

DESIRING MARRIAGE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF COLLEGE-EDUCATED  
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S CHALLENGES IN NEVER  
BEING MARRIED

A DISSERTATION

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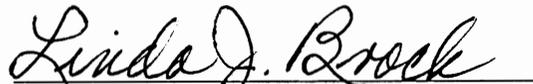
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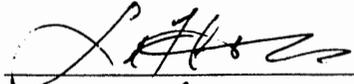
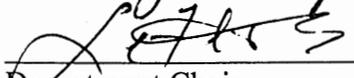
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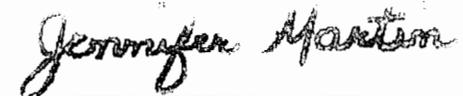
I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Robin Washington-White entitled "Desiring Marriage: A Qualitative Study of College-Educated African American Women's Challenges in Never Being Married." I have examined this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy with a major in Family Therapy.

  
Linda J. Brock, Ph.D., Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

  
  
  
Department Chair

Accept:

  
Dean of the Graduate School

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desires and experiences and for that, I am grateful. God, I thank you for allowing me to use the gifts that you have provided.

## ABSTRACT

ROBIN WASHINGTON-WHITE

### DESIRING MARRIAGE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF COLLEGE-EDUCATED AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S CHALLENGES IN NEVER BEING MARRIED

DECEMBER 2011

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the challenges that never-married, college-educated, African American women face in desiring marriage. Due to numerous barriers, college-educated, African American women, may struggle to find a suitable homogamous mate, one like them in age, race, education, and economic status. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed to gain a deep, rich understanding of the challenges these women face. Snowball sampling techniques were employed to secure participants. The study included 15 never-married, college-educated, African American women who desire marriage. The women ranged in age from 30 to 45 years. The following question guided the research: What challenges do never-married, college-educated, African American women face in desiring marriage?

The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed to determine themes. Five themes emerged: (a) *Because I am not Married, I Question Myself*; (b) *Because I am not Married, I Question God*; (c) *Because I am not Married, Society Questions Me*; (d) *Because I am not Married, I Question Mate Availability and Suitability*; and (e) *Because I am not Married, I Changed My Plans and Question My*

*Future.* Based on the findings, implications for family therapists, mental health professionals, family life educators and churches are presented and recommendations for future research are offered.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In 1960, 78% of African American homes included a married couple. By 1970, this percentage plummeted to 64%. This downward spiral continued rapidly until only 37% of African American women were married in 2000 (Pinderhughes, 2002).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2009, 40.2% of African American women over age 18 had never been married as compared to only 18.7% of White women. There are nearly twice as many never-married African American women as White women in the United States (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Scholars have presented a myriad of factors to explain the decline in marriage rates for African Americans. These explanations include, but are not limited to, the rise of incarceration among African American men (Lane, Keefe, Rubinstein, Levandowski, Freedman, Rosenthal et al., 2004; Lopoo & Western, 2005), the increase of homosexuality (Dang & Frazer, 2005), the decrease of African American educated male counterparts (Gullickson, 2006; Hefner, 2004; Schoen & Cheng, 2006), economic disparities between African American women and African American men (Brown & Kesserling, 2006; Lichter, LeClere, & McLaughlin, 1991), employment prospects for African American men (Kaba, 2005), the rise in interracial dating (Batson, Qian, & Lichter, 2006; Crowder & Tolnay, 2000; Spanier & Glick 1980), and an increase in cohabitation (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991; Guzzo, 2006; Raley, 1996).

In addition, the marriage gradient, which is the unspoken rule that women should “marry up” in age, education and social economic status, may contribute to college-educated African American women remaining single (Veever, 1988). In the United States singlehood is becoming rather common for highly educated women. African American women in particular, confronted with the realities of having a limited number of marriage eligible African American men, may pursue education instead of marriage as the path to social and economic security (Bethea, 1995). Hefner (2004) reported that in year 2000 in the United States, 38,103 Black men earned a four-year degree compared to 73,204 Black women. Nearly 70 percent of all Black students earning bachelor’s degrees in 2000 were women.

According to the American Council on Education’s twenty-third status report (Ryu, 2009) in 2006, 47,477 African American men earned a bachelor’s degree compared to 93,294 degrees earned by African American women. Nearly twice as many African American women earned bachelor’s degrees as did men. These numbers become even more unbalanced when comparing the number of African American men (15,736) to the number of African American women (40,010) earning a graduate degree. The marriage market for highly educated African American women may not be very appealing because there are relatively few African American males with a comparable college education (Hefner, 2004). A vast majority of African American women view their single condition as a forced choice due to limited opportunity to establish relationships with African American men who are similar to them (Bethea, 1995).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Many college-educated African American women desire marriage, but due to numerous barriers, struggle to find a suitable homogamous mate, one like them in age, race, education, and economic status (Blackwell & Lichter, 2004). Some never-married, professional African American women experience disadvantages and drawbacks in never being married, including stigmas, blame, burdensome self-reliance, loss and grief (Fuller, 2001). Still others fear that they may never experience the traditional roles of wife and mother and view their singleness as a forced choice (Bethea, 1995). Little literature was found that specifically addresses the concerns and challenges that college-educated, African American women, who desire marriage, face in never being married.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the challenges that never-married, college-educated, African American women face in desiring marriage. It is important for family therapists, other mental health professionals and the general population to understand the challenges faced by these women.

### **Research Question**

The following question guided this research: what challenges do never-married, college-educated, African American women face in desiring marriage?

## **Research Approach**

A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed to gain a deep, rich understanding of the challenges faced by college-educated, African American women who desire marriage, but have never married. The strengths of phenomenology are that the richness of an individual's experience is gained and, when grouped with others with shared meaning, a unified meaning may emerge (Creswell, 2007). Face-to-face interviews were conducted, audio recorded and transcribed to ascertain the nature or essence of the shared phenomenon.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The researcher focused specifically on Social Exchange as the theoretical lens for the present work. Four main scholars, George Homans, Peter Blau, John Thibaut and Harold Kelley are credited with contributing significantly to the historical development of Social Exchange Theory (Boss, Doherty, LaRossa, Schumm, & Steinmetz, 1993). Social Exchange theory is prevalent in mate selection and marital research. Mate selection is often regulated by informal norms and these norms, or social expectations, shape the perceptions of what characteristics are important in a mate (Murstein, Merighi, & Malloy, 1988).

The exchange framework is built upon a combination of central tenets in which human behavior is viewed as a function of its payoff. Basic assumptions about human nature from the exchange framework are as follows:

1. Humans seek rewards and avoid punishments.
2. When interacting with others, humans seek to maximize profits for themselves while minimizing costs. Since it is not possible to know the actual rewards and costs involved in interacting with another before interaction occurs, humans use their expectations for rewards and costs to guide their behavior.
3. Humans are rational beings and within the limitations of the information that they possess, they calculate rewards, costs, and consider alternatives before acting. This includes the possibility that when faced with no desirable alternative, humans will choose the least costly alternative.
4. The standards that humans use to evaluate rewards and costs differ from person to person and can vary over the course of time.
5. The importance that humans attach to the behavior of others in relationships varies from person to person and can vary over the course of time.
6. The greater the value a reward exceeds one's expectations, the less valued the reward will become in the future. (Boss et al., 1993, pp. 396-397)

As cited in Boss et al., Blau (1964) defined a social exchange as a particular type of association involving actions that are contingent on rewarding reactions of others. Social life is conceived to be a "marketplace" in which participants negotiate with each

other in an effort to make a profit. Rewards, costs, expectations, and alternatives are all considered in this negotiation (Boss et al., 1993).

Rewards and costs are two central concepts to the social exchange. Rewards and costs associated with choice encourage or constrain behavior. Rewards are perceived as benefits for the interested person and costs are the negative dimensions of the reward, the missed or forgone aspects of a choice (Sprecher, 1998). In social exchange theory humans are assumed to be rational beings. They are assumed to have the ability to count the cost and benefits associated with various choices and this rational counting is referred to as profit ratio which may involve several comparisons (White & Kline, 2008).

Thibaut and Kelley (1959) contributed the exchange concept of comparison level (CL) to the theory. The CL involves evaluating what others have that are in your position and measuring how well you are doing compared to them. In mate selection, for example, a single woman may set her mate selection requirements based on her perception of mates that other women have selected. Another exchange concept developed by Thibaut and Kelly is the comparison level for alternatives (CL+) which involves determining how well you are doing, compared to those outside of your current position, this comparison supplies alternative choice (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Applying the comparison level for alternative, the CL+ concept, a single woman may compare her profit as a single person with the profits of the alternative position of being married. In this study the researcher will adopt social exchange theory as the theoretical framework in which to view and

examine the costs and benefits associated with never being married for college-educated African American women who desire marriage.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions were applied:

1. College-educated-- in this study college-educated referred to those having obtained a bachelor's degree or higher from a college or university in the United States.
2. Homogamy-- the natural attraction of persons who share similar objective characteristics, such as race, religion, ethnic group, intelligence, education, social class, age or interest and skills (Saxton, 1977).
3. Heterogamy—the mutual attraction and compatibility of persons with opposite and complementary personality traits (Saxton, 1977).
4. Hypergamy-- to marry up in social status, education, and income (Veevers, 1988).
5. Hypogamy-- to marry down in social status, education, and income (Veevers, 1988).
6. Marriage squeeze-- pushed out of the marriage market because there are not enough potential mates (Crowder, 2000; Spanier & Glick, 1980).
7. Marriage gradient-- term used to explain the phenomena of women's preference to marry men with equal or higher status (hypergamy) and men prefer to marry women with equal or lower status. The results of these two preferences tend to

squeeze certain people out of the marriage market, namely, low status men and high status women (O'Brien & Foley, 1999).

8. African Americans and Blacks--the terms African American and Black will be used interchangeably to refer to the same ethnic group of people, because older literature references Blacks or Black Americans and more recent studies reference African Americans.

### **Assumptions**

This study was based on the following assumptions:

1. Participants in the study will be open and honest when describing their experiences.
2. Persons experiencing a phenomenon are a valid source of knowledge about their experience.
3. African American women have some freedom of choice and the ability to select into marriage or not.
4. The researcher will be able to partially bracket her own judgment and personal opinions.
5. Utilizing a phenomenological approach will help counselors and educators gain a greater understanding of African American women's experiences.

## **Delimitations**

The following delimitations were present in this study:

1. The research participants were limited to never-married women. Women who were single due to divorce or widowhood were not included in the study.
2. The research participants were limited to women who expressed a desire for heterosexual marriage.
3. All participants have earned at least a bachelor's degree from a college or university in the United States.
4. All participants have self-identified as being of the same race, African American.
5. The research participants were volunteers from purposively selective sampling, based on the researcher's criteria, not random sampling.

## **Person of the Researcher**

The researcher is a doctoral student at Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas. This research is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of doctor of philosophy in Family Therapy. The researcher understands that qualitative research is interpretative in nature and therefore the biases, values and judgment of the researcher should be openly considered as these experiences may shape the interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2007).

The researcher is an African American, mother of two, who has been married to an African American male for 15 years. She married at age 25, two years after receiving a bachelor's degree from Morgan State University. Her husband also graduated from

Morgan State University and holds a bachelor's degree in chemistry. The researcher did not personally experience difficulty with finding or securing an educated African American male counterpart.

Her family of origin consists of maternal and paternal grandparents who were both married over 40 years before either of the spouses passed. Her parents have been married 45 years and her husband's parents have also been married nearly 40 years. Licensed as a Professional Counselor in the state of Texas, the researcher values marriage and openly acknowledges her bias toward marriage and has offered marriage counseling to couples struggling with marital issues.

She is very concerned about the declining marriage rates across the nation, particularly in the African American community, and seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors that determine whether African Americans marry. The researcher recognizes that her family of origin, recent marital data, and past experiences have shaped her interest in the topic. For this study the researcher will attempt to bracket preconceived ideas and proceed without judgment.

### **Summary**

Marriage rates have declined among African Americans over the past few decades. Researchers have offered many reasons for the decline including , unequal sex ratios, African American male shortages, increased rates of incarceration, and educational and economic disparities between African American men and women. In addition, the marriage gradient, the unspoken rule that women should marry up in age, education and

economic status has left a large number of college-educated African American women unmarried yet desiring marriage. The present study investigated the challenges faced by college-educated African American women who desire marriage, yet have never married.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the last few decades, there has been a steady decrease in marriage rates among African American males and females. Many social scientists have become concerned about the survival of traditional African American families. In 1960, 78% of African American families were made up of married husband and wife partners. This percentage had decreased to 64% by 1970 and in the late 1980s the marriage rate among African Americans had decreased to a mere 48%. By 1993 only 39% of African American households included both husband and wife (Pinderhughes, 2002).

Researchers Schoen and Cheng (2006) investigated the decline in marriage rates in several states within the United States. They compared vital statistics records focusing on retreat from marriage as a function of race and education. They concluded that as many as 32% of African American men and nearly 40% of African American women will never marry in the course of their lives. The vast majority of African American women view their single condition as a forced choice due to limited opportunity to establish relationships with African American men (Bethea, 1995). This is especially true for college-educated, African American women because they often struggle to find a homogamous mate. This review will include research on women desiring marriage, barriers to marriage for African American women, and research related to single, educated African American women and marriage.

## **Desire for Marriage**

There are a number of studies that seek to explain why never married women desire marriage. One such study by Schroeder (2003) evaluated reasons why women wished to marry, the strength of their desire for marriage, and the levels of meaning in their lives. Self-report questionnaires were completed by 100 women who desired marriage. Reasons why women desired marriage were grouped into 14 separate categories including: companionship, children, family, emotional support/security, commitment, love, the wedding celebration, financial support, growing old with someone, sex, personal growth, to fulfill life, to emulate parents, and to fulfill a fantasy. A preliminary Desire for Marriage Scale was also created in this study. A negative correlation was found between women's desire for marriage and the meaning placed on achievement in their lives. In addition, a positive correlation was found between the desire to marry and level of meaning placed on religion.

Mahay and Lewin (2007) determined that age may influence one's desire to marry. Data were analyzed from 3,078 responses to a national General Social Survey (GSS) to determine how age differences influence desire to marry in single men and women from age 18 to 69. This study first identified five perceived gains from marriage which included, gaining personal resources (i.e., education, employment, income), gaining children, gaining religious acceptance, gaining cultural acceptance, and gaining different perspectives based on divorce experiences. Mahay and Lewin found that single people in their mid-fifties and older may not believe that the expected gains from

marriage outweigh the costs. Gains from marriage change along the life course and consequently, older single people in their fifties and sixties are less likely than their younger counterparts to want to marry, even if the right person comes along. Younger singles had a greater desire for marriage and thus perceived gains that may result from marrying.

In an effort to understand marital desire and reasons for being single, Frazier, Arikian, Benson, Losoff and Maurer (1996) conducted a study with a community sample of 217 unmarried adults over 30 years of age. The majority of the sample (96%) was Caucasian and had graduated from either college or professional school. Both never-married and divorced men and women were included in the study. A questionnaire and three separate inventories were completed which included, SWLS-Satisfaction with Life Scale, ISEL- Interpersonal Support Evaluation List, and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Results suggested that single adults most often attribute being unmarried to not having met the right person, suggesting that being single reflects barriers rather than a personal choice. This sample also embraced the optimistic view that the difficulty lies with meeting potential partners rather than with there being an actual shortage of desirable partners. When comparing the never-married to the divorced, those who had never married appeared to perceive more barriers to marriage both in terms of the availability of partners and their own interpersonal skills. Overall, never-married individuals reported more desire for marriage, lower self-esteem, and more dissatisfaction with their lives than did divorced individuals.

College-educated women's desire to marry may be positively or negatively influenced by the type of relationship that her parents have displayed. Long (2001) studied how parental discord and parental separations effected a daughter's attitudes toward marriage. The general hypothesis in this study was that parental marriage perceived as unhappy by daughters or a marriage that had ended in divorce would condition daughters against marriage. Questionnaires were completed by 134 middle-class White female undergraduate students. It was found that daughters who perceived their parents' marriage to be less happy and with more discord, displayed more negative attitudes toward marriage. Daughters of broken marriages also displayed negative attitudes toward marriage and expected to delay marriage until a much later age and consequently presented less desire for marriage.

Bronzoft (1991) explored marital aspirations of young Black college women. The purpose of this study was to determine if young Black college women had the same futuristic desires for career, marriage and family as did other races. Two hundred and twenty-nine women (110 Hispanic, 54 Black, and 65 White) attending college in New York participated in the study by completing surveys. Results indicated that Black women, similar to other races, want to have it all. They desired marriage, career and family. However, Bronzoft indicated concern regarding the availability of comparable marital prospects for Black women, since there are far fewer Black males seeking higher education.

Bulcroft & Bulcroft (1993) assessed racial differences in attitudinal and motivational factors in the decision to marry. This assessment was based on the 1987 and 1988 National Survey of Families and Households. A total of 13,017 adults living in randomly selected households were surveyed. The purpose of the study was to document race and gender differences in perceived likelihood of marriage, perceived benefits of marriage, the importance of economic supports in the timing of marriage, and adherence to traditional mate selection norms. This analysis was restricted to never-married, non-cohabiting males and females over the age of 18. The results indicated that Black women, more than other racial groups, place greater importance on having economic supports in place prior to marriage and are unwilling to marry someone who has fewer resources. Early in adulthood, Black females are the most likely group to expect to get married and they are also more likely than any other group to perceive positive economic and social/emotional benefits from marriage. These higher expectations are maintained throughout most of their marriageable age range (Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1993). These traditional attitudes may place further restrictions on marriage markets for Black women. They may be delaying marriage or choosing not to marry at all because they refuse to marry a man who lacks a certain level of economic resources.

Black men and women are significantly less desiring of marriage than their White counterparts. South (1993) explored racial, ethnic, and gender differences in the expressed desire to marry. Three racial/ethnic groups were contrasted in this study: Blacks, Whites, and Hispanics. Questionnaire data from 2,073 respondents was reviewed

from the National Survey of Families and Households. The key question evaluated was, I would like to get married some-day? This question was part of a larger self-administered questionnaire completed by unmarried, non-cohabiting persons aged 19 to 35. The results suggested that low marriage rates among African Americans, relative to their non-black counterparts, may be more a function of Black men's than of Black women's reluctance to marry. Compared to White men, Black men anticipated less improvement from marriage in their sex lives and personal friendships, and these differences accounted for most of the difference in the desire to marry.

### **Barriers to Marriage**

Research reveals that the scarcity of marriageable African American men and the disproportionate sex ratio within the African American population may be the foremost cause for the declining marriage rates among African American women (O'Connor, 2006). This section will discuss some of the major barriers to marriage, including unequal sex ratios, African American male shortages, interracial marriages among African American males and marriage gradient norm restrictions.

#### **Unequal Sex Ratios**

Where are all of the marriageable men? According to unequal sex ratio statistics, Black men have the highest mortality rate as compared to all other groups including Black women, White women and White males. In 1991, there were approximately 77 men for every 100 marriageable women. (Pinderhughes, 2002). Lawson and Thompson 1994 (cited by Pinderhughes) explain that the unequal sex rate may be directly linked to

male infidelity. Simply put there is an over abundance of women as compared to men and this makes it difficult for men to remain committed. Kiecolt & Fossett (1997) also acknowledge that when there is a man shortage, it is increasingly difficult for men to commit to a single, long-term relationship because they have more potential partners. They have no pressure to compromise and can attract women without offering much.

Lane et al. (2004) found that unequal sex ratios impact the quality of mate selection for women and forces lower mating standards.

A low male sex ratio robs women of their so-called bargaining power in relationships. As men become scarcer, each relationship becomes much harder to achieve. In her effort to hold onto the relationship, a woman may accept conditions to which she would not agree if her range of potential partners were wider. (Lane et al., 2004, p. 424)

Lane points to disproportionate and premature deaths of Black males as huge contributors to the gender imbalance.

### **African American Male Shortages**

Many factors contribute to the reduction in the number of eligible Black men available for marriage. Some of these factors include high death rates, poor healthcare, violent crimes, high rates of drug and alcohol use and gang activity (Pinderhughes, 2002). Kroll (1993) as cited by Pinderhughes, reported that a disproportionate number of African American men were in prison and in psychiatric hospitals. Only 12% of the United States population is African American, however, 47% of the prison population

consists of African American males. In addition, 28% of the psychiatric hospital population is African American males.

During the years in which most first marriages occur, Black females encounter a relatively restricted field of eligibles compared to white females. Black women are more likely than White women to include previously married divorced men in their pool of marriage eligibles (Spanier & Glick, 1980). Spanier and Glick offered a solution to the scarcity of the pool of marriage eligible Black men. They suggested alleviating the imbalance by Black women increasing interracial dating and marriage.

### **Interracial Relationships**

African American men are more likely than African American women, to select a White partner. It is very rare for a Black female to marry a man who is not Black. Schoen and Cheng (2006) agreed that most unions in the United States were homogamous, same race, Blacks marrying Blacks and Whites marrying Whites. When interracial marriages occurred, it was typically between Black men and non-Black women. Researchers noted a distinct pattern in interracial marriages with non-Black brides marrying up educationally when marrying a Black groom.

The 2003 study by Marbley included only educated Black men and sought to obtain their views on dating outside of their race. All of the participants insisted that they were not interested in dating non-Black women. Yet, they offered some reasons why other Black men would choose White women. These reasons included status symbol, forbidden fruit, Barbie doll image, sex and money (Marbley, 2003). This explanation is

yet another reason why African American women find it difficult to secure a homogamous mate.

### **Marriage Gradient**

Normally, it is expected that women marry up (hypergamy) in social status, education, and income and that men marry down (hypogamy). This informal norm is often referred to as the marriage gradient. Men at the top with high social status, education and income have a much larger pool of eligibles to select from because they are expected to marry down. However, women at the top only have a very small pool of eligibles to select from considering that they are expected to marry up.

The marriage gradient is especially problematic for highly educated African American women. Social status, education and income are not the only factors influencing the marriage gradient. Veivers (1988) pointed to the widespread, generally accepted norm that husbands should be older than their wives. The age factor mating gradient is one of the most significant components creating competition for mates among older unmarried women as compared to older unmarried men. For women access to potential grooms are highest in their 20s and decreases with advancing age until, around age 50. By age 50, there are only about 50 available grooms per 100 unmarried women based on age gradient. "During a time of rapid increase in fertility, some young women are squeezed out of the marriage market because there are not enough potential husbands of a suitable age, namely, two to three years older than themselves. The resulting phenomenon is known as the "marriage squeeze"(Veivers, 1988).

Studies of mate selection provide extensive evidence supporting the generalization that hypergamy, the situation where the woman marries up in terms of status, is almost universally more acceptable and more common than the converse, hypogamy, in which the woman marries down. These norms structure the patterns of relative ages within marriage. Other things being equal, it is appropriate for a man to marry someone of his own age or younger; it is appropriate for a woman to marry someone of her own age or older. Black women have a more restricted field of eligibles; a relatively large portion of Black women will marry men with lower social status or will remain unmarried (Spanier & Glick, 1980).

### **Single African American Women and Marriage**

Swanson (2006) conducted a qualitative study employing grounded theory methodology in order to examine professional, high-achieving, single, African American women's attitudes and perceptions on education, career, marriage and motherhood. The goal was to assess their "sense of balance" in their professional and personal lives and to explore their ideas concerning whether or not their success has come at a personal price, sacrificing marriage and motherhood. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 high-achieving African American women aged 28-40, who had never been married or had any children, having master's degrees, and earning a minimum of \$45,000 per year.

Swanson (2006) asked the women to take a retrospective look at whether their professional success had come at a personal cost and to explore their attitudes and

perceptions about education, career, relationships, marriage and motherhood. Ten major thematic areas emerged from the data analyses: (a) Family Support, (b) Fear of Failure, (c) Lack of Focus (in attaining secondary degrees), (d) Personal Stressors, (e) Sexism, (f) Shortage of Black men, (g) Stereotypes (of Black women), (h) Dating Preferences/Behaviors of Black Men and Women, (i) Mate Compatibility, and (j) Importance of and Obstacles to Motherhood. Overall, marriage was no longer important to 50% of these women and 50% of the women still strongly desired marriage.

In a qualitative ethnographic study Holland (2005) purposively selected 25 African American single college women who were mothers to interview. They were all between the ages of 18 and 30 years and were selected from a college in New York. These women stated that they desired male companionship and their pregnancies were unplanned. The purpose of the study was to explore the attitudes toward marriage among educated African American single mothers and to examine why college-educated women are continuing to have children and not marry. Two research questions guided the study: Research question one asked, “What are the factors that contribute to the decision of college-educated African American women to remain single?” and research question two inquired, “What are the factors that contribute to the decision of college-educated African American women to have children while remaining single?”

Holland (2005) found that African American, college-educated, single mothers desired honest ambitious, non-womanizing and respectful men. They expressed an interest for men to demonstrate that type of behavior during the dating stage, which was a

criteria phase for a long-term commitment that could result in marriage. Since they have not met men who have demonstrated that type of behavior during the dating stage, they continued to be single. They were also torn between moral decision making and the reality of not wanting to relive their experience of prior abortions, so they opted to bear children although they were not married and their pregnancies were not planned. These women made it clear that not marrying was a choice they made, just as having a child was a choice. All of the mothers spoke about not marrying someone just for the sake of getting married. They also reported a sense of self that helped them to navigate through society as single parents and through their education. Results were combined into two major themes: *We are pondering marriage, although we decided to bear children while being single*, and *Single mothers exhibiting eminence with self-esteem* (Holland, 2005).

Fuller (2001) designed and implemented a phenomenological study that explored the lived experience of never-married professional African American women. The design took into consideration the following assumptions regarding Single African American women and situations they are subjected to (a) the economic disadvantages and social subjugation of being a woman (b) the social and economic drawback of being single in a couple-oriented society and (c) socially constructed forms of oppression of women of color. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of singlehood as perceived by 10 college degreed African American women who have never married. The grand tour question guiding the study was “What is it like being a never-married professional African American woman in today’s society?”

Eleven generalized themes were found. Each theme defined aspects of singleness: (a) freedom and independence, (b) burdensome self-reliance, (c) stigma, (d) blame, (e) loss and grief, (f) faith and spirituality, (g) catalyst for growth and opportunity, (h) choice, (i) pressure, (j) temporary life stage, and (k) self-acceptance and well-being. This study established that never married women are aware of the advantages and disadvantages of living as a single woman. Regardless of their desire to marry or remain single, the participants described their lives as very satisfying and meaningful (Fuller, 2001).

### **Summary**

The vast majority of African American women view their single status as a forced choice due to their limited opportunity to establish relationships with African American men (Bethea, 1995). There exists an abundance of research on declining marriage rates among African Americans and on the declining ratio of available African American men as well as on mating gradient preferences of college-educated African American women. There is less research available that specifically investigates African American women's views regarding these phenomena. The present study seeks to explore the challenges that college-educated, African American women face in desiring marriage, yet never having been married.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative research was to discover phenomenologically the challenges faced in never being married for 15 college-educated African American women who desire marriage. As the marriage rates decline among African Americans, marriage and family therapists may see an increase in the number of never-married African American women who strongly desire marriage. It is imperative that mental health professionals understand the challenges faced by this growing population in order to provide the appropriate treatment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 college-educated African American women who desire marriage. Each interview was audiotaped, then transcribed, and analyzed for themes. This chapter will provide detailed methodology for the present study. A number of procedures are explained including the sampling methodology, interview protocol, protection of human participants, data collection methodology and data analysis.

#### **Sampling Methodology**

Snowball sampling techniques were employed to secure participants for this study. The present study included 15 never-married, college-educated, African American women who desire marriage. They ranged in age from 30 to 55 years. All participants have earned at least a bachelor's degree from a college or university in the United States. The researcher began sampling with acquaintances that qualified for the study and then

secured referrals from participants. Recruitment flyers (Appendix A) were used and made available to participants to give to other acquaintances. Recruitment flyers were also available electronically to mail to organizations that had college-educated African American women membership. Participants were recruited mainly from two states within the United States, Texas and Maryland. Once the participant contacted the researcher by electronic mail or telephone the researcher fully explained the purpose and the process of the interview (Appendix B). The researcher and the participant selected a mutually convenient date, time and site for the semi-structured, face-to-face, interview to take place.

### **Protection of Human Participants**

The researcher took necessary precautions to make certain that the human participants were protected. The study was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board of Texas Woman's University to insure that all guidelines for participant protection were followed. A consent form was provided for each participant that clearly stated potential risks and benefits of participation. The purpose of the research, the research procedures and the process for handling sensitive information were included in the consent form. All important information was verbally discussed with each participant prior to signing the consent form. The consent form contained the name and phone number of the researcher and the research advisor in the event of questions following the interview. Participants were allowed to withdraw from participation in the study at any time. A referral list of mental health providers was given to each participant to use if she felt the need to discuss

any emotional discomfort that the interview may have caused. Confidentiality was also assured and maintained with a coded filing system in which names did not appear on the demographic data sheets or in the typed transcripts. Code numbers were used instead of names on all documents and these documents were kept in a locked file in the researcher's office (Babbie, 2001). All identifiable research related information will be kept for two years and then will be destroyed.

### **Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews were the central focus of this study, using a phenomenological approach to gain a deep, rich understanding of the challenges faced by never married, college-educated, African American women who desire marriage. The researcher determined that 15 participants had yielded data saturation for the present study. Data saturation occurs when no new information results from additional interviews (Babbie, 2001). Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed for themes as each interview was completed. If new information and themes were being discovered following 15 interviews, the researcher would have continued interviewing additional participants until data saturation has been reached. Saturation had been reached prior to 15 interviews.

In qualitative research the researcher is the instrument and the manner in which she presents can influence the level of trust or evoke caution on the part of the participant (Babbie, 2001). Therefore the researcher dressed in what is commonly referred to as business casual attire for each interview. She brought a digital recorder, pen, paper,

demographic information forms (Appendix D) and consent forms (Appendix C) to each interview. The consent form was read, fully explained, and signed prior to the interview. A signed copy of the consent form was given to each participant along with a counseling resource list (Appendix F) should the participant desire counseling services following the interview. The demographic data sheet contained all pertinent personal data relating to the present study such as age, education level, and ethnicity. The following questions were asked during the semi-structured interview:

1. What has your dating experience been like?
2. What has the experience of wanting to be married been like for you?
3. What challenges are you facing as a result of not being married?
4. How do you feel about having never been married?
5. Do you believe that marriage is in your future?

During the semi-structured interview the participants were encouraged to speak freely and to ask questions if they needed clarification. At the completion of the interview, each participant was given a list of mental health counselors in her area and asked if the researcher could contact her by phone in the upcoming weeks to allow her to add additional information to the interview and member check the themes found.

### **Data Analysis**

Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The transcription included all the words, pauses and inflections in the participants' voices. Significant non-verbal communication was also noted in the transcripts. The data

analysis began immediately with the first interview. Analysis of the data may lead the researcher in a different direction in order to capture the participant's unique experience. As more information is obtained, the research questions may be reshaped (Denzin & Lincoln, 2007). In order to organize and sort the data, transcripts were read numerous times. Major statements were identified and highlighted on each transcript in order to gain a greater understanding of the participant's experience with the phenomenon. These major statements were used to develop shared themes describing their experiences.

To establish trustworthiness and authenticity of the data, the researcher returned the themes found back to the participants for "member checks" and two doctoral level research assistants triangulated the data (Creswell, 2007). The two researcher assistants randomly selected three transcripts in which they read and highlighted what they viewed as important themes. After the transcripts had been analyzed by the research assistants the researcher met with each assistant to discuss and corroborate emerging themes. The agreed upon themes were then organized into a shared narrative account of the participants' experiences.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative research was to examine phenomenologically the challenges faced in never being married by 15 college-educated, African American women who desire marriage. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with each participant. All necessary precautions have been taken to protect human participants. Each interview was digitally audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and then

analyzed for themes. Two research assistants facilitated triangulating the data and participants member checked the themes to establish trustworthiness and authenticity. This is the final product of the research study, a narrative depiction of the lived experiences of the participants.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

This chapter reports the results of this phenomenological study that was designed to explore the challenges that never-married, college-educated, African American women face in desiring marriage. A description of the sample of women interviewed is provided in the first section. The second section presents the themes that emerged from the women's responses to five interview questions and spontaneous responses to a final open-ended question that allowed participants to add any additional information that they wished relating to their desire to marry. The researcher conducted a pilot study of the first two interviews to determine if the questions and her style of interviewing allowed participants the freedom to give adequate descriptions of their experiences. Consequently, two of the original interview questions were rephrased for clarity and simplicity. The researcher met face-to-face with 17 potential interviewees; however, two candidates did not meet the criteria for inclusion in the study, and they were therefore not included in the study. Participant confidentiality was protected by assigning each participant a numerical code. Two research assistants reviewed the transcripts for common themes and to triangulate data.

### Description of Study Participants

The researcher interviewed 15 ( $N=15$ ) never-married, college-educated, African American women who desired marriage. All participants resided in the United States within two states, either Texas or Maryland; one third ( $n=5$ ) of the participants resided in Texas, and two thirds ( $n=10$ ) resided in Maryland. Each participant was assigned a numerical code prior to commencing the interview. Numerical codes 1-15 represent each individual who participated in the study. The women ranged in age from 30 to 45 years with a mean age of 35.93 years. The median age of the women was 36 years, and 30 was the mode age in this study. Standard deviation between the ages was 4.7 years. Table 1 displays the mean, median, mode and standard deviations for all ages in this study.

Table 1

*Means, Medians, Modes, and Standard Deviations for Ages of Never Married, College-Educated, African American Women Desiring Marriage*

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Age	35.93	4.7	36	30	30	45

All participants had earned at least a bachelor's degree. Regarding highest education level attained, 26.7% ( $n=4$ ) of participants earned bachelor's degree, 46.7% ( $n=7$ ) had earned a master's degree, 20.0% ( $n=3$ ) earned a juris doctorate, and 6.7% ( $n=1$ ) had earned a doctorate. Occupations were varied and stated as: academic counselor

(*n*=1), assistant principal (*n*=1), attorney (*n*=3), social worker (*n*=1), graduate assistant (*n*=1), graduate student (*n*=1), president of finance (*n*=1), processing aide (*n*=1), school counselor (*n*=1), teacher (*n*=2), training specialist (*n*=1) and U.S. Navy officer (*n*=1). Individual income levels ranged from \$20,001 to \$30,000 (*n*=3), \$30,001 to \$50,000 (*n*=3), \$50,001 to \$70,000 (*n*=3), \$70,001 to \$90,000 (*n*=3), and income greater than \$90,001 (*n*=3). Participants' highest education level, occupation, and income levels are listed in Table 2.

The women in this study identified their birth order and the number of siblings they have. Forty percent of the never-married, college-educated, African American women were the oldest child in their family. Twenty-seven percent of the women indicated that they were the youngest in their family, 20% were middle children and 13% were the only child. Figure 1 represents percentages of participants' birth order. Participants likewise indicated their current living arrangements; 87% of the single, college-educated, women lived alone, and 13% lived with others. Of those who lived with others, 40% indicated that they lived with their mother, 20% lived with their sister, 20% lived with family, and 20% did not indicate with whom they lived. Figure 2 displays the percentages of participants who lived alone versus participants who lived with others. Figure 3 displays the percentages of those with whom participants lived if they did not live alone.

Table 2

*Frequencies and Percentages of Highest Education Level, Occupation, and Income of Never Married, College-Educated, African American Women Desiring Marriage*

	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Highest Education Level</b>		
Bachelor's	4	26.7
Master's	7	46.7
Doctorate	1	6.7
<i>Juris Doctorate</i>	3	20.0
<b>Occupation</b>		
Academic Counselor	1	6.7
Assistant Principal	1	6.7
Attorney	3	20.0
Eldercare Specialist	1	6.7
Graduate Assistant	1	6.7
Graduate Student	1	6.7
President of Finance	1	6.7
Processing Aide	1	6.7
School Counselor	1	6.7
Teacher	2	13.3
Training Specialist	1	6.7
US Navy Officer	1	6.7
<b>Income Level</b>		
\$20,001 to \$30,000	3	20.0
\$30,001 to \$50,000	3	20.0
\$50,001 to \$70,000	3	20.0
\$70,001 to \$90,000	3	20.0
\$90,001+	3	20.0

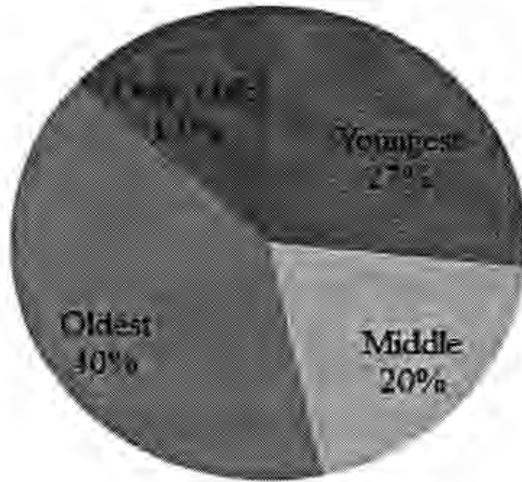


Figure 1. Percentages of birth orders of never married, college-educated, African American women desiring marriage ( $N = 15$ ).

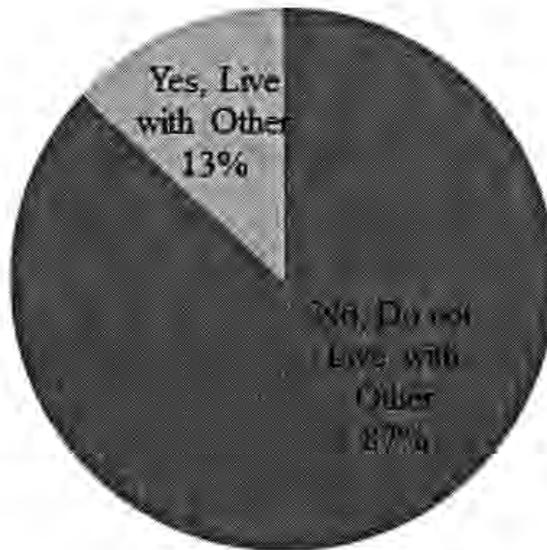
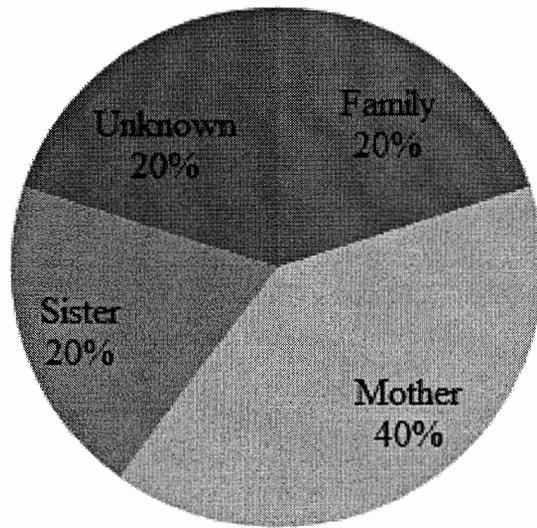


Figure 2. Percentages of never married, college-educated, African American women desiring marriage who live alone versus those who live with others ( $N = 15$ ).



*Figure 3.* Percentages of those with whom never married, college-educated, African American women desiring marriage, lived if not living alone ( $N = 15$ ).

Participants indicated whether they had ever cohabitated with a romantic partner. Eighty percent of the participants had never cohabitated with a romantic partner, and 20% of the women indicated that they had at one time cohabitated. Figure 4 presents the percentages of participants who cohabitated with their romantic partner. The entire 20% of women who had cohabitated indicated that they had cohabitated between 1 to 2 years. No participants indicated cohabitating more than 2 years. Figure 5 depicts the percentages of time spent cohabitating with romantic partners.

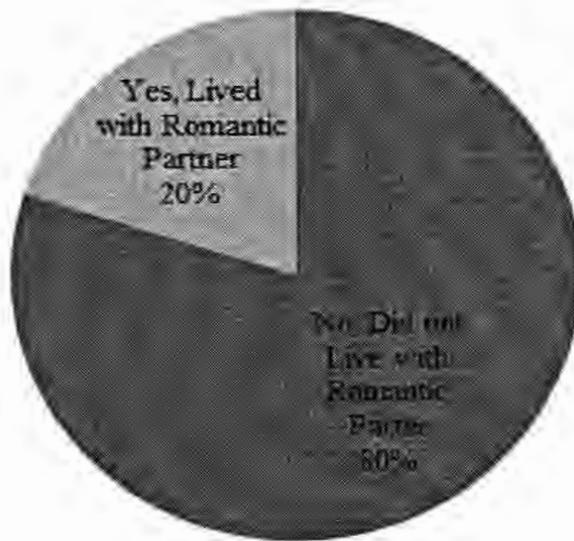


Figure 4. Percentages of never married, college-educated, African American women desiring marriage who cohabitated with their romantic partner ( $N = 15$ ).

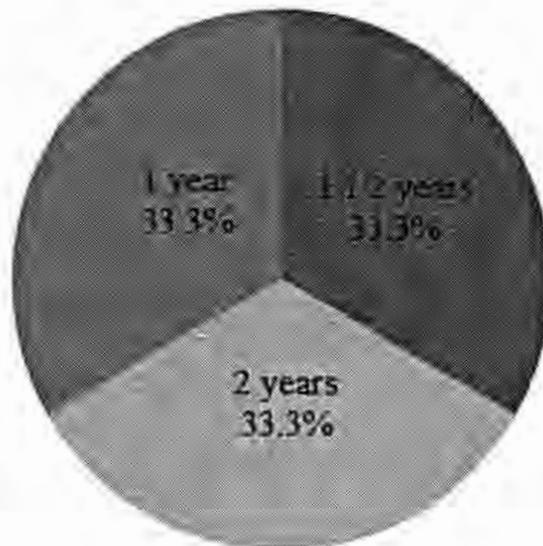


Figure 5. Percentages of time that never married, college-educated, African American women desiring marriage spent cohabitating with romantic partner ( $N = 3$ ).

The participants noted how they spent their leisure time, and their first four responses were recorded and are presented in Table 3. The most frequently recorded leisure activity was reading ( $n=7$ ), the next most frequent response was spending time with friends ( $n=5$ ). Spending time with family, travel, church, and exercising all received an equal number of responses ( $n=4$ ).

Table 3

*Description of Never Married, College-Educated African American Women Desiring Marriage, Leisure Time Activities*

	First Activity	Second Activity	Third Activity	Fourth Activity
1	Resting	Computer Games	Church	Family
2	Movies	Friends	Television	Reading
3	Travel	Music Concerts	Reading	No Answer
4	Listening to Music	Doing Hair	Doing Makeup	No Answer
5	Reading	Dancing	Church	Karaoke
6	Reading	Shopping	Travel	No Answer
7	Friends	Movies	Exercising	No Answer
8	Fitness	Nutrition	No Answer	No Answer
9	School	Family	Church	No Answer
10	Volunteering	Jogging	Movies	Reading
11	Shopping	Traveling	Church	Gym
12	Professional events	Reading	Shopping	Concerts
13	Happy Hour	Friends	Travel	Reading
14	Relaxing	Friends	Family	No Answer
15	Family	Friends	No Answer	No Answer

When asked to indicate their religious affiliations, 73.3% of participants responded that they were Christian ( $n=11$ ), 13.3 % were Pentecostal ( $n=2$ ), 6.7% were

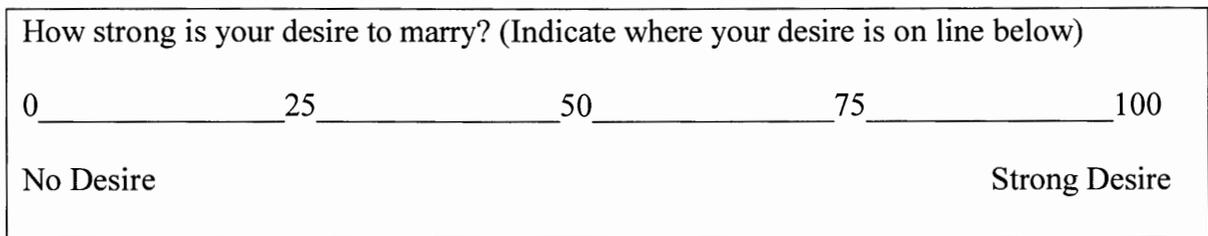
Baptist ( $n=1$ ), and 6.7% were Spiritual ( $n=1$ ). Service attendance ranged from attending three times a week to no service attendance. Five participants (33.3%) reported attending services twice weekly, four (26.7%) indicated attending services once a week, two (13.3%) indicated attending twice monthly, two (13.3%) indicated not attending services at all, and one participant (6.7%) reported attending services three times per week. Additionally, one participant did not indicate whether she attended services. Frequencies and percentages of religious or spiritual preferences and attendance are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

*Frequencies and Percentages of Religious or Spiritual Preferences and Attendance of Never Married, College-Educated, African American Women Desiring Marriage*

	n	%
<b>Religion</b>		
Baptist	1	6.7
Christian	11	73.3
Pentecostal	2	13.3
Spiritual	1	6.7
<b>Attendance</b>		
Twice Monthly	2	13.3
Once Weekly	4	26.7
Twice Weekly	5	33.3
Three Times Per Week	1	6.7
None	2	13.3
No Answer	1	6.7

As demonstrated in Figure 6, women rated their desire to marry on a scale from 0 to 100, with 0 representing no desire to marry and with 100 representing a strong desire to marry.



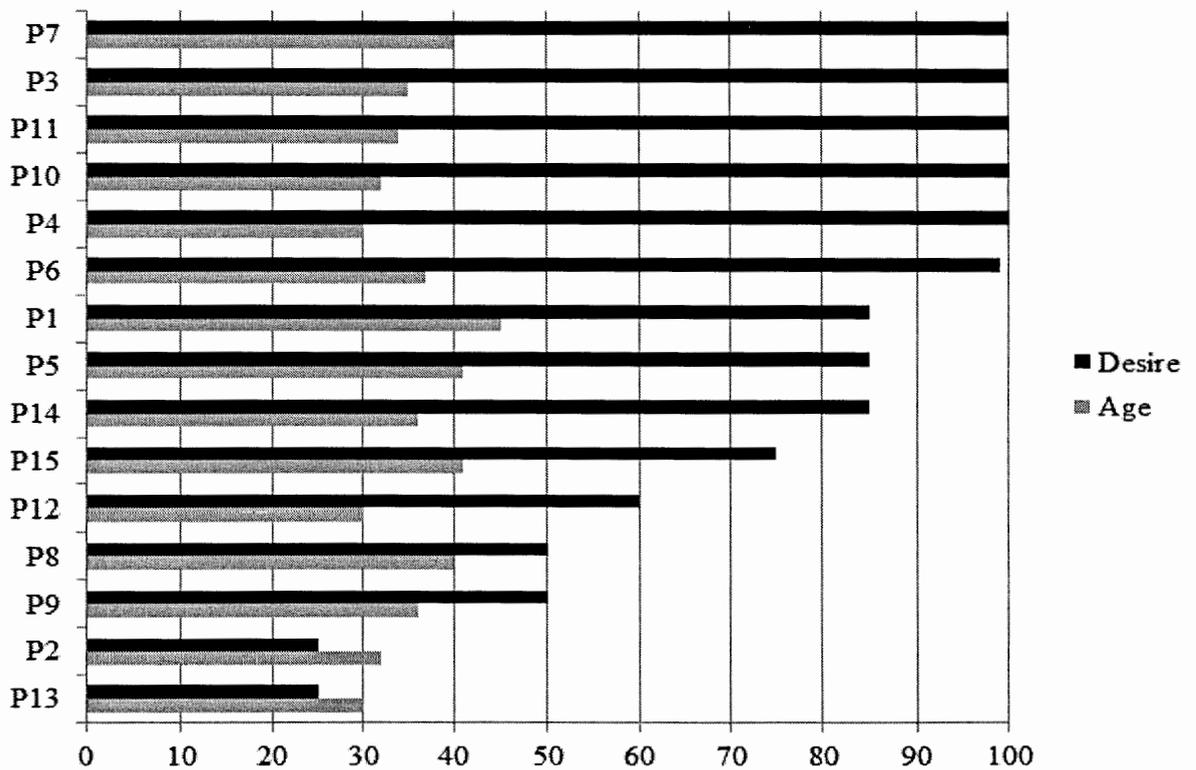
*Figure 6.* Desire for marriage scale for never married, college-educated, African American women desiring marriage.

The mean rating of desire to marry was 75.93%, the median was 85.00%, and the mode was 100.00%. Table 5 displays the mean, median, mode, and standard deviation of desire for marriage ratings. Five participants ( $n=5$ ) rated their desire to marry at 100%, ( $n=1$ ) rated desire to marry 99%, ( $n=3$ ) rated desire to marry at 85%, ( $n=1$ ) rated desire to marry at 75%, ( $n=1$ ) rated desire to marry at 60%, ( $n=2$ ) rated desire at 50%, and ( $n=2$ ) rated desire to marry at only 25%. Figure 7 displays percentages of participants' age by their desire for marriage rating.

Table 5

*Mean, Median, Mode, and Standard Deviation of Desire for Marriage Ratings of Never Married, College-Educated African American Women Desiring Marriage*

	N	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Min	Max
Desire to Marry Rating	15	75.93	85.00	100.00	27.34	25	100



*Figure 7. Never married, college-educated, African American women's age and rating for their desire to marry (N = 15).*

## Findings

Five major themes emerged from the data. The women revealed much uncertainty surrounding their desire to marry. Some of the greatest challenges faced involved questions that they asked themselves, others, and God. Theme one was *Because I am not married I question myself*, theme two was *Because I am not married I question God*, theme three was *Because I am not married society questions me*, theme four was *Because I am not married, I question mate availability and suitability*, and theme five was *Because I am not married, I have changed my plans and I question my future*.

### **Theme One: Because I am not Married, I Question Myself**

One of the major challenges that college-educated African American women face as a result of not being married is the continuous questioning of themselves and the impact it has on their self-esteem. Women in this study questioned why they have not married. They wondered if they had personal issues that hindered them from marrying. Some questioned their looks; others questioned their past actions and behaviors. One 35-year-old social worker, who rated her desire to marry at 100%, questioned herself.

It makes you start questioning things about yourself. Honestly, like, what, uh, what's wrong with me or umm what am I doing wrong? Uh is it something I said? Is it the way I look? Am I too heavy? Umm, is it my hair? I've had my hair natural before. It was cut really short, or do I look like a guy? Umm, do I look like a lesbian... [not being married] makes me question a lot of things about myself that I necessarily would not question 'cause I think I'm a confident person. I don't

think I necessarily have worried about my looks, but here lately, yes, it does make me question things about myself... Umm yeah, should I be smaller? ... I am a plus size full figure girl. I'm tall. But, so it makes me think gosh am I supposed to be a size ten? You know. Umm so, [not being married] it makes you think about those things. If I was smaller, would I be with someone? (P3)

A 30-year-old high school teacher, who rated her desire to marry at 100%, revealed that being single at age 30 is extremely frustrating and has impacted her self-esteem. She explained:

It [not being married] can be very frustrating you know and if you're not strong enough, it can actually play a big part on your self-esteem. And uhm challenge how you feel about yourself at times, you know, because you hear so often "you're this," "you're that," "you have this to offer," uhm "you're the triple threat"...you know, "you sing," "you do hair," "you cook," "you love children," "you're friendly"... "you have a great smile", you know you hear all these things and you're still alone, so it can be very frustrating and uhm at times like I guess the weakest point would probably be when your self-esteem, it, it starts to become affected by, you know, the whole situation...so it's just like it can really play a part in your self-esteem and you really have to like almost [I] have to check myself sometimes like, "no it's not that serious," you know maybe it's just not time, or you know maybe you're not in the right time or maybe there's some things that you need to do or need to accomplish before this[marrriage] actually

happens and then at the same time you're like the time is getting longer and so  
uhm but it can be very very frustrating at the least. (P4)

A 40-year-old attorney, who rated her desire at 100%, questioned herself and  
wondered if she had done something wrong. She questioned whether she should do  
something drastically different such as move out of state to live closer to her boyfriend.  
She said:

Some days I'm okay with it [not being married], some days, I'm like I REALLY  
wish I were married right now ... I've been thinking a lot about, if there is  
something that I've ignored to the point where now I'm 40 and not married, and if  
that's the case, what do I need to do differently?...I'm seriously thinking about  
just moving without a job, which in some ways seems absolutely insane given this  
economy, but in other ways, I'm like, if I continue to do [laughter] what I've  
always done, you know, try to be very practical and logical, I'm going to get the  
same thing [not being married]? (P7)

A 30-year-old with a bachelor's degree in mass media, who rated her desire to  
marry at only 25%, questioned whether she would ever marry and if she needed to move  
out of state in order to find the right person. She joked, saying:

I'm gonna be a cat lady [laughs]... The cat lady, she's either the single old lady in  
the neighborhood or a widow or she might be an old maid basically who has cats  
as her [laughs] companions basically. So I always joke to my friends I know I'm  
gonna be the cat lady and I'm content with that but I just don't see it [marriage] in

my future... I guess maybe I need to get out of my area, move around some?

Maybe I will find that person. I don't know. It just seems so bleak when it comes to dating and relationships. (P13)

A 36-year old president of finance, who rated her desire to marry at only 50%, expressed a lot of pain and frustration resulting from questioning herself and her desire to marry. She said, "... like I said, at one point, it was a lot of crying, it was sadness. Then there are times when you are sitting there comparing like, 'Okay, what am I doing wrong?'" (P9)

While questioning themselves, some of the women sought an outside opinion on what they may be doing wrong. Some woman sought advice from their siblings, others from a mentor, and others sought advice from male friends. For example, a 35-year-old social worker asked a male friend whether she was doing something wrong. She asked him:

... what are some feelings about me, what do you think I'm doing wrong?... and umm he said something about umm I may be too confident. And I questioned that because I thought, really? ...what's wrong with being too confident? Am I supposed to [laughter] be depressed? Or am I supposed to walk around looking a certain way? And he even made the comment that I dress as if I were ... I don't remember his words, but umm I, the way I dressed and the way I carried myself and I had my hair, usually I have my hair done, ...usually I have my hair done like every two weeks I get my hair done and that's just my thing, or I get my toes

done. I do that, and for them [single men]; I guess they see that as maintenance and too much maintenance. Umm I mean, I, I even question umm things as far as maintenance ... (P3)

She also sought advice from her sister:

...she'll ask me questions like... when you are at the grocery store do you smile? Are you smiling? You don't smile that often. So that's one thing I don't know if I'm supposed to walk around with a happy face all the time ...I think that I'm a friendly person? (P3)

A 32-year-old senior training specialist, who rated her desire to marry at 100%, questions how prepared she is for marriage. She states that her mentor has challenged her to think about her preparedness. She explained:

...that it has forced me to think about can you really be a wife 'cause it's one thing to want the wedding, but you have to be a willing participant for the marriage, and so the wedding is really an afterthought although it comes first, I do believe that uhm I will be married. (P10)

A 40-year-old navy officer, who rates her desire to marry at 50%, recalls being told that one of the reasons men did not approach her is because she appeared too confident, and she questioned what being too confident really meant. She said:

This one guy told me you appear to be too confident...I was in uhm in Japan and I was in a club, um, with my sister and we were celebrating, um, my promotion, and some other friends and I were sitting there, and I had my legs crossed, and I

was just sitting there, and one of my friends went over to this guy, this brother, said go talk to my girlfriend. You know, and I wasn't drinking, wasn't doing anything, was just sitting there, listening to music... he's like, "no I can't talk to her, she looks too confident." Like, what does too confident look like, you know? (P8)

A 36-year-old sociology teacher, who rated her desire to marry at 75%, explained that her questioning of herself is not really a low self-esteem issue, but it is actually a question of why others cannot see the good that she sees in herself. She questions why men are not able to recognize how great she is. She disclosed:

One of the issues [challenges is] you kinda take a more introspective view of yourself... not a self-esteem thing because you know, I'm awesome, so it's not a self-esteem thing, but you kinda look at yourself like, I know I'm great. I know I'm hot. I'm a sexy mama... So why is it that no one outside of myself sees that or understands that? What am I doing that's not allowing other people to see who I really am or allowing people to connect with me in a way which they will want to take the time to know who I am? But it, again it kinda makes you look at yourself like, "okay what's wrong with me?" and there's nothing wrong with me and I know that! (P15)

One of the major challenges these women faced as a result of not being married is the many questions that they repeatedly asked themselves. These women asked themselves: "What's wrong with me?" "What am I doing wrong?" "Is it something I

said?” “Am I too fat?” “Is it my hair?” Some said, “I know it is not me because I am awesome. Still, why can no one else see how awesome I am?” Some of the women questioned if they should try something extremely different from anything they had ever tried before, such as relocating to a completely different area to find the right mate.

### **Theme Two: Because I am not Married, I Question God and I Wait**

The findings point to similar challenges experienced by college-educated African American women desiring marriage. Perhaps one of the most common traits was their religious beliefs. Almost all women reported some level of faith in God and identification with the Christian religion. While several participants reported regular church attendance of two services per month, more than half of the participants revealed a more frequent attendance of one or two times per week. This devotion to their faith translated into an expectation of divine provision, or at least divine approval, of their marriage partner. That is, the participants believed that God would provide an acceptable husband at the appropriate time; therefore, they wait.

A 30-year-old graduate student believed that God will determine her marital state. She said, “I don’t think I could honestly say if it’s [marriage is] in my future cause I believe in fate and I believe in the concept of God’s plan that his will, will happen...”

(P12)

A 40-year-old Christian attorney acknowledged frustrations about her unmarried state, but referenced a trust in God that outweighs the stressor. In particular, she rationalized:

... I accept that in the right time and in God's season that's [marriage is] something that he will make available to me so that's what keeps me balanced and keeps me from fretting about it. It does get frustrating at times because I trust that God has a good plan for my life ... and I'm believing that plan to manifest in my life. That alleviates some of the stress and frustration. (P14)

A 36-year-old financial president revealed a frustration so intense that she temporarily eliminated dating to seek spiritual guidance. Now, she is asking God many questions. She said:

To be honest, I, um, I'd stopped dating. I haven't really dated since 2006. So I've taken a, a break and I've just been on a kind of, on a different journey, because I've been more, getting deeper into the spiritual side. And now... that I've gotten... closer to the Lord, um, I'm starting to think more about... dating again... and I've started asking, "Lord okay, when... is it [marriage] going to happen?" "Lord, what is it that you want me to learn from this [waiting]?" ... "why is it not happening?" ... [scripture] says... that He will change the desires of your heart, and I've been really trying to meditate on that... "Okay, Lord, are you going to change my heart?" because it [the desire to marry] is still there. At times, it hits pretty hard... some of the ladies [in church]... have a closer walk with the Lord... or are more mature, and I see them walking in it for, like, 10, 15 years, being single... oh, my God! I can't do that!... I don't want to wait, you know, 15 to 20 years. (P9)

A 40-year-old naval officer likewise suspended dating pending spiritual guidance. She reported that God requested her full attention without the distraction of prospective marital partners. She conveyed how she turned away potential mates during this waiting period. She explained:

I'm a Christian, I believe in God... I've always believed in him for my mate... this year I decided that... Lord, I'm not going date. I don't think dating is your plan, and I don't believe it's God's way for me. . So I look at waiting on God... my Christian girlfriends say, waiting on God, you're not gonna meet nobody, and, they're Christians. And so I'm like well I'm giving God these 365 days so last year in December, I committed 365 days to God and I can't believe that I'm at 211 already, and in my commitment, it's no distraction, no dating, no phone calls, and amazingly, when I made that commitment, two people approached me, two Christian guys approached me. And, um, the day I made the commitment... I woke up in the morning, and something in my spirit said no dating, no distraction. No talking to guys, I'm like, and I remember praying saying Lord, I'm a cute kinda girl, I'm cute. Guys are going to want to talk to me, what do I say to them? Literally having this conversation. What do I say to them? It's like no distraction. I was like, for real? I said That ain't, that ain't God? I mean [laughing]. You know, and I'm like, well, it's normally God when it's opposite to what I want. And then, so I decided, OK, And I told him [the guy] I can't go out with you right now, this is a season for me where I'm just, I don't know if you understand this or

not, I'm gonna be totally committed to God...OK God, I'm really gonna focus on you cuz obviously you're trying to tell me something. So, long story short, I don't date, and, um, for these next 365 days, I'm just trying to hear God. (P8)

During the interviews, the women freely shared what they learned about marriage according to Christian principles. For example, a 30-year-old consumer science teacher shared:

...[marriage is] not always something you can control sometimes you have to sit there and wait on God ... with my religious belief and with what I've always been taught, I was taught to be sought after to sit and wait and let him [a man] find you and you sit there and you wait and you're like maybe he don't know what he is looking for ... or maybe he doesn't realize what I have to offer. (P4)

A 45-year-old graduate assistant desires a husband who shares similar Christian beliefs. She reasoned that different values will impede understanding and cause unnecessary marital difficulties. She concluded:

...he won't understand the fact that, uh, I pay my tithes, I give 10% to the Lord. Which is a Christian ... foundation. He probably won't understand ...that I pray every morning. I give reverence to God. I don't want stuff like that to be a conflict in my relationship. (P1)

A 34-year-old attorney remembers praying to God for a spouse before her father passed away. She admits that she has questioned God asking him why he does not like her. She recounted:

I remember praying because my dad was sickly and I remember telling him that I had prayed that God would allow me to be married before he died so he would know I was taken care of. ...Also when you really want to be a mother and you're like but I'm not going to go outside of what God has said do... so, I've had my battles with God saying, "You just don't like me," you know um, and last year I think I'd reached my limit.. Done with it, I think I was on the verge of backsliding [going against what the church says] because it had just gotten too much and I just wanted to do it my way... (P11)

The majority of women in this study expressed their faith in God and explained how they were all waiting on God for their husband. Each believed that God is the determinative factor, specifically that He was the One to decide if and when they would marry. A few of the women described in detail their methodology for waiting. Some refused to take the initiative and approach a man first. Others refused to date online. Some declined to date at all. Two of the women described a long waiting period of a year or more where they refused to talk to men on the phone or to go out with them even for coffee. Not only are these women waiting on God, but they also openly questioned God regarding their singleness.

### **Theme Three: Because I am not Married, Society Questions Me**

Another challenge frequently faced by the never-married, college-educated African American women in this study was the constant questioning that they received from other people. Some of the women were questioned by family; others were

questioned by their friends. A few of the women were even questioned by their doctors. For example, a 45-year-old graduate assistant reports that one of the biggest challenges she faces is that people in society make her feel like she has a major problem or some sort of infirmity because she is not married. She discussed being questioned by her brother, sisters, aunts, parents, neighbors, friends, and even church members. She said:

I think the only thing I really dislike [about never marrying] is most of the time ...when you go to family functions, and when you go to gatherings, even when I'm at church,... the fact that people are always trying to fix you up with somebody. As if you're not OK by yourself, you know? As if [long pause] it's kind of like you're disabled because you don't have somebody. Yeah. And I, I don't get that. Um, I understand that most people in the world have a mate ...people treat you as if you're not a whole person if you don't have a mate...I'll go to a gathering and aunts will go [long pause] so, when you gon' have someone, when you gon' get married, or when, you know, gon' bring somebody other than yourself to a family function? Ok, as if I can't come by myself to the family function, OK? [laughs] As if I can't come by myself to a family function! Um, I think my parents, they wanted me to have somebody...Uh, my father, I'm sure he still wants a son in law, but he is OK with me not having somebody right now. My siblings [long pause] I think my brother asked me like six months ago, was I ever going to get married, and I'm like, yeah I'm gonna find somebody. Uh, and so you know people just want you to have somebody. At church, we praying for

you to have a mate, you know, we praying for your mate. And I'm like, OK I'm praying for him too but if he don't come I'm still OK, you know? Um, friends, you know if you go to a, uh, a gathering, most people introduce, this is my husband, you know. I'm like, hey, I'm here, you know so I'm, I am OK with my life as it is, I think it's society that pushes you to have somebody. And I think for me, I see it even more in the neighborhood that I live in... I love my house, I love everything about it, but I am the only single individual in this neighborhood... And even my neighbor said one day, uh, that he'd be glad when I had somebody so he'd have somebody to talk to. Somebody to hang out with, ya know? Somebody to do man things with you know? So, uh, I think that part is a little, you know, sometimes it bothers me but it doesn't bother me enough to where I'm just gonna grab the first thing that comes along, OK? No! (P1)

A 30-year-old processing aid says that she often feels pressured to live up to societal expectations. She states that society expects women to get married, have a career, and have children. Failure to meet all of these expectations has created some anxiety for her. She also is anxious because her family often questions when she will marry. When asked about the challenges she faced, she said:

Uhm challenges, uhm well, of course since society has this notion that all females should be married of course you're feeling like anxiety a little bit, yeah anxious to get married. Uhm, I am realizing sometimes like my family members, older family members always question why I'm not married but there's no clear cut

answer to that. Uhm, I guess I'm trying to maintain society's viewpoint of what a women should be at my age. That we should be in a career, married with kids also. So, those are my challenges. (P13)

A 40-year-old attorney is also frequently questioned and is frustrated because she does not have an answer for people. She asserts that not being married can be challenging, especially when people keep asking, "why are you not married?" She said:

The experience of wanting to be married has varied over time. There have been times when it's been frustrating because I didn't have in my life a suitable mate ...Uhm it gets frustrating sometimes when you know people ask "Why aren't you married?" And you really don't have an answer for them. (P14)

A 40-year-old U.S. Navy officer maintains that one of the greatest challenges for her, in not being married is having her parents ask her questions and having them search for a suitable mate for her. She said, "...the other challenge is my parents of course, uh, my parents... want to hook me up with this person or hook me up with that person. 'When are you getting married? You need to have kids, settle down' ... Drama!" (P8)

A 35-year-old social worker disclosed that one of the challenges that she faces is that men question why she does not have any children. She complained that men treat her as if something is fundamentally wrong with her because she does not have any children at her age. She said:

... people will ask you certain questions. You know, guys, if you're out like uh, 'why don't you have any children? What's wrong with you?' You know,[she

would like to reply] ‘what’s wrong with you that you have three?’ Hmm, because I am thinking to myself umm child support. Hmm, umm so I don’t consider it [having no children] to be a problem. (P3)

A 30-year-old old family and consumer science teacher described her frustration with friends asking questions about why she has not married. She said that even her online friends are sending her electronic messages wanting to know why. She stated:

Then you have everybody asking you like “Oh when are you gonna get married,” like I’m gonna propose to myself? [laughs] or like, I’m the factor for why I’m not married, you know, and I don’t think people realize it’s not just about you it’s about whoever the other person is so you know it’s a combined thing so. That’s always the question... so it’s very frustrating when you know what you have to offer and people tend to ask you “why aren’t you married” ... “why aren’t you with anyone?” ... you have friends calling you, friends with all the internet networking... sending you messages, “you’re not married yet?” ... you are a great person, you’re beautiful and you’re sitting there thinking “if everybody else thinks all of this, what’s really the problem?” you know ah so it can be very frustrating, you know, and if you’re not strong enough it can actually play a big part on your self-esteem... and then looking at society and the way everyone else relationships tends, seem to go, it’s like is this even worth wasting my time? (P4)

A 36-year-old teacher acknowledges that it is often upsetting when people assume that there is something wrong with her because she is in her 30s and has never married.

She shared:

It's been painful at times because I'm starting to look my age. When I didn't look my age it was okay cause you know people thought I was in my 20s you know it's okay to be in your 20s and not be married and not have kids but now I'm starting to look that 30ish and they're like "Ohh where's your ring?" What ring? The ring around my tub? ... "So you're not dating anybody?" And you always get the "okay something must be wrong with her because she doesn't have kids" and they're like "Oh so what do you do?" I'm a teacher. So if I'm a teacher that means they automatically they make the correct assumption that I have a degree. So okay you have a degree, you know, you're halfway decent looking then you must be crazy, something's wrong with you. Either you got bad credit, you crazy or you got like 12 kids and none of those things [laughs] are true and I'm still single...and a lot of times people look at you like something is wrong with you like either you've been married and it didn't work out or sometimes I really think people look at me like maybe she can't have kids and that's why her first marriage broke up and I was like I was never married like people just make assumptions about you cause you're 36 and not married and then the fact that I'm black is like a double whammy cause a lot of guys that are my age, I don't wanna be with them. They're like big kids and they're not established. (P15)

A 41-year-old assistant principal maintains that she was questioned about marriage and family, by her gynecologist. She said that the gynecologist asked, since she was not married, if she would like to consider freezing her eggs. She said:

I... make my gynecologist, my gynecological visits, you know, and watch things that are going on. Um, and we do have discussions about, you know, still things that I could do [at my age] you know? A very strange conversation, um, which I think, um, is noteworthy, sort of strange, but I guess people are doing it now, was a discussion I had with my gynecologist about preserving eggs. [Interviewer asked: Did you ask your gynecologist?] No, she mentioned it to me. You know. She said, “are you still interested in having a family?” and “well, you are getting a little older now, but um, you know if you consider preserving some eggs, then, you know, it may give you, you know a few more options.” I’ve contemplated it. She gave me, you know, some information about it, um, matter of fact I’ve had an appointment about it a couple days ago, and she asked me about it. I guess she had a note. I said no, I haven’t acted on it yet. Maybe a little part of me is still holding out that, um, I may, you know, meet somebody within the next few years.

(P5)

A 34-year-old attorney agrees that one of the challenges that she faces is that society assumes that she has placed her career before marriage or that her career is more important than marriage, but this is not true. She said:

Uhm doctors don't really help or people who don't really understand, who think that you're purposely waiting and you're just waiting, your career is the main thing and I'd have people say that to me, "oh your career, you're just focus on your career." I'm like, "no I don't even wanna work" [laughs] you know I'm just working cause I have to eat. I don't really wanna work. I wanna travel the world and do other stuff and volunteer at the Red Cross or you know, take some job at an orphanage if I'm gonna work but I don't really wanna work as an attorney...I wanna be a wife and a mother. That's what I wanna be. That's a big deal to me.

(P11)

In summary, one of the major challenges that never-married, college-educated, African American women in this study faced is frequent questions from those in society. Some of the questions often asked include: "When are you getting married?" "Where is your ring?" "What's wrong with you?" "Why don't you have any children?" Some of the participants were even asked if they would like to consider freezing their eggs. The participants admitted being asked these questions caused them anxiety and frustration.

#### **Theme Four: Because I am not Married, I Question Mate Availability and Suitability**

Another challenge that college-educated African American women in this study faced was being keenly aware of the shortages in the number of available African American male counterparts who were similar to them in education and work experience. These women questioned whether they should continue to maintain high mate selection

standards as they aged and while in the midst of the daunting realities of African American male shortages. For example, a senior training specialist, age 32, questioned whether she will find a suitable mate and if she should maintain or adjust her mate selection criteria as she ages. She said:

Uhm you know it's also a challenge of just finding someone, and it just depends on your preferences but the older you get ...you're not going to get the same crop that you wanted, so it's a lot easier to find someone that already has kids, but you don't wanna have kids ... I don't have any so it's like...“Have they been unmarried?” “Have they not had kids?” ... “Do they have kids or not?” And if you don't want kids, the more stipulations you put on it [future mate criteria] but as you're growing in age the smaller the pool gets. So, you know you find yourself [saying]...”Well you know, he's only been married once” “He only had two kids” so, the older you get the more baggage people have and so the more you will have ... even if you don't have kids or never been married you still have to deal with their mind set, which is baggage sometimes, so those are some of the challenges... apart from, uh, being at a certain place in your career... you're either middle management or upper management at this age ... over 30, and so it's like do I wanna compromise...? (P 10)

An academic counselor, age 32, questions mate selection criteria as she recalls past dating experiences. She shared that mates in the past have not been honest; therefore, honesty is a very important future mate criteria. She explained:

...Um, uh, I don't know why that is, and why it's happened that way, but um, I've had a lot of guys that are either hard to trust or it's difficult to trust. Um, are not honest, uh or the timing, you know maybe they're ready for something when I'm not or I am when they're not, Um, so overall it [finding a mate] hasn't been the best. (P2)

A processing aid, age 30, recognizes male shortages and struggles to find a suitable mate that meets her mate selection criteria. She said:

So that's the hard part. Trying to find someone who you feel as though is suitable enough to date... Because it's hard to come by males who are on the same playing field as you are. Someone who is career goal minded, someone who had goals, someone who has as much education as you, someone who is bringing the same things to the table as you. For instance, I have no children. I have my bachelor's degree... and to find a man who has those same qualities is very difficult. I guess it's a small dating pool of men and there is a large dating pool of women. In any major city that you go to you see that there are more women available to men as compared to men available to women. So, it's hard. It makes it very difficult out here. Males have a choice of women. But, women we don't have as much of a choice. It's very difficult, it's very hard. So, I don't think marriage is in my future, marriage isn't obtainable. I give everyone a chance... But the males that I'm always running into are like the wrong ones. The ones you

are told to stay away from. The ones you should just make a U-turn as soon as they start speaking. (P13)

An assistant principal, age 41, began questioning mate availability while dating in college she revealed:

My dating experience, um, has, has been varied in some ways. Um, and to be honest with you I, I wish I could have dated more...Um, a little disappointing factor was when I found out the college, I mean the university that I attended, uh, had more women than men. It was probably like, I think it might have been maybe 65 to 35%, or something like that, 65% women. But, um, I still had a lot of contact with males. And so there was an opportunity to date...Uh, after college, it kinda slowed down some though. (P5)

Now, 41 years old, the assistant principal has adjusted her mate selection criteria and explained:

I met a kinda young guy, he's older than I am, he's 44. And um, I met him online, on eHarmony. And, we have a lot in common. Um, uh, he's a Caucasian. Um, he is of German descent. Second generation, I think, um, German, um, in the United States. His mother was born here. Both of his parents are German extract but, even still we have a lot in common. We both went to parochial schools, went to Catholic schools. Um, uh, we've had uh, some common, just common experiences, and we can laugh at some of the same things. Oh! And something that surprised me... he mentioned something about karaoke. I love karaoke. It's

not about how someone looks. It's just from the heart. And actually, we, have a lot of common faith, we have a common faith. And we appreciate each other's level of faith. (P5)

An attorney, age 41, reviewed her mate selection criteria. She disclosed:

What I'm looking for consequently is a person I can live with. Someone with whom I am compatible, he loves and appreciates me for who I am. I love and appreciate him for who he is and that we can challenge each other to grow and mature into the best people possible. And just know constantly at all times he has my support. And I have his. (P14)

A graduate assistant, age 45, questioned whether there is a suitable mate available for her. She has high standards and refuses to accept a man who doesn't meet her criteria. She declared:

I'm still gonna be very selective. Very, very selective... [I want] somebody that I'm compatible with, somebody I can mesh with. But somebody that's able to deal with my ways and I'm able to deal with their ways. [long pause] ...A lot of men got a whole lot of baggage. And this ain't no airport! I'm not a baggage collector, OK? I don't check baggage, I don't want yours. Check your baggage at the door. Uh, [long pause] and I know everybody's gonna bring something, but I want you to have worked through the chaotic part of your baggage... I had a gentleman recently who really was into me but I told him you got too much confusion going on in your life, you know, for me to even be bothered with. Then

I have a couple of criteria. I'm 45. I know at this point I will not have any children, biological reasons, I won't have any. I don't want to get with somebody who wants some children. Babe I need you to know, we ain't gonna have those... and I don't wanna deal with your 9, 10, 5, and 6 year old. In the back of my mind I'm thinking, "you probably need to be with that baby's momma." So, I have a couple of criteria that I'm going to hold on to. Uh, and I want him to be Christian. (P1)

A school counselor, age 37, who rates her desire to marry at 99%, wants a man who desires marriage just as much as she does. She expressed:

I'd like them to be a good communicator, a good manager of money, love family, value, you know, religion. Umm you know, just have good character, and overall wanting to be in a relationship. Wanting to be there, wanting to be married. And you know, love being married. The idea of being married. (P6)

An attorney, age 40, questions whether a White male will be a suitable partner for her. She shared her view:

I have not [dated outside of my race] and probably because I just haven't had that interest. Um, I'm interested in having children, and in terms of dating or marrying someone outside of my race when I think in terms of having children, particularly with a son, um, I have questions or concerns about someone who is not an African American male being able to raise an African American boy. Um, another person of color, possibly, um, would, would be a possibility, but someone who is White,

I, I doubt it. It would, it would have to be a very quote-unquote “different type of White man” because unless you have experienced what African American men deal with in this country, I mean, it would be very hard for him to help our son know what he may have to go through. I’m not saying it’s impossible, um, or that, you know, it absolutely could not happen, but I just think it would be very difficult. So with all those things running around in my head, um, I’ve never really, um, thought of dating outside of my race. I love black men, and so I have not. (P7)

A president of finance, age 36, considered the limited availability of suitable African American men. However, she refuses to lower her standards. She said:

And then you have the challenge of, you know, you have like 5 men to 80 women, or something like that. [laughter] ..., I just want to have friends, but, you know, a lot of guys, they just, just, they cuss, or they think, .. they, think like the world [not like Christians], they talk to you like any kind of way, just like, okay I can’t, you know, I can’t [deal with you]. Before, I could deal with it, but I can’t, you know. I just, I don’t want to deal with that. (P9)

A social worker, age 35, questioned whether her mate selection requirements are unreasonable. She explained:

I am looking for a good male, a mature man, someone that knows how to treat a lady...I would prefer to maybe date someone around, about my age. But, umm I’m not gonna say necessarily that a 27-year-old umm doesn’t know to open the

door, pay bills... I want someone that's church oriented. I would prefer to have someone with no children, but unfortunately I don't think that that will happen... I would love for him to be umm [long pause]. Umm, someone that's been in a previous relationship, and I mean we've all had different things happen so that way you, you know how to treat people in certain situations. Again, I would love someone family oriented. My family is very family oriented... a Christian background. Umm and that's it, I guess I'm a really simple person. I don't think that I'm asking too much? And for him to at least be employed [laughter] would be nice. And that would be first, that's number one, employed. We've all been through situations, but I'd prefer you to be employed. Umm and that does not, including unemployment. I need umm, employment. And I'm not asking, even guys that drive, it's okay if you drove a trash truck. That's a job. It's employment.

(P3)

A school teacher, age 36, questioned whether she will find a suitable mate. She said:

A lot of guys that are my age, I don't wanna be with them. They're like big kids and they're not established. So if I really feel like you don't have at least what I have you gotta have your own car. You gotta have a degree. You have to have the ability to move up in the position that you are in and I would prefer that you would have your own place, as a female, I can live at home until I get married. As a male you need to step on out there and make some moves and there's not a lot

of guys my age that are not already married [limited availability]... We will not take garbage! We have taken garbage for too long and that's why a lot of us are single because we're not gonna take garbage. If a man decides to be less than what we require him to be, then we will not deal with him. And I say that, I'll say me I'm not gonna deal with it cause I've dated guys who had that degree and chose to do nothing. Well if you choose to do nothing, I can't help you, but I've also dated guys who didn't have a degree and all they had was high school and that's it and they struggled to do what they wanted to do and I respected them for that, but I'm not gonna be with a man that has no drive. I don't wanna be the head of my household. I want him to be the head of my household and for me to have that, he has to come to the table in a way that he can support me. Plus, he needs to be like 6 feet something. I'll take 6 foot 5 is good. That way I get to look up at him. [laughs] But yeah that's it [my requirements]. (P15)

The never-married, college-educated women in this study recognized that there is a shortage in African American male counterparts that are like them in education and employment experience. Even still, these women maintain their very high mate selection criteria. These women are looking for men that can lead them, men that they can look up to, and men that will support them. Until they encounter a suitable mate, they will continue reevaluating themselves and their standards.

**Theme Five: Because I am not Married, I have Changed my Plans and I Question my Future.**

Most of the college-educated African American woman in this study had specific plans for marriage. They were accustomed to mapping out their educational plans and their lives. However, they realized that marriage was something they could not successfully plan; 13 of the 15 participants indicated that they had plans to be married at a certain age, but their plans had not materialized. They spoke of the challenges they faced in having to change their original plans and how they were uncertain about their future.

A 45-year-old graduate assistant described how she had planned as a child to be married and to have children, but as she aged, her plans changed and education became a priority. She said:

I think from a child I wanted to be married. I've always wanted to be married, I think, when I was a kid, I wanted to be married, uh, I had my house, the, American dream, little house, little white picket fence. Uh, I wanted a set of triplets, I wanted them to be girls. Uh, then I got older and decided I wanted an education, and then I wanted to be married. Uh, and then I got a job. Then I wanted more education. Still wanted to be married but then my education took priority over wanting to get married. I wanted a career... Uh, I thought, you know, realistically in life that at this point, I'd be married. Actually when I was

younger, I thought by 45 I'd be married and have my triplets. But life has a way of happening, and life has happened. (P1)

The 45-year-old graduate assistant also expressed concerns about her future and the possible challenge of being able to live with a man after living alone for so many years.

She said:

One of my big things is, I'm 45, I've been alone all my life. Being able to be under the roof with somebody would be an issue. You know, being able to live in the same household with somebody. I've never cohabitated. So I don't know what it's like to live in a house with a man, and all the little issues I hear, he leaves the toilet seat up, you know stuff like that, uh, toilet seat up. I don't know what that's like. (P1)

A 32-year-old senior training specialist had planned to be married at a young age like her parents were but eventually realized that she had to rethink her plans, and now she questions whether she will ever marry. She shared:

I thought in my 20s I would be married uhm at the age of 27, and when 27 came it was kinda depressing that I wasn't yet because you know my mom, my parents got married when they were 17 and 18 and they're still married and so I thought that not at 17 and 18 but that definitely by 27 I would be married and by 30 at least have a child. And so when 27 came and that didn't happen and when 30 came it was just like, "Okay." So, um, you know there is this reality of well maybe I might not get married ... I don't wanna grow old by myself. Um, I would

love to have a family. At least before I wanted four now, I want two kids but uh, you know I wanna leave a legacy. I wanna have those family meals uhm and really just wanna share, share myself in that way as far as in motherhood and being a wife, So yeah, I believe that it [marriage] is definitely in my future ...

(P10)

In addition, the 32-year-old senior training specialist shared that she originally planned for and wanted four children, but now that she is already over 30 she has changed those plans and wonders what her future will be like. She wonders if she will even have the stamina for children. She said:

...it's just kind of weird you know because like even though I'm still in my early 30s it's like but not being married, it's like "am I gonna have enough energy for kids?" ... I wanted four kids, now I don't...I'll be 33 next month and so it's like but you're not married yet. You know and then when you get married you'll probably want to have a year with your husband so it's like putting you at 35 having kids so not being married now causes me to think about, "okay is the planning of when I do get married how many decisions I had to change because of my age?" Uhm or because of the career or do I change my career plans around because I wanted a family. So you know, I wouldn't really say it's a worry, but it's something that it's a constant thought at how it will change and every year that I'm not married changes again you know, and it's funny because it's like although you would think it's more decisions to make, it's not as many because

you don't have as many, you know like you don't wanna put yourself at health risk, ...you don't wanna be 70 at graduation you know, [laughs] you don't wanna be 70 or 60 at graduation. You wanna be able to play with your kids uh you wanna have enough money you don't want to work forever, you know, introducing a family especially in these economic times and then you know like you're gonna have to raise them for 18 more years, you know, you have to think finances wise what will be available to you even as far as retirement is concerned so yeah not being married I guess poses many decisions... (P10)

A 30-year-old family and consumer science teacher voiced her challenge of wanting to have a family to pass on her values and traditions. However, she has not been successful in having the family that she had planned. She expressed her frustration and uncertainty about the future:

Uhm I honestly thought I would be married with at least two children by now. And it was even harder when my sister got married before me, she was younger than me. She never wanted to be married and she got married before me and had two children. You know, and she's not even 30 yet....it's beyond just a man it's about family, it's about having your own, uhm your own family your own children...having your own family having and being able to give what was taught to you through your own family, through your own friends and loved ones and passing things from your grandparents and passing things on down from your god parents things that you were taught, you know, throughout your life, you get to

pass on to someone else, and right now I can't do that ... I think the biggest challenge is, just not being able to have that, um, that family to give to... another challenge would probably be trying not to get frustrated... Um, part of me feels like it [marriage and family] may never happen... (P4)

A 36-year-old president of finance expressed uncertainty about her future. She wonders if she will ever marry. She communicated:

I wish somebody could help me [financially]. Or when you, um, when you want to be comforted, you wish somebody could be there... other times, it's, there's also a fear. Like, "okay, oh my goodness. I'm, I'm getting ready to approach 37. And is this going to be a permanent thing?" (P9)

A 35-year-old social worker seemed to have lost hope. When asked about whether she saw marriage in her future, she said:

No!... I don't. I don't see it in my future. Sorry, I have a tattoo that says faith, love, and hope. [but]... at this point, I can honestly say that umm no, I don't see it in my future. I would love to if I had a crystal ball. Umm I would at least take a glimpse of what would happen in a year or two years. But no, and me and my mom would talk about it quite a bit because me and my mom are really close but and she used to tell me all the time: it's gonna happen, it's gonna happen. (P3)

A 41-year-old assistant principal is still hopeful that she will marry. Even though her original plan was to be married by age 24, she believes that people can find love at any age and expects to marry in the future. She explained:

Now, when I was very young in high school, I thought that 24 was an ideal age to get married, because my mother, my parents got married when they were 24. And I thought that was just old enough. It was after college, for a couple years. And then, when, when I actually got to 24, it was like, “what? I’m not ready yet.” I dated a guy when I was 26, and he was four years older. And so, he had turned 30, and somehow I guess that’s when it clicked, that he wanted to get married. OK? But I wasn’t ready yet. I still wasn’t ready yet...I still would like to be married. Um, I um, would still be interested in having children. Um, so uh, I heard about, a couple weeks ago, about some 80-year-olds that got married in a nursing home. And the husband, uh, the groom, had never been married before. OK, so, uh, I know somewhere that people can find love at any age. So, uh, just because I have not married in my 20s does not mean that I would never marry. And on the radio, about two days ago, there was a lady that was very excited, who had just turned 50. And she also was engaged for the first time. (P5)

A 37-year-old school counselor, who rated her desire to marry at 99%, said she doesn’t want to be a bridesmaid in any more weddings. She would like the next wedding

that she participates in to be her own, yet she realizes that marriage may never happen.

She explained:

Um, I know that I've been in several weddings and I think at the age that I am now, I'm, I'm at the point where I'm like look. I don't really; I'll come to the wedding I really don't want to be in it. And the next wedding that I dress up for will be mine. [laughter]..Umm I'll say again, I really do want to be married, but I've also come to that conclusion that it may not happen. It just might not, so I mean, I don't really. I wouldn't like totally sulk about it; you know, if it happens, it happens. (P6)

A 40-year-old attorney described how she was not too concerned about getting married when she was younger and when she was in law school, but now that she has reached age 40, she feels the pressure, and getting married is a real concern. She said:

Um, I would say it [the desire to marry] has been different at different phases of my life, you know, in college, it was something, "yeah, I'll get married, you know later, later, later." It was... something that I knew I wanted to do, but it wasn't pressing. I didn't feel any type of pressure, like, oh, you know, I absolutely have to get married, "Oh! I'm in college and I don't have a boyfriend, and I won't be married right after college." That didn't faze me. Um, I guess after I got out of college and was in grad school, and law school, I started to, I started to think about it more, but it still wasn't something where I felt like, "Oh, gosh, it'll never happen! Why not? I need to hurry up." Um, now I'm 40, and [laughter] that

probably is on my mind a great deal. Um, 40 is a big, it's a big age! You know? Some people, you know you live to be 80, 85, this is really that halfway point, so I'm like, alright if I were to die today, I don't want to not have a family and children and things like that. Um, so it's more of a concern now. So I'm at a stage where I'm really trying to figure out, um, what to do, so it's more important and a bigger issue at this point in my life than it was 20 years ago, or even I believe in 10 years ago 'cause when I was in law school, again, it wasn't a big, big deal. It was something that I knew I wanted to do, but it wasn't in the forefront of my mind. I would say at this point in my life it's more in the forefront... [pause]

Ummm, I guess the biggest challenge would be having children. I want to have children, and, um, I've never wanted to voluntarily be a single parent. So, for me, I've always known that I wanted to be married and have children, so the challenge has been getting married, and then, um, having children, and being the age that I am now [laughter] I've got to recognize, you know, that biologically, unlike men, we don't have forever to be able to have children, um, naturally so, that's been the biggest challenge I would say. (P7)

A 30-year-old graduate student said she does not know what her future holds:

I'm 30, will I be married before I'm 35 or 40? Who knows? I am 30 so I still feel like I have a little window. I don't hear a clock ticking or anything so I'm still I'm very hopeful. I haven't like lost lost hope yet [laughs] Hopefully I won't but you

know, who knows...uhm hmm I don't think I could honestly say if it [marriage is] in my future... (P12)

A 40-year-old attorney remembers how she used to avoid making large scale commitments and plans as she waited for a mate. But with maturity, she has decided to move forward even without a mate. She shared:

...well several years ago I think I might have uhh not gone forward with large scale goals because I was waiting to see if what if I got married soon, then you know my spouse might not like this [house] or would prefer that ... but as I've grown and matured uhm I've just come to accept that whoever God has for me we will work it out... whoever that person is he is going to accept that I am where I am and if there are any changes that need to be made we'll make them at that time. (P14)

A 30-year-old processing aide has re-evaluated her plans for marriage and has realized that she originally had unrealistic plans. She explained:

Well when I was younger I would say about 23, I thought marriage would be in my future ... marriage is something that as young girls, women are always told about this image of having a big wedding to this dream guy so of course you are spending a lifetime looking for that dream guy so you tend to have unrealistic expectations of the males that you date. You tend to overlook things that should be warning signs to you about the males that you are dating. Uhm, I do look forward to marriage but as I get older, I'm realizing that it's not realistic. It's not

gonna happen as fast. It's not gonna happen in a dreamy type way. It's not gonna happen as in fairy tales. (P13)

A 34-year-old attorney had planned to be married by age 20. Now that her marriage plans have changed, she questions her future and whether she should return to her hometown to live near family. She is also considering freezing her eggs and is uncertain of her future. She said:

I wanted to get married like at 20. Uhm, because I just do not like being single like what is the point of this? You have so much more fun if somebody else is around. And that could be because everyone in my family is married just about so I grew up seeing marriages and it wasn't a lot of singles...it has been terrible. I did, I really did want to be married and for me, I want to have children, I want to have sex, I want to have a family, I want to do all these things... Hmm, well for me whether or not to go back home to Texas because my whole family is there and I live here alone and my goal has been 35 is the cut off. If I'm not married by 35 I'm going home so that's in two months. Do I go? You know that had been the goal. Do I go home? Uh so I struggle with that... I wanna be a wife and a mother. That's what I wanna be. That's a big deal to me so you know uhm so I face the challenge of do I freeze my eggs because I've been considering it and I've looked it up online and I'm like okay, it cost \$10,000 dollars or something like that...

(P11)

The college-educated African American women in this study all had planned to be married by a certain age. They also spoke of their desire to have children and a family. However, none of these things have materialized for them. Now they question their future. Many still hope to marry, some are planning on relocating, and others are thinking about alternative ways to make their dreams a reality, such as freezing or preserving their eggs for the future.

### **Summary**

This chapter reports the results of this phenomenological study that was designed to explore the challenges that never-married, college-educated, African American women face in desiring marriage. A description of the sample of the women interviewed was provided. Five emerging themes were introduced with supporting quotes from the women. The women's responses were generated from five interview questions and spontaneous responses to a final open-ended question that allowed participants to add any additional information that they wished relating to their desire to marry.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, REFLECTIONS, LIMITATIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research explored the challenges that never-married, college-educated, African American women face in desiring to marry. A qualitative phenomenological methodology was employed to collect and analyze the data. The researcher interviewed 15 women to gain perspective on their lived experiences. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were analyzed to determine emerging themes. This chapter discusses the findings and conclusions that were drawn to correspond to the research question. Limitations of the research are presented and implications for family therapists and other mental health professionals are reported. Finally, recommendations for future research are offered.

#### **Discussion of Findings**

This qualitative study utilized phenomenology as the method for understanding the lived experiences of never-married, college-educated, African American women between the ages of 30-45. There were a limited number of studies that addressed marital desire among women or men. None of the studies found specifically addressed challenges that African American women faced. In response to the scarcity of literature, the researcher added to the body of literature by identifying five challenges that never-married, college-educated, African American women face in never being married.

### **Theme One: Because I am not Married, I Question Myself**

One of the major challenges that never-married, college-educated, African American women, in this study faced was the continuous questioning of themselves. The women in this study questioned why were they not married and often pondered what problems or challenges interfered with their opportunities to marry. A number of the women focused on whether their appearance influenced why they were not married, while others contemplated how past decisions and actions may have impacted their current state of singleness. These women constantly posed to themselves the following questions: “What’s wrong with me?”; “What am I doing wrong?”; “Is it something I said?”; “Am I too fat?”; “Is it my hair?” This constant questioning may negatively affect the women’s self-esteem. Even though, one woman stated, “I know it is not me because I am awesome” she still asked herself “...but, why can no one else see how awesome I am?” (P15)

This finding of questioning of self is consistent with the work of Frazier, et al. (1996) who conducted a study with a community sample of 217 unmarried adults over 30 years of age. The majority of the sample (96%) was Caucasian and had graduated from either college or professional school. Both never-married and divorced men and women were included in the study. The overall finding of the 1996 study was that never-married individuals reported more desire for marriage, lower self-esteem, and more dissatisfaction with their lives than did divorced individuals. Likewise, in this study, the women reported dissatisfaction with their lives that often leads to lowered self-esteem.

On the other hand, the finding of questioning of one's self in the present study is contradictory to the findings of Holland (2005) study involving African American, college-educated, single mothers. The single mothers in this study reported a sense of self that helped them navigate through society as single parents and through their education. One of the major themes in Holland's study was single mothers exhibiting eminence with self-esteem. These women stated that their singleness was a choice just like motherhood had been a choice and they were not questioning themselves. To the contrary, in the present study the women were not mothers and asked themselves many questions.

### **Theme Two: Because I am not Married, I Question God and I Wait**

Among the women interviewed for the study, there was a consistent and common trait that influenced their marital status: religious beliefs. Almost all of the women reported some level of faith in God, and identification with the Christian religion and values. While several participants reported regular church attendance of two services per month, more than one-half of the participants revealed a more frequent attendance of one or two times per week. This devotion to their faith translated into an expectation of divine provision, or at least divine approval, of their marriage partner. That is, the participants believed that God would provide an acceptable husband at the appropriate time, so they continued to wait for their husbands.

The majority of women in this study expressed their faith in God to the interviewer and explained that they were waiting on God for their husband. Each of these women believed that God was intricately involved in determining if they would marry. A

few of the women described in detail their methodology for waiting on God. For example, some of the women refused to initiate contact with a man, believing that God designed men to be the leader in the relationship and therefore the man should make initial contact with them. Others refused to participate in more modern dating methods, such as, dating online. Furthermore, there were women who declined to date at all. Two of the women described a long waiting period of a year or more when they refused to talk to men on the telephone or to go out with men, even for coffee. These women acknowledge that they are waiting on God and they also openly questioned God regarding their singleness, wondering if and when they will ever marry.

This finding of questioning God and waiting is consistent with the work of Schroeder (2003) who evaluated reasons why women wished to marry, the strength of their desire for marriage, and the levels of meaning in their lives. Self-report questionnaires were completed by 100 women who desired marriage. According to the report, there was a positive correlation found between the desire to marry and the level of meaning placed on religion. It is possible that women with no or less religious beliefs may not desire marriage as much as those who have strong religious beliefs.

### **Theme Three: Because I am not Married, Society Questions Me**

Another challenge frequently faced by never married, college educated, African American women in this study was the constant questioning from people: “Why aren’t you married?” Some of the women were questioned by their family while others were questioned by their friends. A few of the women were even questioned by their medical

doctors. Ultimately the question was “why aren’t you married?” but it often was articulated in other ways such as: When are you getting married?, Where is your ring?, What’s wrong with you?, Why don’t you have any children?.” Some of the participants where even asked if they would like to consider freezing their eggs for future reproduction. The participants admit that being asked these questions often caused them embarrassment, anxiety and other discomfort.

The theme of being questioned by society is consistent with the work of Fuller (2001) who designed and implemented a phenomenological study that explored the lived experience of singlehood as perceived by 10 college degreed African American women who have never married. This study differed from the present study in that the present study focused specifically on the challenges faced by this segment of the population. Fuller’s grand tour question was broader in scope, “What is it like being a never-married, professional, African American woman in today’s society. Sigma and pressure were themes found within 11 generalized themes.

#### **Theme Four: Because I am not Married, I Question Mate Availability and Suitability**

Another challenge that college-educated African American women in this study faced was being keenly aware of the shortage of available African American male counter parts with similar education and work experience. Due to the dearth of available African American men, these women regularly questioned whether they should continue to maintain high mate selection standards as they aged. Although the women in this study

recognized a shortage of available African American men, they nevertheless, were not persuaded to alter their mate selection criteria. These women are interested in men who can provide leadership in the relationship, possess integrity and character, and provide emotional, financial and spiritual support. Until they encounter suitable mates, the women may continue to reevaluate themselves, but seem to adhere to their standards.

The theme of questioning mate availability and suitability is consistent with the work of Swanson (2006) who conducted a qualitative study employing grounded theory methodology in order to examine professional, high-achieving, single, African American women's attitudes and perceptions on education, career, marriage and motherhood. Ten major thematic areas emerged from the data analyses. Shortage of Black men and Mate Compatibility were two of the ten major themes that are consistent with this research.

Another study that is consistent with questioning mate availability and suitability is Bronzof's (1991) study that explored marital aspirations of young Black college women. He found that young Black college women had the same marital aspirations as other racial groups. However, Bronzof indicated concern regarding the availability of comparable marital prospects for Black women, since there are far fewer Black males seeking higher education.

#### **Theme Five: Because I am not Married, I have Changed my Plans and I Question my Future**

Most of the college educated African American woman in this study had specific plans for marriage. For example, one woman wanted to be married by age 26 and have

two children by age 28. (P1) These women were accustomed to mapping out their educational plans and their lives. However, marriage continues to elude them and they realize that they could not successfully plan marriage. Thirteen of the fifteen participants indicated that they had plans to be married at a certain age but their plans had not materialized. The women spoke of the challenges they faced in having to change their original marital plans and how they were uncertain about their future as it relates to marriage. They also spoke of their desire to have children and a family. However, none of these things have happened for them. Now, they question their future. Many still hope to marry, some are planning to relocate to increase their marriage prospects and still others are thinking about alternative ways to make their marital and family dreams a reality such as freezing and preserving their eggs for the future.

The theme of Changing My Plans and Questioning My Future, is consistent with the work of Fuller (2001) who designed and implemented a phenomenological study that explored the lived experience of singlehood as perceived by 10 college degreed African American women who have never married. As previously indicated in the 2001 Fuller study eleven generalized themes were found. Each theme defined aspects of singleness, loss and grief and a temporary life stage are the themes that the researcher believes coincides with the finding of changing one plans and questioning the future. Loss and grief may result from failure to obtain desired marital goals.

## Conclusions

A single research question guided this phenomenological study: What challenges do never-married, college-educated, African American women face in desiring marriage? The following are conclusions that the researcher has drawn based on the data analysis and the emerging themes. In this study many of the women did not fully understand why other women had married, yet they were still single. They doubted themselves and constantly asked themselves what they had done wrong. They often compared themselves to other women. The researcher believes that continuous comparing and questioning of themselves could result in lowered self-esteem. All of the participants were not comparing themselves to others, a few women however, were very confident and even stated that they knew that they are “awesome” but these women still struggled with why men had not married them.

The college-educated, African American women in this study assigned the ultimate responsibility for their mate to God. Some of the women reported seeking God for the timing of their mate and marriage. In fact, two women in this study opted to “fast” an entire year from dating while seeking answers about their mate from God. It was surprising to the researcher that the women who fasted from dating rejected men who approached them during this time, which seemed to contradict the very purpose of the fast. These women did not view the offers to date during the fasting period as possible responses from God to their dilemma. It leaves the researcher to wonder if the women inadvertently contributed to their marital dilemma.

Some of the women frequently experienced a battery of questions from those in society regarding their unmarried state. These women shared a common distress by the frequency and extent of these questions. They reported that older family members always questioned why they are not married. Some said that church members ask about their mate and then volunteer to add their names to prayer lists for a spouse. Others said that they are questioned and treated as if they are disabled because they are not married. Still others reported being questioned directly by males who wanted to know why they did not have any children at this age and then they stated they were made to feel as if something was wrong with them because they do not have children. Neighbors and doctors also asked the women questions relating to their singleness. These experiences lead the researcher to believe that our society, despite its unconventional values, still expects women to marry. Never-married women are feeling pressure and anxiety from the many questions.

The unmarried state of the women in this study caused them to question the availability of suitable mates. Some said “I wish I could have dated more...I found out the college I attended had 65% women to 35% men” (P5), and others said, “I want him to be head of the household...he has to come [into the relationship] in a way that he can support me” (P15). These concerns lead the researcher to confirm that the higher the women progress in economic and educational status the less likely they are to encounter mates that they perceive as suitable. This suggests to the researcher perhaps these women should reevaluate their standards for mate selection.

Failed marriage plans have caused the women in this study to change the course of their lives. No longer do they believe that they can control an event requiring the participation of another person. The women in this study had planned various achievements at certain intervals in their lives. They planned to complete their education, purchase their cars, and their homes by certain times in their lives. Likewise, they planned to marry at a certain point however, the women in this study seemed to have learned and come to accept that marriage is not subject to the same scheduling approach and is not solely within their control. Now, some of the women doubt if they will ever marry.

The researcher focused specifically on Social Exchange as the theoretical lens for the present work. Social Exchange theory is prevalent in mate selection and marital research. Mate selection is often regulated by informal norms and these norms, or social expectations, shape the perceptions of what characteristics are important in a mate (Murstein, Merighi, & Malloy, 1988). Social life is conceived to be a “marketplace” in which participants negotiate with each other in an effort to make a profit. Rewards, costs, expectations, and alternatives are all considered in this negotiation (Boss et al., 1993).

The exchange framework is built upon a combination of central tenets in which human behavior is viewed as a function of its payoff. The women in this study displayed many of the basic assumptions from the social exchange framework, for example, they sought rewards when considering a mate and attempted to avoid costs and punishments. These women were interested in men who could provide rewards such as leadership in

the relationship, integrity and character, and provide emotional, financial and spiritual support. Not only did the women consider the rewards but they also considered the costs involved in selecting a mate. One woman clearly stated, “We will not take garbage! We have taken garbage for too long and that’s why a lot of us are single because we’re not gonna take garbage. If a man decides to be less than what we require him to be, then we will not deal with him” (P15). Until they encounter suitable mates, the women continued to reevaluate themselves, but adhered to their high standards, which may help them, avoid costs or punishments of making a poor choice.

Another central tenet of exchange theory is that humans are assumed to be rational beings. They are assumed to have the ability to count the costs and benefits associated with various choices and this rational counting is referred to as profit ratio, which may involve several comparisons (White & Kline, 2008). Not all of the decisions made by the women in this study appeared to be rational ones. The faith that the women displayed in God influenced the women’s rational decision-making. For example, many believed that God is the determinative factor, specifically that He was the One to decide if and when they would marry. They were not simply counting the costs and benefits; they were also acting on their faith in God. Two of the women described a long waiting period of a year or more when they refused to talk to men on the telephone or to go out with men even though they reported wanting marry. Many of the central tenets of the social exchange theory were applicable to the women in this study. However, the

researcher noted that there were instances where the women's actions, choices, and beliefs differed from the tenants of the theory.

### **Researcher's Reflections on Qualitative Research**

In qualitative research the researcher plays a significant role in data collection and is the primary instrument. The principal investigator's reflection on the study is an important quality of the research and helps enhance understanding and interpretation. This study was conducted by a married, college-educated, African American woman, who is family therapist and educator. The process for this study started many years ago with several conversations that I had with African American female friends from college who had never married. For many years my highly educated single friends have called and sought my advice on relationships issues. As I listened to their complaints about how difficult it is to find a appropriate mate, one like them, in age, race, religious beliefs, economic status and educational attainment, I wanted to learn more about their dilemma and help them with their difficulty. While progressing in the family therapy doctoral program, I read literature and was exposed to documentaries concerning shortages in the availability of African American men.

I was petitioned to embark upon this research by one African American attorney who strongly desired marriage and was rather anxious about still being single in her early forties. One of the major concerns that she had was that she not only desired marriage, but also desired a family, and she expressed feeling anxiety and pressure to reproduce soon before it was biologically too late. Even though I had heard her story, to the best of

my ability, I suspended my biases and assumptions regarding this topic as I conducted the interviews and analyzed the data. I listened to each story with no predetermined ideas or assumptions. To increase trustworthiness and authenticity of the data, I invited two research assistants to review randomly selected transcripts. I also employed member checking by returning the themes to the participants to check for authenticity.

Gathering data for this study was not an arduous process due to the great quantity of never-married, college-educated, African American women wanting to discuss their dilemma. The researcher had to turn away a couple of potential participants because they were just below the lower age limit for the study or they had not fully completed their bachelor's degree, yet they still wanted to share their story after hearing about the study. I struggled with turning these women away because they did not meet inclusion criteria. During the interviews, I also struggled as I listened to the women talk about very painful incidents that distressed them such as death of their boyfriends. When listening to the struggles the therapist inside of me wanted to further explore past grief issues; however, I was able to stick closely to the predesigned interview script and reminded myself that I was listening to the women in the role of researcher and I was not in the role of therapist. I found that these women did not participate in therapy, but instead shared their struggles with other African American women who were in the same predicament. I believe that support groups for these women may be beneficial.

## **Limitations**

This research yielded valuable information concerning childless, never-married, college-educated, African American woman. The lived experiences of the women who participated in this study enrich the research literature on marital desire. The researcher however, has identified a few limitations pertaining to this study. One limitation of this study was the purposive sampling of a limited number of research participants. The sample consisted of 15 childless, never-married, college-educated, African American women. These participants were not randomly selected instead, they were gathered through snowball sampling techniques. With a limited number of participants, finding from this study cannot be generalized to a larger population. Another limitation was the use of a semi-structured interview format for the data collection process. The phenomenological nature of this study also limits general conclusions that could be drawn from the findings. This study was limited to a specific homogeneous group of women, specifically childless, never-married, college educated, African American women and therefore, the findings of this study may have limited meaning for those other groups not represented in the sample. A final limitation inherent in this phenomenological study was the use of self-report of lived experiences rather than more objective measurements; therefore, the findings cannot be quantified or compared to results of objective, quantitative studies.

## **Implications for Family Therapists, Family Life Educators, and Churches**

It is crucial that family therapists, family life educators and churches recognize the unique challenges that never married, college-educated, African American women face in desiring marriage. These women exist in a society that considers marriage a customary progression within the stage of early adulthood. The following are implications for family therapists, family life educators and churches:

1. Acknowledge that never-married, college-educated, African American women experience pressure to marry from family, friends and members of society.
2. Assist never-married, college-educated, African American women, who desire marriage, in processing negative emotions that they may exhibit relating to marital desire.
3. Facilitate discussions about failure to achieve life goals and desired marital aspirations.
4. Collaborate with never-married, college-educated, African American women as they reframe their experiences and redefine their roles.
5. Support childless, never married, college educated women as they age and consider alternative fertility options.
6. Educate family, friends and community members regarding the challenges that childless, never-married, African American women face in desiring marriage in an effort to increase sensitivity toward this population.

7. Allow for reflective activities during therapeutic sessions. Participants in this study implied that the reflective nature of this study, such as sharing their experiences, was beneficial.
8. Implement therapeutic support groups comprised of women who are all facing similar challenges in desiring marriage. Many women find it beneficial to discuss challenges with others in similar situations; this support group may reassure them that they are not alone in this experience.
9. Develop and offer educational programs that focus on positive aspects of singlehood and valuing the contributions of single women within the family.
10. Offer workshops and seminars in local churches and in the community that educate and encourage its membership to remove stigma associated with singleness and to accept single women as they are.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Although this study has added to the body of literature pertaining to college-educated, African American women and marital desire, more research would expand the field and better equip mental health professionals who would work with women who are experiencing difficulties. The following are recommendations for future research:

1. Future studies could examine the challenges that never-married, African American women over 45 years of age face in desiring marriage, because this study focused solely on women between ages 30 and 45.

2. Future studies could involve other ethnic groups to see if college-educated, women in other groups experience similar challenges in desiring marriage.
3. Research is needed to identify appropriate therapeutic models for working with clinical college-educated, African American women who desire marriage.
4. Replicate the study using a larger sample size including women from other geographical regions.
5. Duplicate the study with African American males who desire marriage.
6. Repeat the study with African American women without a college education.
7. Repeat the study with college-educated, single mothers who desire marriage
8. Replicate this study using a quantitative instrument that measures desire.

### **Summary**

This chapter included a discussion of the findings, conclusions, researcher's reflections, limitations, implications and recommendations for future research. This remains a significant topic on which to keep a dialogue going. Mental health professionals who work with clinical, unmarried, college-educated, African American women must be sensitive to the situation these women are attempting to work through and find ways to support them during this time. Family life educators and local churches may play an active role in reducing stigmas associated with singleness that these women face. In addition, further research is needed to identify appropriate therapeutic models for working with African American women who present with clinical issues surrounding marital desire.

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APPENDIX A  
Recruitment Flyer



## **DO YOU DESIRE MARRIAGE?**

You may qualify to participate in a research study about the experiences that never-married, college-educated, African American women face in desiring marriage.

- **Are you an African American woman?**
- **Have you earned at least a bachelor's degree?**
- **Are you single, having never been married, yet desiring marriage?**
- **Are you between the ages of 30-55?**
- **Would you like to tell your story?**

I want to hear about your experience as a never-married woman desiring marriage. Our audiotaped conversation about your experience will take no more than 90 minutes to complete at a location convenient for you. Your name and other identifying information will not be used and will be known only to me. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time.

If you are interested in this study, please contact me, Robin Washington-White, at (214) 981-4443 or email me at [RWashingtonWhite@twu.edu](mailto:RWashingtonWhite@twu.edu). You may also contact my research advisor, Linda J. Brock, Ph.D., at (940) 898-2713.

There is a potential risk of loss of confidentiality in all email, downloading and internet transactions.

**APPENDIX B**  
**Telephone Script**

## Telephone Script

“Hello, my name is Robin Washington-White. Thank you for responding to my flyer. I am a doctoral student in Family Therapy at Texas Woman’s University where I am completing this research project as a part of my degree. I am also a family therapist and have always been interested in understanding why some people are married and others are not.

“The purpose of my research is to explore the challenges that college-educated, African American women face in desiring marriage, yet never having been married.

If you agree to participate, I will interview you at a place and a time that is convenient for you. The interview will last from approximately 1 hour. When we meet, I will have consent for you to sign, a demographic sheet to collect some background information, and then I will audio record our conversation. I will be asking you five separate questions:

1. What has the experience of desiring marriage been like for you?
2. What has the experience of wanting to get married been like for you?
3. What challenges are you facing as a result of not being married?
4. How do you feeling about having never been married?
5. Do you believe marriage is in your future?

I will use a code number to protect your confidentiality and I will be the only one to know your name. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time without penalty to you. “Do you have any questions for me? (All questions will be answered by the researcher.) “Would you like to schedule a day and time for an interview?” (If the potential participant says yes, a time and place for the interview will be scheduled.) “Thank you for volunteering to be in this study. I look forward to meeting with you on the date and at the time we’ve agreed upon.” [Will re-state time and place]

(If potential participant says no, she will be asked if she knows of anyone else that might be willing to be a part of the study). “Thank you for taking the time to talk with me.”

APPENDIX C  
Consent Form

TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY  
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title: Desiring Marriage: A Qualitative Study of College-Educated African American Women's Challenges in Never Being Married

Investigator:

Robin Washington-White, M.A..... RWashingtonWhite@twu.edu (214) 981-4443

Advisor:

Linda J. Brock, Ph.D.....LBrock@mail.twu.edu (940) 898-2713

Explanation and Purpose of the Research

You are being asked to participate in a research study for Robin Washington-White's dissertation at Texas Woman's University. The purpose of this research is to explore the challenges that never-married, college-educated, African American women face in desiring marriage.

Description of Procedures

As a participant in this study you will be asked to spend a maximum of 90 minutes of your time in this study which will include a face-to-face interview (approximately 80 minutes) with the researcher and then if you agree, a follow-up telephone call (approximately 10 minutes) a few days following the interview. The researcher will ask you questions about your experiences as a never-married, college-educated, African American woman desiring marriage. The interview will take place on a date, time and at a private location agreed upon by you and the researcher. The researcher will assign you a code number in the interview. The interview will be audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim so that the researcher can be accurate when studying what you have said. In order to be a participant in this study, you must be a never-married, heterosexual, African American woman, college-educated, having earned at least a bachelor's degree and between the ages of 30 and 55.

Potential Risks

The researcher will ask you questions about your experiences as a never-married, college-educated, African American woman desiring marriage. The following are potential risks associated with your participation and steps that the researcher will take to minimize these risks.

Fatigue is a possible risk in this study. If you become tired, you may take as many breaks as desired and may stop the interview at any time.

Emotional discomfort is another possible risk in this study. If you become upset, you may stop answering questions at any time and end the interview. If you feel you need to talk to

a professional about your emotional discomfort, the researcher has provided you with a list of counseling resources.

Participant Initials \_\_\_\_\_

Page 1 of 3

Loss of time is also a risk in this study. To decrease the risk of loss of time, your appointment has been set at a time convenient for you and at a location of your choice. This may reduce your travel time. A maximum time commitment of 90 minutes has been discussed with you and you are aware that you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Loss of confidentiality is another risk in this study. Confidentiality will be protected to the extent that is allowed by law. The interview will be held at a private location that you and the researcher have agreed upon. Your real name will not be used, instead you will be assigned a code number which will be used throughout this research. The audio recording, written transcripts of the interview, demographic information and consent forms will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office. Only the researcher will have access to the stored data. All identifiable data and audio recordings will be destroyed within 5 years from the completion of the study. Consent forms will be submitted to the IRB along with the final report of the dissertation upon completion. There is a potential risk of loss of confidentiality in all email, downloading and internet transactions.

Loss of anonymity is also a risk in this study. To reduce the risk of loss of anonymity you will be assigned a code number during the interview instead of using your real name. The interview will take place in a private location that you and the researcher have agreed upon. The results of the study may be reported at professional conferences and in scientific journals but your name and any other identifying information will not be included.

Risk of coercion is another risk in this study. You have been made aware that your participation is completely voluntary and that there are no direct benefits from participating in this study. You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

The researcher will try to prevent any problems that may happen because of the research. You should let the researcher know at once if there is a problem and the researcher will assist you. However, TWU does not provide medical services or financial assistance for injuries that might happen because you are taking part in this research.

Participation and Benefit

Your involvement in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. There are no direct benefits from participating in this study. If you would like to have a summary of the results sent to you, the researcher will mail it to you.\*

Questions about the study

You will be given a copy of this signed and dated consent form to keep. If you have any questions about the research study you should ask the researchers; their phone numbers are at the top of this form. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this research or the way this study has been conducted, you may contact the Texas Woman's University Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at (940) 898-3378 or via e-mail at IRB@twu.edu.

Participant Initials \_\_\_\_\_  
Page 2 of 3

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant                      Phone (for follow-up call)                      Date

\*If you would like to have a summary of the results of this study please list where you want it to be sent.

Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX D  
Demographic Data Sheet

DESIRING MARRIAGE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF COLLEGE-EDUCATED  
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S CHALLENGES IN NEVER BEING MARRIED

CONFIDENTIAL DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

PARTICIPANT ID # \_\_\_\_\_

Please complete the following information.

1. Current Age \_\_\_\_\_
  2. Marital Status \_\_\_\_\_
  3. Have you previously been married? \_\_\_\_\_
  4. Race \_\_\_\_\_
  5. Highest educational degree earned? \_\_\_\_\_
  6. College major? \_\_\_\_\_
  7. In what year did you graduate with your bachelor's degree? \_\_\_\_\_
  8. Do you live alone? \_\_\_\_ If no, who lives with you? \_\_\_\_\_
  9. Have you cohabited with a romantic partner? \_\_\_\_ If yes, how long have you  
cohabited? \_\_\_\_\_
  10. How many children do you have? \_\_\_\_\_
  11. How old are your children? \_\_\_\_\_
  12. How many siblings do you have? \_\_\_\_\_
  13. What is your birth order? \_\_\_\_\_
  14. How do you spend your leisure time? \_\_\_\_\_
-

15. What is your religious or spiritual preference? \_\_\_\_\_ If you attend services, how often? \_\_\_\_\_

16. What is your current occupation? \_\_\_\_\_ How long? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your annual gross income?

- \_\_\_ \$0-\$12,000
- \_\_\_ \$12,001-\$20,000
- \_\_\_ \$20,001-\$30,000
- \_\_\_ \$30,001-\$50,000
- \_\_\_ \$50,001-\$70,000
- \_\_\_ \$70,001-\$90,000
- \_\_\_ \$90,001+

How strong is your desire to marry? (Indicate where your desire is on line below)

0 \_\_\_\_\_ 25 \_\_\_\_\_ 50 \_\_\_\_\_ 75 \_\_\_\_\_ 100  
No Desire \_\_\_\_\_ Strong Desire

**APPENDIX E**  
**Interview Guide**

## Interview Guide

Participant ID# \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

“Thank you once again for agreeing to be a part of my study.” (Pause for feedback)  
“The purpose of the study is to explore the challenges that college-educated, African American women face in desiring marriage, yet never having been married. Please remember that your participation is completely voluntary and you may stop the interview at any time without any questions. I will audio record our interview to make sure that I accurately report your responses in my paper. You may take breaks if you need them during the interview.”

Please read and sign the consent form (give them the form). After you read and sign I will give you a copy to keep. This form basically gives me the authorization to interview you. It also lets you know that there are some risks involved in participating in the study (point out the risks section, discuss questions about risks) “Do you have any questions about the consent form?” (researcher will answer any questions) Also, at the bottom of the consent form that is space for you to put your mailing address or email address if you want to have a summary of the results of the study mailed to you. (Researcher will give a copy of the signed consent form to the participants and keep one for herself).

Before I begin recording may I also have you complete this short demographic form? (give participant demographic information sheet). “Do have any questions regarding the demographic information before we begin the recorded interview? (Pause, to listen and answer any questions)

“Okay, are you ready to begin the recording and the interview?” I’m turning on the audio recorder now.” (Recorder now on)

I only have 5 questions to ask you but I encourage you to speak freely and add as much detail and information to each question as you would like. Just let me know if you need a break, or if you don’t fully understand the question.”

“First tell me what has your dating experience been like?”

“What has the experience of wanting to be married been like for you?”

“What challenges are you facing as a result of not being married?”

“How do you feel about having never been married?”

“Do you believe that marriage is in your future?”

I will use these additional prompts during the interview, as needed:

What more can you say about that?

okay

Smiling

Nodding

I see

How so?

What more could you say about that?

Let me see if I understand what you are saying.

What else comes to mind?

Anything else?

Would more would you like to add?

“That was my last question. Is there anything else you want to say or add before I stop the audio recording?” We’re finished with the interview now. (Stop recording)

I’ll be calling in a few days to see if you’d like to add more information. If you’ve asked for summary results from this study, a copy will be sent to the address you’ve given me.

“Thank you so much for helping me by participating in my study.”

APPENDIX F  
Counseling Resources

Elliot E. Connie, M.A. LPC  
Counselor  
1660 Keller Parkway Suite 103  
Keller, TX 76248  
(817) 602-1714

Julie A. Hanson, M.S. LMFT-A  
Marriage and Family Therapist  
5172 Village Creek, Suite 103  
Plano, Texas 75093  
(214) 838-1128

Nickol Barnes, MS, LGPC, CAC-AD  
Counselor  
711 W. 40<sup>th</sup> Street Suite 456A  
Baltimore, Maryland 21211  
(443) 856-2841

Jacqueline Segue-Wilkins, LCPC, NCC  
Counselor  
5401 Twin Knolls Road Suite 9  
Columbia, Maryland 21045  
(410) 489-1986

Counseling and Family Therapy Clinic  
Texas Woman's University  
114 Human Development Building (HDB)  
Denton, Texas 76204 (940) 898-2620

Find a Therapist  
[www.psychologytoday.com](http://www.psychologytoday.com)

American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy  
112 South Alfred Street  
Alexandria, VA 22314-3016  
703-838-9808  
<http://www.aamft.org>

American Counseling Association  
5999 Stevenson Avenue  
Alexandria, VA 22304  
800-347-6647  
<http://www.counseling.org>

APPENDIX G  
Follow-up Telephone Script

## Telephone Script

“Hello, my name is Robin Washington-White. You agreed to participate in my research study a few weeks ago. Once again, I want to thank you for participating. I am calling because you agreed to a follow up call after the completion of the interviews. I have officially completed my study and have analyzed all of the interviews and would like to share with you the themes that I have found. But before I share with you let me ask if you may have thought of anything else you want to add since we met?

(I will listen and record any additional thoughts or comments that the women may have)

As I share the themes with you that I have found, please let me know if you feel the themes accurately convey the meaning you were wishing to share. All themes may not represent you completely. Feel free to inform me if a theme does not convey your experience. In general for me to identify a major theme more than half of the participants would have stated the theme.

(At this point I will read each theme back to the participant and have them member check the theme, agree or disagree, with theme and then explain why.)

Researcher will make any necessary theme adjustments.

APPENDIX H  
Institutional Review Board Approval Letter



**Institutional Review Board**  
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
P.O. Box 425619, Denton, TX 76204-5619  
940-898-3378 Fax 940-898-3416  
email: IRB@twu.edu

July 14, 2011

Ms. Robin Washington-White  
1700 Station Place  
Carrollton, TX 75007

Dear Ms. Washington-White:

*Re: Desiring Marriage: A Qualitative Study of College-Educated African American Women's Challenges in Never Being Married (Protocol #: 16665)*

The above referenced study has been reviewed by the TWU Institutional Review Board (IRB) and appears to meet our requirements for the protection of individuals' rights.

If applicable, agency approval letters must be submitted to the IRB upon receipt PRIOR to any data collection at that agency. A copy of the approved consent form with the IRB approval stamp and a copy of the annual/final report are enclosed. Please use the consent form with the most recent approval date stamp when obtaining consent from your participants. The signed consent forms and final report must be filed with the Institutional Review Board at the completion of the study.

This approval is valid one year from July 14, 2011. Any modifications to this study must be submitted for review to the IRB using the Modification Request Form. Additionally, the IRB must be notified immediately of any unanticipated incidents. If you have any questions, please contact the TWU IRB.

Sincerely,

  
Dr. Rhonda Buckley, Co-Chair  
Institutional Review Board - Denton

enc.

cc. Dr. Larry LeFlore, Department of Family Sciences  
Dr. Linda Brock, Department of Family Sciences  
Graduate School