be shredded, and all electronic records will be deleted.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

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

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw from the study 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 do so by contacting the researcher, at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be

included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

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

The researcher conducting this study is Jamie J. Pettis. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact the researcher via e-mail at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. [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 IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, [REDACTED]; our phone number is [REDACTED], and our email address is [REDACTED].

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner 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 with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

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

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

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix F: Questionnaire

The purpose of my research study is to investigate how couples experienced attending premarital counseling. This questionnaire is intended to assess your perceived level of ability as a couple to reflect on and discuss your premarital counseling experience and record your overall reflection and perceptions of your premarital counseling experience.

* Required

Email address: * _____

1. We Are Confident That We Can Recall Details About Our Experience Prior To Attending The Premarital Counseling (e.g., Our Relationship Prior To Attending, The Events That Led To Our Interest In Participating In The Counseling, Expectations of The Counseling, etc.): *

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

2. We Are Confident That We Can Recall Details About Our Experience While Attending The Premarital Counseling (e.g., Challenges Experienced, Positive Moments Experienced, etc.): *

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

3. We Are Confident That We Can Recall Details About Our Experience After Attending The Premarital Counseling (Differences in Our Relationship, Short Term & Long-Term Impact, etc.):

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

4. Please Take A Moment To Share A Memory From Your Premarital Counseling Experience: *

Appendix G: Copy of Semi-Structured Interviews Questions

Opening Questions

1. Please tell me a little about yourself as if we were meeting for the first time.
2. How did you meet?
3. What made you decide to become engaged?
4. How would you describe your relationship with your parents or parental figures growing up?
5. How would you describe your parent's marriage while growing up?

I. *Questions Related to the Experience of the Moving in Phase*

6. Please describe your experience of learning about premarital counseling. What were your initial thoughts when you heard about premarital counseling?
7. Please describe the process you took as a couple to decide to participate in premarital counseling. What were the circumstances surrounding your decision? What was the appeal of the premarital counseling that helped sway you to say yes?
8. After registering for premarital counseling, what were your expectations prior to attending premarital counseling?
9. How would you describe your relationship before attending premarital counseling?

II. *Questions Related to the Experience of the Moving Through Phase.*

10. How were your expectations met while attending premarital counseling?
11. What challenges did you experience while attending premarital counseling?
12. What were some unexpected experiences you encountered while attending premarital counseling? Were they positive? Were they negative?
13. While attending premarital counseling, how would you describe your experience with the interactive exercises of premarital counseling?

14. While attending premarital counseling, what did you experience or what were your thoughts, emotions, and feelings as you learned the material that was being presented?

15. While attending premarital counseling, how would you describe your relationship?

III. *Questions Related to the Experience of Moving Out Phase*

16. As you look back at your premarital counseling experience, how would you describe your experience with premarital counseling? Was it an overall positive experience or negative, and why?

17. How do you feel that you, your spouse, and your relationship benefitted (or did not benefit) from you completing the premarital counseling?

18. How would you describe your relationship since attending premarital counseling?

19. What would you tell other premarital couples considering attending premarital counseling?

20. Is there anything else related to your premarital counseling experience that you would like to add that we have not already discussed?