

THE BLACK LOVE NARRATIVE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SCIENCE IN MARRIAGE AND FAMILY
THERAPY

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE
TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, FAMILY STUDIES,
AND COUNSELING

COLLEGE OF PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

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AUGUST 2020

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of eight Black couples that identified as being in love. A phenomenological methodology was used to conduct this study. Each couple was interviewed and asked to share their experienced of being Black and in love. During the interview, the participants discussed the misrepresentation of Black love in different aspects of society, expressed that they are actively working towards countering the negative representations of Black romantic partnerships, and provided insight on their individual experiences in their partnerships. It was concluded that healthy Black love does exist, Black love is different due to the unique experiences Black Americans encounter, and that there is a need for more representation of healthy Black romantic partnerships.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Black Americans have endured many trials and tribulations since being enslaved and brought over to America (Franke, 1999). The challenges and obstacles they faced were not limited to the denial of human rights. In addition to the social and political injustice they faced, their enslaved status also impacted their intimate or personal lives. Further, Black Americans were thought to be overly sexual individuals who engaged in abnormal sexual relations (Franke, 1999). Moreover, they were not allowed to legally marry, so they participated in other forms of ceremonies to finalize their unions. During post-emancipation, they were finally permitted to go before the court to marry; however, they still encountered challenges and were held to expectations that their White counterparts were not (Franke, 1999).

Black Americans continue to experience disparities in social outcomes, such as marriage rates, to this day (Johnson & Loscocco, 2015). In the last half a century, there has been a significant decline in marriage rates across the United States (Marks et al., 2008). This decline is more pronounced in the Black community. In 1970, out of the 15 million Black Americans that participated in the census, about 56% of them were married; however, out of the almost 34 million recorded in 2019, only 35% were married. These numbers reflect a drop in the marriage rate by 21% in the past 50 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018c). In recent years, there has also been a shift in the age that people typically get married in the United States; individuals are now waiting later into their 20s to marry (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018b). It is believed that the decline in the marriage rate

amongst the newest generations of Americans is the result of factors such as lack of financial stability (Anderson, 2018), how the media romanticize marriage (Holmes, 2007; Segrin & Nabi, 2002; Wanzo, 2011), disproportionate male-to-female ratios, and over-incarceration of Black males (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011; Dixon, 2009).

Information that pertains to Black couples, whether they are married or cohabiting, tends to focus on the negative aspects of their relationships (Billingsley, 2016; Chamber & Kravitz, 2011). These negatives have included highlighting the decline in their rate of marriage (Chamber & Kravitz, 2011; Dixon, 2009), addressing the emasculation of Black males (Chamber & Kravitz, 2011; Dixon, 2009; Franke, 1999), comparing to White marriages and relationships (Broman, 2005; Johnson & Loscocco, 2015; Orbuch et al., 2002; Wanzo, 2011), and cultural factors due to race (Chamber & Kravitz, 2011; Dixon, 2009; Johnson & Loscocco, 2015). Few studies underscore the importance of highlighting the positive aspects and attributes of Black couples and/or Black marital units.

As demonstrated in the literature on this topic, it is evident that Black couples face a multitude of challenges due to their race. Moreover, the statistics on marriage decline and the disparities among Black couples in this area make it imperative to explore and understand these encounters. Additionally, when so much of the literature on Black American marriages is focused on the negatives, it limits the scope and complexity of these relationships (Billingsley, 2016). In contrast to these challenges, research that seeks to gain understanding of the more positive aspects of Black couple relationships is

needed to provide a more holistic perspective on the topic and serve as a platform to share their stories.

Statement of the Problem

It is evident that there is a decline in marriage rates in the Black community (Chamber & Kravitz, 2011; Dixon, 2009; Johnson & Loscocco, 2015). There are many articles that provide insight into inadequacies when it comes to Black Americans intimate relationships (Billingsley, 2016; Chaney, 2014a; Chaney, 2014b; Hopkins-Williams, 2007; Marks et al., 2008; Phillips, Wilmoth, & Marks, 2012). Within the past 10 to 15 years, there has been a shift towards more articles being published that focus on the good qualities in Black marriages, and how there are long-lasting Black American marriages (Hopkins-Williams, 2007; Marks et al., 2008). However, few have conducted exploratory qualitative research on Black love in the Black community.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the lived experiences of eight Black couples who, regardless of their sexual orientation, identify as being in love. This is important because being exposed to positive examples of love amongst Black couples may provide marriage and family therapists with a broader understanding of Black intimate relationships, potentially countering the current literature that mostly centers on the negative aspects of Black Americans couples' experiences (Chamber & Kravitz, 2011; Broman, 2005; Johnson & Loscocco, 2015; Wanzo, 2011).

Research Question

The following question will guide this study: What are the lived experiences of Black couples who identify as being in love?

Theoretical Framework

Narrative techniques are often used to share accounts of people's daily lives, whether it is through the old tradition of storytelling or explaining their excitement with a new movie on social media (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Therefore, in this effort to highlight the success of Black couples, a narrative approach was used to tell their stories. This is important because narratives have "become a popular source of data in qualitative research" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 34). Narratives will allow me to get a glimpse into the participants' experiential world (Flick, 1998). Hermanns (as cited in Flick, 1998) stated that during a narrative interview, the participants will be asked to explain their experiences with a topic and to tell their story from beginning to end. This was beneficial for this study because it provided me with an overview of the Black couples' experience with love in their relationships.

Methodological Approach

The phenomenological approach is an interviewing method that seeks to understand the experiences of a group of people who share a unique setting (Moustakas, 1994). This research approach was used as Black couples were interviewed about their lived experiences of the phenomena of Black love (Moustakas, 1994).

Definition of Terms

The following terms will be used in this study:

1. Black/Black Americans/African Americans – Used interchangeably, “A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa.” (US Census Bureau, 2018a)
2. Black and in Love – As identified by participants
3. Healthy Relationship - “Just two people kicking it together and growing...and not participating in toxic activities” (participant 0070/0071)

Delimitations

The following delimitations will be applied to this study.

1. Participants will identify as being either Black, Black American, and/or African American.
2. Participants will be Black couples who identify as being in love.
3. Participants will identify as either homosexual or heterosexual.

Assumptions

The following assumptions will be made.

1. Subjects will voluntarily participate in the study.
2. Participants will respond openly and honestly about their experiences as a Black couple.

Researcher as Person

I am a Christian, Black, female graduate student, majoring in Marriage & Family Therapy, at Texas Woman’s University in Denton, Texas. I grew up in a single-parent home and did not regularly encounter happy long-lasting Black couples. Therefore, I am curious about the lived experiences of Black couples who identify as being in love and in

a healthy relationship. Moreover, I hope that sharing the experiences of Black couples who have healthy relationships, will provide future Black couples with hope for their own intimate relationships.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the lived experiences of eight Black couples who, regardless of their sexual orientation, identify as being in love. Although there is research that highlights positive Black intimate relationships, there is a need for more exploratory qualitative research on Black couples. Having research that highlights positive romantic Black partnerships, provides an alternative outlook on the skewed perspective of Black couples. This will ultimately enlighten marriage and family therapists with more information about the experience of Black couples in love and will help provide a foundation of what a healthy relationship could look like for future Black couples.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Black romantic partnerships come in all shapes and forms (Franke, 1999). Despite the increase in studies that highlight successful and positive Black marriages and relationships in recent years, there is still disproportionately more research being conducted that focuses on the negative aspects of Black couples (Marks et al., 2008). This chapter will review the history of Black marriages, the decline in marriage rates, negative depictions of Black marriages and relationships, past studies that highlight positive aspects of Black romantic partnerships, and the need for exploratory qualitative research on the representations of Black love.

History of Black Marriages

Franke (1999) stated in his article that it was believed that enslaved people were inferior to Whites. The enslaved were “overly sexual, violent beasts or as passive and dependent Sambos, and the women as oversexed Jezebels or nurturing Mammys” (p. 259). Sexual promiscuity was considered a norm for African Americans who were enslaved, and many believed that nothing could be done to decrease their sexual behaviors. In an effort to bring a positive light to the marriages and family dynamics of Black Americans after emancipation and to eliminate the idea that Black men are weak and have female-headed households, African American scholars compared the lifestyles of Black Americans to that of European Americans. They said that Black Americans lived in nuclear families like that of White American families. However, it was presented by another scholar, Franke reported, that enslaved Black Americans have always had the

desire to have nuclear families and did sustain such families and marriages during slavery. Therefore, freed slaves were not simply copying or trying to mirror the families of European Americans. They were, in fact, living out their morals and family dynamics that they had prior to slavery. In contrast to that belief, another scholar stated that slaves had three forms of living arrangements. Either they were “Sweethearting,” “Taking up,” or “Living together” (Franke, 1999, p. 256). Sweethearting was a reoccurring, non-monogamous, relationship amongst young people. Taking up, was a long-standing sweetheart relationship or a non-exclusive relationship amongst older people. Living together, was a recognized marriage that was observed by the slave’s owners and other slaves. The conflicting viewpoints of how enslaved Black relationships were practiced may be due to the slaves’ living conditions in their different regions and plantations (Franke, 1999).

A narrative account from an enslaved woman provided information about what a marital ceremony would consist of on a plantation. She stated that she was married to her husband, who was also a slave by a Black preacher; this was considered “slave rules” (Franke, 1999, p. 269). Due to being married by a Black preacher, there were no church or public records of their marriage. There were also some instances where enslaved people were married by their masters. Identifying as married was not based on having gone through a wedding ceremony (Franke, 1999). There was an account of an enslaved wife who was trying to receive federal pensions for her husband’s death in the war. She expressed that she and her husband were cohabiting and, therefore, they were married (Franke, 1999). This provided scholars with evidence that enslaved people did not need

official ceremonies, such as, jumping the broom, to identify as a married couple. Black Americans views on marriage and what constitutes a marriage varied amongst them (Franke, 1999).

Enslaved African Americans were not allowed to participate in a legal ceremony that legitimized their marriages. It was not until emancipation that they could go before the court to be married. The right to marry was considered the “most important ramification of emancipation” (Franke, 1999, p. 277). Those that were cohabiting while being enslaved were also given the right to make their marriage official. However, there were some states that had different rules around freemen marriages. Formerly enslaved people were told that they had to obtain a marriage license within a certain time frame. This was troublesome for some slaves because the price of a marriage license was high. Therefore, those that did not abide by the deadline were charged criminally for “adultery and fornication” (Franke, 1999, p. 289). There were some instances where Black fugitives were required to get married if they wanted to live as husband and wife. The federal government chose this approach to promote the importance of “the family obligations” to help them qualify for citizenship (Franke, 1999, p. 279). Amongst the Black community, leaders urged the freed Black slaves to follow the marriage rule in fear of interfering with their citizenship. One leader said, “Let us do nothing to re-kindle the slumbering fires of prejudice between the two races” (Franke, 1999, p. 290). African Americans believed that if they conformed to the norms of the society it “was a price paid instrumentally for the respect they believed it would buy” (Franke, 1999, p. 292).

The Decline in Marriage Rates

Over the past 50 years, the overall marriage rate in the United States has dropped by 12%; in the Black community, the drop in the marriage rate is even greater. In 1970, 55% of Black Americans were married, but in 2018, only 34% were married. Over the past 50 years, the Black community has seen a significant drop in marriage by 21% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018c).

When examining the younger adult population over the generations, the rate of marriage of millennials does not line up with their predecessors (Pew Research Center, 2014). Millennials are considered those who were born from 1981 to 1996 (Dimock, 2018). In 1960, the average age of marriage for a man was 23 and 20 for a woman; today the average age for men is 30 and 28 for women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018b). The decline in marriage rates and rise in the age of marriage amongst millennials is believed to be the result of low financial stability (Pew Research, 2014; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018d). Millennials are reporting that they are postponing marriage because they do not feel they have reached the financial stability needed to commit to a new stage in life. Research has also pointed to the sex ratio and a limited number of qualified African American males as part of the reason for the decline in African American marriages (Anderson, 2018).

It is believed that the increase in divorce could be the result of unmet expectations in their relationships (Holmes, 2007; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). Holmes (2007) suggests that high expectations in marriages could be influenced by unrealistic representations of

romance on television. Studies have shown that young adults use television and movies to help guide their learning when it comes to romantic relationships (Holmes, 2007).

Romantic situations in movies and television have influenced the idea that partners should be able to “read each other’s minds,” being able to understand their partner’s wants and needs effortlessly (Holmes, 2007, p. 9). Therefore, when young adults are not experiencing this level of connection in their relationships, they may think it is a sign that they are not meant to be and give up on the relationship (Holmes, 2007).

Segrin and Nabi (2002) argued that overall television viewing is not a predictor of unrealistic relationship expectations, and that in fact, the specific genre of television shows are the influencers. Viewing romantic comedies and soap operas has fueled idealized expectations in marriages. In this study, a high percentage of the couples stated that they planned to stay in their marriage for the remainder of their lives and to never get divorced. However, with the increase in divorce rates in the U.S., researchers know that this is an unrealistic expectation (Segrin & Nabi, 2002).

Negative Depictions of Black Marriages and Relationships

Cohabitation

Dixon (2009) then discussed cultural factors and how they contribute to the decline of African American marriages. Staples (as cited in Dixon, 2009) mentioned that African American marriage rates are affected by single-parent households due to unmarried births. Cohabitation has also been recognized as a factor in the decline in marriage. Now that it is acceptable to live with a partner even when they are not married, more couples are opting for cohabitation rather than marriage (Dixon, 2009). Dixon

(2009) also talked about African American extended families and their role in low marriage rates. She mentioned that African Americans' extended family provides them with the support that others would find in a marriage. For example, in the African American community, the grandmother has a central role in the family. Typically, the grandmother is put in charge of caring for her grandchildren. This eliminates the need for additional support and finances from a partner (Dixon, 2009). Dixon also referred to individual factors as barriers for African Americans getting married. African Americans have expectations when they are looking for a marriageable partner. Therefore, when these expectations are not met, they refrain from marriage (Dixon, 2009). For instance, women are expected to marry men who have more income and education. However, in the African American community, Black women tend to have more education because "Historically, African Americans sent their daughters to college while the sons worked" (Dixon, 2009, p. 37). Dixon (2009) ended her article by stating that African Americans' spend less time married and have higher divorce rates, African American women have unrealistic expectations for mates, cohabiting for African Americans may initially be a temporary position, however, structural and cultural constraints more often than not will make it permanent.

In an effort to understand the challenges and obstacles that are said to be present in the folds of Black marriages, Johnson and Loscocco (2015) decided to examine these two factors through an intersectional race/gender prism rather than the White model of marriage and relationships that "[suggest] that there is something pathological about the marital patterns of Blacks" (Johnson & Loscocco, 2015, p. 3). They stated that marriage

was socially constructed by the White rich upper-class and contains patriarchal influences that provide men with more power in the relationship over the woman. The gender expectations in the ideal American marriage go against the roles Black men and women were conditioned to take on during enslavement. Black men were depicted as being “weak” and Black women were thought to be “too strong” (Johnson & Loscocco, 2015, p. 6). The “systematic exclusion from the basic building blocks for a ‘typical’ or ‘healthy’ marriage means that Black marriages could never quite measure up” (Johnson & Loscocco, 2015, p. 6). Due to Black marriages not being able to fit the model of what society considered to be the makings of a marriage or the “normative ideal, marks Blacks as culturally deficient” (Johnson & Loscocco, 2015, p. 6). Johnson and Loscocco then go on to provide statistics comparing White marriages to Black marriages. When discussing the data, consistently they present that Black couples and their marriages fall short during the comparison shaping the idea that Whites have longer lasting and more stable marital unions. However, “Black marriages, like all marriages, are embedded in immediate contexts as well as larger cultural schemas” (Johnson & Loscocco, 2015, p. 9). Their cultural experiences speak to the differences that are present in their marital dynamics.

Internal and External Influences

Orbuch, Veroff, Hassan, and Horrocks (2002) followed Black ($N = 174$) and White ($N = 199$) recently married couples for 14 years to see what factors would predict divorce. On average, the husbands’ ages were 27 and the wives’ were 25. The Black couples were more likely to have at least one child, and/or were cohabiting before they were married. The researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with the couples in year

1, 3, and 7, with year 2 and 4 utilizing phone interviews. In the 14th year, participants received a brief questionnaire either over the phone or through the mail that asked marital status information. For those that they could not contact, they looked at divorce records of three surrounding counties. By the third year of the couples' marriages, 14% had divorced. In the 7th year, 29% had divorced, and 40.5% by the 14th year. The divorce rate for the Black couples was the highest. Among the Black wives, high education level was associated with less divorce. However, Black husbands' high education levels were not associated with less divorce. Black husbands decreased their chances of divorce when they participated in household tasks. In conclusion, race and education were major indicators of whether these couples would stay married over the 14 years of the study (Orbuch et al, 2002).

Broman (2005) explored the differences in marital quality between Black Americans' and White Americans' marriages by analyzing the Americans Changing Lives survey. From this database, Broman used the survey responses of 1,414 Black Americans and White Americans, in three waves over 9 years, about their marriages. The researcher used factors such as participants' age, sex, race, education, number of children, and family finances, and their spouse's behavior to measure marital quality. The participants' ages averaged 51 years old, with Black Americans tending to be younger. Females were 45% of the participants (Broman, 2005). Black participants tended to have less education and lower incomes. The Black participants were found to have the most children (Broman, 2005). Black participants reported higher levels of negative characteristics about their spouses, such as spouses having affairs, and being critical, and

abusive. Black participants were less likely to say that their spouses made them feel more loved (Broman, 2005). Overall, Black participants were found to have lower marital quality. Broman states that lower marital quality for Black participants had also been reported in other studies. He questioned whether the Black participants were just more willing to talk about their spouse's negative characteristics than White participants (Broman, 2005).

Dixon (2009) explored literature on African American marriages and found that African American marriage rates have dropped drastically since 1970. African Americans are less likely to get married, and once they are married, their length of marriage tends to be short (Dixon, 2009). Social factors have been suggested as one reason that the African American rate of marriage has declined. Dixon (2009) stated that there is an imbalanced sex ratio in the African American community. In 2003, there were 91 African American males for every 100 African American females. This imbalance is believed to be the result of 50% of prison inmates being African American males (Dixon, 2009). African American males' deaths are occurring more than African American females. African American males are more likely to be unemployed. Their lack of confidence in being able to support and provide for a family interferes with the desire to marry (Dixon, 2009). African American males are often not considered marriageable. It has also been found that African American males marry later in life. It is hypothesized that this is because African American males are more stable financially later in life, when they marry after completing school or leaving the military, and the benefits of being married decrease (Dixon, 2009).

Chambers and Kravitz utilized “Vulnerability – Stress – Adaptation Model” to understand how sociological and psychological factors are influencing African American couples to not get married (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011, p. 649). Some of the sociological constraints that the researchers identified were cohabitation, mate availability, and children born outside of marriage. Chamber and Kravitz state that mate availability presents a problem because it contributes to a shift in gender role responsibilities. They mention that due to Black women making more money and tending to household and child responsibilities, it can cause a power struggle to emerge in the relationships and have the man feel emasculated. They also stated African American women with more education have less of an urgency to get married because they are economically self-sufficient (Chamber & Kravitz, 2011, p. 652). Therefore, removing the economic incentive, “there becomes an increased burden on the relationship to meet the woman’s emotional and psychological needs” (Chamber & Kravitz, 2011, p. 652). Chamber and Kravitz discuss how parenthood has a negative effect on a couple’s relationship and lessens relationship satisfaction due to it being stressful. Trust, fairness, and forgiveness were presented as psychological constraints. It is stated that African Americans’ mistrust is linked to their “long history of racism and discrimination” (Chamber & Kravitz, 2011, p. 654). African Americans’ macro level of generational mistrust in society and the healthcare system may have influenced their dyadic relationships (Chamber & Kravitz, 2011). The authors’ said that African Americans struggle with forgiving, which is partially due to “the legacy of slavery, discrimination, and racism, [and their] strong sense of justice and fairness” (Chamber & Kravitz, 2011, p. 654). Forgiveness is also

constrained because of unsuccessful past relationships and they carry that hurt into future relationships. Then it is mentioned that this creates a defense mechanism where African Americans avoid being vulnerable to protect themselves from it happening again, “that is, they proceed and behave in their relationships out of a place of fear” (Chamber & Kravitz, 2011, p. 654). Lastly, the research stated that African Americans have this notion that before they get married, they must have an established career. Once these individuals become stable in their careers, it is later in their lives. This then leads them to become reluctant to get married because they fear the loss of their freedom and independence. Chamber and Kravitz (2011) consider this to be a “The Paradox of Employment and Relationship Success.” In conclusion, African Americans’ face many disproportionate constraints in their premarital relationships that then influence the low marriage rate amongst them (Chamber & Kravitz, 2011).

Societal and Media Representation

Wanzo (2011) discusses the discourse in media, society, Disney, and amongst the Black community around unmarriageable professional Black woman. The conversation began by addressing the increased focus on the marriage rate in the Black community once Barack and Michelle Obama entered the White House. The Obamas’ presence sparked the conversation around Black romantic relationships and what an ideal relationship looks like. Wanzo explores the depiction of princesses of color in the Disney fantasy world. She states that “... the history of black representation is so overrun with negative stereotypes it can be difficult to produce a narrative that does not gesture to some racist history...” (Wanzo, 2011, p. 4). Wanzo credits *The Cosby Show* for being an

exception that “represents ideals that do not reference the larger plight of African Americans” (Wanzo, 2011, p. 4). She then stated that Disney has been trying to fit non-White princesses into a mold that resembles romantic western societal views and ignores “African American desires and pleasure outside of a western imaginary...” (Wanzo, 2011, p. 7). Wanzo (2011) stated that the depiction of princesses of color such as Princess Tiana (the first Black princess) has provided Black women with fantasies that are problematic to their view of romantic love. This then has carried over to famous Black celebrity men insinuating that Black women are the problem when it comes to their failed success when looking for a Black man to have a romantic partnership with. Wanzo mentioned a famous comedian that “[Characterized] black woman’s desire to communicate as foolish in the face of black men’s commonsense model to living shores up a pathological reading of woman’s desires.” (Wanzo, 2011, p. 11). This comedian, along with others mentioned by Wanzo, was found to believe that Black women have unrealistic expectations of Black men in romantic partnerships that are accredited to the lack of success in finding a mate.

Wanzo (2011) then expands on the Obamas’ relationship and how they became the representation of Black love for the Black community, which was replacing the Cosby show with a real-life example. She reported that their love is not a realistic representation for the average Black American because of the unequal role the Obamas’ played in their relationship due to Barack being the president at that time by stating that “Becoming First Lady is an unachievable goal for most women, but it is the structure of the marriage itself that we might not want to treat as the ideal model to which every woman should aspire” (Wanzo, 2011, p. 13). Wanzo stated the Obamas’ relationship

pushes the ideology that Black women, despite their education and career, should give it all up to help their partner be successful in their endeavors and to ignore their own wants to ensure the domestic responsibilities and their husbands are tended to. The article ended by stating that Black love is not a fairy tale, and that the real fairy tale is placing Black women at the center of the problem when it comes to the marriage rate in the Black community, when it, in fact, is the structure of society.

Johnson and Loscocco (2015) discussed emotional management and how, due to their hypermasculinity, Black men are thought to hide their emotion. Johnson and Loscocco (2015) stated that Black women are responsible for managing emotions in the marriage and helping the man manage his own emotions. Johnson and Loscocco mentioned that Black women have a heavy burden on them when it comes to being married to Black men. Not only are they expected to manage the emotions in the relationship, they are viewed as being the Strong Black woman. Being a Strong Black woman means they are there to support the needs of their immediate family and extended family, as well as their Black men when they encounter racism. The researchers stated that “As Black women in a White patriarchal institution, Black women are asked to do all that White women do—and much more” (Johnson & Loscocco, 2015, p. 14). Johnson and Loscocco mentioned the Black church as being a pivotal influence in the Black community and Black marriages. They stated that the church has helped reinforce the patriarchal gender roles in marriage and said that “those roles were seen as spiritually mandated and complementary, while the specter of divorce looms for those who do not hew to their God-given place in marriage” (Johnson & Loscocco, 2015, p. 16). Lastly,

the researchers mentioned that the “images of deviant Black men and Women, and their flawed and failed relationships, have been a staple of American popular culture” (Johnson & Loscocco, 2015, p. 17). Oprah Winfrey said, “It really was about letting people see the tenderness and the love between a black couple and their love for their family, which is something you never see” (as quoted in Johnson & Loscocco, 2015, p. 19). She made this statement in response to the lack of images of Black couples showing intimacy between them in media. In conclusion, Johnson and Loscocco (2015) stated that “our intersectional narrative suggests that rather than blaming Black couples or individuals...it is a racialized and gendered institutional and cultural apparatus that makes it particularly difficult for Black couples to have lasting and satisfying marriages” (p. 23).

Past Studies Highlighting Successful Black Intimate Relationships

Long-term Black Marriages

Hopkins-Williams (2007) also utilized phenomenology to examine happy, strong long-term Black marriages. There were twelve couples whose years of marriage ranged from 24 years to 50 years, participated in this study. Hopkins-Williams asked her participants 15 open-ended questions about their marriage, themselves, their partner, and their family. Of the couples, eleven stated that children were a major influence on them staying together. Couples also stated that children provided their marriage with stability. Spirituality was mentioned throughout the interview as the foundation and navigator for the couples’ marriages. Couples expressed that praying with their spouse and the support of their religious community positively influenced their marriage. However, there were also incidents that were discussed amongst the couples that displayed spirituality and

religion as a negative influence. Communication was mentioned frequently throughout the couples as a key factor to ensure a strong marriage. The couples also stated that commitment was a key influence in the longevity of their marriages. There were some couples that felt they had to be the exception when it came to Black marriages and families. They stated that media often depicts Black marriages and families in a negative way and that they worked to ensure their relationships and families did not reflect these stereotypes. Racism was discussed amongst the couples, and they shared that societal factors did have an influence on their marriages, and it fueled stress and marital problems that could be detrimental (Hopkins-Williams, 2007).

In a dissertation written by Billingsley (2016), she set out to understand the experience of Black Love using phenomenological interviewing. The Black Marriage Through the Prism of Gender, Race, and Class (BMTTGRC) Model was used (Johnson & Loscocco, 2015). Johnson and Loscocco's model questions "the traditional White middle-class model of marriage and its creation to benefit White Men" (as cited in Billingsley, 2016, p. 98). She had three research questions "(1) What is Black Love? (2) What is unique about Black Love? and (3) What makes Black Love Endure?" There were five African American couples and an interracial couple (at least one African American partner) that were in an intimate relationship for at least 10 years participated in this study. Out of the six couples, one couple was in a gay male relationship and one was in a lesbian relationship. The couples' ages ranged from 34 to 61 years of age, and how long they had been together ranged from 10 to 23 years. There was one couple that was cohabiting, and the other couples were married. Using 17 interview questions, the

researcher created three clusters that answered her three research questions. In cluster one called “Love,” she answered her research question that asks, “What is Black Love.” There were five themes that emerged from this question: children and family, uniqueness, commitment, evolving, and unconditional. Love relationships amongst African Americans are like that of the traditional heterosexual marriages, in that they are just as happy and healthy. For the second cluster, Black Love, another five themes were acknowledged: Love is Love is Love, children and family, cultural awareness, a beautiful struggle, and movies and television. Black love is depicted in movies and television as successful nuclear relationships. Black Love being displayed in media provided Black people with a blueprint, an example of love. Being Black and in love was the norm, a desirable and achievable experience. Lastly, in cluster three, Personal Love, there were three themes: boldness, spirituality and religion, and friendship. Of the couples, 83% of them expressed that they believed that Black Love is real. However, Black Love can only be experienced and obtained in the Black community and amongst Black Americans (Billingsley, 2016).

Challenges and Barriers

Marks et al. (2008) explored how happy and enduring African American couples deal with challenges and barriers. There were 30 couples who participated in the study. All the couples were dual earners, and their income averaged \$58,000. Their ages ranged from 42 to 75 years old. The couples on average were married for 26 years. The whole-family qualitative methodology was used. This approach allowed for the couples to be interviewed together, and for the therapist to observe how the couples interacted with

each other. Marks et al. discussed four core themes: 1) Challenges in African American Marriages, (2) Overcoming External Challenges in Marriage, (3) Resolving Intramarital Conflict, and (4) Unity and the Importance of Being "Equally Yoked" (p. 180). All the couples stated that it was a challenge trying to keep a work-family balance. Another challenge that the couples mentioned was, dealing with family-related stress and extended family stress. The couples experienced stress that involved "the street life" (Marks et al., 2008 p. 180). There were some participants who had lost male relatives to street violence. The couples who shared narratives about losing a loved one spoke about how their spouses provided them with strength and helped them get through their loss. The researchers stated that losing a loved one can strengthen the marital bond. Lastly, giving out needed support to family and friends was considered a challenge amongst the couples. The couples said that having a committed spouse helped them get through their challenges and provided them with strength during difficult times. Religion was also considered a strength. All the couples reported having at least some intramarital conflicts. When asked how they overcame their intramarital challenges, they said that they communicate. They talk about things that bother them and issues that arise. The couples referred to God and their faith again as a resource to get through tough times. Having unity and being "equally yoked" in the participants' marriages was mentioned as a contributor to their marital success. Working together and spending meaningful time with one another fueled their unity. The couples said that sharing a religious practice also provided their marriage with strength. This study showed that it is possible to have a

happy and strong African American marriage, even amid challenges, whether they are internal or external (Marks et al., 2008).

Areas of Concern

Phillips, Wilmoth, and Marks (2012) examined several areas of concern in enduring and happy African American marriages. These areas of concern were (a) factors that have strengthened marriage, (b) challenges that have posed threats to marriage, and (c) key areas of disagreement within marriage. There were 71 married African American couples who participated in this study. Their years of marriage ranged from 15 to 60. The couples were mailed a survey packet that contained three questionnaires, one for each partner to complete individually and one for them to complete together. There were three open-ended questions that the couples answered together. The first question asked, “What do the two of you believe is the top reason your marriage has lasted so long?” The top three responses were God/Jesus at 51%, Love at 31%, and Good Communication at 23%. Forgiveness as a reason that they have lasted so long was least likely to be selected at 1%. Question two asked, “What would the two of you describe as the biggest challenge or obstacle that you’ve had to overcome in your marriage?” Issues with Trust/Infidelity (25%), Communication Problems (24%), and Issues Involving the Children (11%) were the top three choices. Sex was considered least likely as a challenge at 4%. The last question asked, “Looking back over the years that you’ve been married, what would the two of you say is the one thing you’ve disagreed about the most?” The top three choices were: Money (24%), Decision Making/Communication (20%), and Children (15%). Only 1% of the couples said that they disagreed the most about Trust. Almost all the

participants stated that they are just as happy or happier in their marriage than other married couples. Of the 71 couples, 77% of them said they spend much of their time together. The researchers believe that this is because many of the couples were retired. Overall, the study showed that all the couples experienced challenges and disagreements; however, they were still able to get through them and sustain long-lasting marriages (Phillips et al., 2012).

Commitment

Chaney (2014a) used phenomenology as her foundation to explore what motivated 30 low-income, Black, cohabiting couples to stay committed to each other. The couples' ages ranged from 18 to 54 years of age, and their years of cohabitation ranged from 1 to 18 years. When the couples were asked "What motivated your partner to commit to you?" nine individuals stated that they did not know. Of the participants, three said that their partner was committed to them because of their looks, and six partners said that it was their ability to provide emotional and tangible support. Of the participants, 14 stated that love and commitment was what motivated their partner to stay with them, and 18 said that it was their personality and the way they treated their partner (Chaney, 2014a).

Chaney (2014b), using the phenomenology method, interviewed 30 cohabiting and 30 married African American couples. She examined how married and cohabiting couples described and experienced closeness and commitment. Married couples were more likely to say that they would miss their partner's personality, and cohabiting couples said they would miss their partner's affections and sex. Married couples were more likely

to state that their commitment strongly impacted whether they would stay together, and cohabiting couples did not see it impacting their decision to stay together. Chaney concluded that despite the varying answers to the questions, married and cohabiting couples do not differ much from each other (Chaney, 2014b).

The Need for Exploratory Qualitative Research on Black Love

There has been a lack of research conducted on Black romantic partnerships. Therefore, negative articles that highlight the dysfunction in Black American cohabiting relationships and marriages seek to find the answer to why marriage rates amongst Black Americans are declining, and how American society is structured to eliminate and breakdown successful Black marriages are prevalent. Articles that speak to the success of Black marriages and how Black Americans' history of resilience has aided in the longevity of these Black marriages are rare. When these rare articles are found, their desire to address a certain question or expectation of their desired outcome is apparent. They asked questions such as how they have endured challenges in their marriage, what challenges have they overcome, and/or what external and internal resources they utilize in tough times. It is uncommon to find a study that aims to merely provide the couple with an opportunity to express and share their experiences with Black love.

Asking Black couples to share their love story, taps into an old African American tradition. Banks-Wallace (2002) stated that storytelling in the African American community is an age-old oral tradition. Storytelling in the African American community was a way to pass on history from generation to generation. These stories were used to heal and nurture. Storytelling is used to uncover and share the lives of those that came

before us (Banks-Wallace, 2002). The act of telling love stories will aid in providing those who aspire to find true love one day with examples of love, instead of them looking to media as a guide, as mentioned above.

Conducting a study that allows couples to share their stories of love will also contribute to the marital literature. It will provide marriage and family therapists with a wider view and understanding of Black marriages and intimate relationships. With more positive images of Black love in literature, those that do not have firsthand experience with Black relationships will develop a positive perspective on Black American marriages and relationships. This will lead them to have a positive view and understanding of what intimate relationships in the Black American community consist of, and not interfere with treatment plans when working with these couples.

Summary

Gradually, there has been an increase in positive literature that highlights the good in Black Americans' romantic partnerships; however, there is still a need for more. Throughout the history of Black marriages, Black Americans have endured many challenges and trials when it comes to being able to identify as husband and wife, or simply life partners without titles. In recent years, America has seen a drop in the Black marriage rate, which has resulted in the oversaturation of research that explores the negatives in their relationships. There is a need for more research that adds to marriage literature by presenting Black couples who identify as being in love and live happily together.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the lived experiences of eight Black couples who identified as being in love. It appears marriage literature on Black Americans consists of many articles that depict the negatives in their relationships. Marriage and family therapists may benefit from having more exposure to research that highlights the positives and how Black couples are able to sustain a long-lasting intimate relationship. Data were collected using face-to-face, audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews and analyzed for recurring patterns and themes. The following chapter will present the methodology of the study, including the theoretical framework, description of the researcher, sampling procedures, protection of the participants, interview procedures, and data analysis procedures.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilized a narrative approach using a phenomenological methodology, an interviewing methodology that seeks to understand the experiences of a group of people that share a unique setting (Moustakas, 1994). The lived experiences of those that participate in phenomenological, provides insight and knowledge about how each of them individually perceives the situation and/or thing at hand, which in this study, is the concept of Black love (Moustakas, 1994).

Researcher as Person

Qualitative research is unique in that it allowed for me to be a part of the study. I essentially became an instrument for data collection and analysis. While I was in the

process of conducting interviews, I attempted to be beneficial by responding immediately, exploring deeper, and interpreting what was verbally being said in the moment. However, being a human instrument also came with potential setbacks. I had biases that could have potentially interfered with my interpretation of the interviews. In the process of identifying my biases, I also needed to speak to how they shaped my understanding of the data that I collected and interpreted.

As mentioned in the introductory section of this thesis, I am a Black female Christian, and I am currently a Marriage & Family Therapy graduate student at Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas. I have always found an interest in why people behave the way they do, and how they process what is going on around them. This has led me to seek a career in social science as a therapist. I grew up in a single-parent home and often was exposed to the arguments between my father and mother. It was not until I reached adult age that I came to personally know a married Black couple that had a nuclear family. Having had a lack of exposure to long-lasting and happy Black couples, I was intrigued by what a successful Black couple looked like. From this curiosity, I decided to conduct a study that would bring to light Black couples who identify as being in love. After reviewing the literature on Black American couples, I noticed that many of the studies leaned more towards their negative aspects. It is my hope that by highlighting Black couples who are in love, my study will aid in providing the therapist with a broader view of Black couples. Having lived my own experiences pertaining to Black love, I have developed unique biases. Therefore, I am aware of these biases and I consciously set them aside and bracketed them while I was conducted the interviews and analyzed the

data for this study. My bracketed consisted of me consulting with my thesis chair about once a week. During that time, we discussed my current stage of data collection and writing, and she provided feedback.

Sampling Procedures

Participants in this study were eight Black couples, who identified as being in love. This was a purposive sample. I ensured that my participants were in a intimate relationship, Black, and identified as being in love. I intended that the participants were diverse in education levels, socioeconomic status, and cultural experiences. The recruitment flyer (see Appendix A) was posted on my social media platforms, placed in the common area of the Woodcock Hall at TWU, shared via mass email to all students in the TWU system, and shared via word-of-mouth to my acquaintances. When utilizing my social media, I posted the flyer on my Facebook and Instagram profiles six times over a 3 month span. The flyer was sent to TWU students once via email. The study used snowball sampling by sharing the flyer (see Appendix A) with my acquaintances, and with the participants so that they could refer couples they thought might meet the criteria for the study. If individual were interested, they either sent a private message via social media, posted a comment on my social media post of the flyer, or sent me an email. For those that commented publicly that they were interested on my social media post, I continued the conversation by sending a private message via the social media platform. Once I made my initial contact either through private messaging or email, I asked that those who were interested to provide me with a good phone number and time for me to call them and provide more information about the study.

Protection of Participants

The first measure to limit potential harm was to ensure that the study was reviewed by the Texas Woman's University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB reviewed and oversaw the study due to it using human samples. In their review process of this study, the IRB reviewed whether the study presented risks or benefits to the participants. They ensured that the method followed in the study was appropriate and obtained consent from the participants. Ultimately, IRB oversaw the study to ensure that the participants were not be harmed or exploited.

Confidentiality is also something I took into consideration to ensure that the participants' identities were protected. This was done by coding each participant with a number instead of their names. Confidentiality was discussed when the participants reviewed and signed the informed consent form (see Appendix B). The consent form allowed the participant to document their understanding of the study, they were aware that they could choose to opt out at any time, and that none of their personal identification would be linked to their responses.

While conducting this qualitative research, there were some instances where I asked the participants to recall or talk about experiences in their lives that may have been a sensitive area. Therefore, it was important that I take the necessary precautions to ensure the protection of the participants. At the end of my interviews, I provide the participants with a list of counseling resources (see Appendix F), in case they felt the need to process the information that they shared with me.

Interview Procedures

Participants in this study were found using a recruitment flyer (see Appendix A) for purposive and snowball sampling. A qualitative approach was used to explore the lived experiences of Black couples who identify as being in love. In this study, Black couples were asked to share narratives about their love; therefore, I conducted semi-structured interviews, using a phenomenological approach.

I first encountered the participants when they showed interest in the study either via a social media messaging platform or email. Then, I requested that the participant provide me with a good time and telephone number to contact them to further explain the study. Once I made initial contact via telephone with both partners present, I then fully explained the study and provided the participants with the opportunity to ask any questions they had (see Appendix C). Once the participants stated that they would like to move forward with the study, an interview time and date that worked for both the partners and I was established. If the couple chose to have a face-to-face interview, a location that accommodates both the couple and I was scheduled. The option to have the interview conducted via telephone was to provide those that either did not have availability to meet face-to-face or did not live in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

For those interviews that were conducted in person, I ensured that I was dressed in business casual attire. Each interview session began with a greeting and a moment of conversation to establish rapport. The participants were then given a consent form (see Appendix B) to read over, as well as a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D) that provided me with information about each participant's education, spirituality, years of

relationship, number of children, occupation, and income. For the interviews that were conducted via telephone, the participants were asked to review, fill out, and sign the consent form and demographic questionnaire and then email it to me prior to the start of the interview. These participants were also provided with the counseling resources via email. During the interviews, I had with me an audio-recorder, pen, and note pad to help with documentation of the interview. Once the paperwork was completed, the participants were asked the following question: What is it like to be a Black couple in love? Throughout the interview, I followed the question with prompts such as “What more would you like to add?”, “Is that how you see it too?”, “How was that experience for you?”, and “What do you think about that?” Prompts like these were used to keep the interview moving and to clarify and expand on their responses (see Appendix E).

The interviews were documented using an audio-recorder. I listened to the recordings of the interviews then transcribed each interview recording from each couple and analyzed it for common themes. In case the participants felt the need to address or process what they recalled during the interview, each couple was provided with a referral list of mental health professionals after the interview (see Appendix F). The interview times ranged between 20 and 60 minutes long. Once the interview was completed, the participants were asked if it was acceptable for me to follow up with them within one to two weeks to see if they would like to add any additional information, this was also documented on the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D). The participants were given a recruitment flyer (see Appendix A) in case they might know of any other couples they would like to refer to the study.

Data Analysis Procedure

The process of analyzing the data started soon after the first interview was transcribed. This was important because, throughout the interview process, I was not certain of what I was going to find or what I would like to further explore. Therefore, analyzing data while conducting interviews was helpful in guiding me through the study.

As I read the first transcript, I took notes, wrote down comments, and made observations in the margins of things that stood out or was relevant to the research question. At this point, I was open to anything that came to my attention; this is considered “open coding.” Once the initial transcript was read and reread, I then repeated the review process for the following transcripts. However, now I also started to compare the data in the transcripts. During this comparison, I was looking for commonalities and themes and began to make a master list of codes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I often compared transcripts and the participants narratives to ensure that the code I was applying to them was accurate. The coding process consisted of me assigning a shorthand phrase to a finding that I would like to retrieve easily in the future. After I finished coding each transcript, I begin to establish the themes. I first, cut out the short narratives that I coded and placed them into piles with other couples’ narratives that had similar topics. Then, I named each pile with a theme. I then reviewed each narrative cutout to confirm it was in a pile that best spoke to what the participant said. I redid this process until I narrowed it down to three main themes. Once I identified recurring themes present through the transcripts, to ensure trustworthiness, the analyst triangulation method was used. This included using a co-coder and frequent discussion about the themes with my

thesis chair to address whether I have encounter blind spots and interpreted accurately. I emailed the co-coder five random interviews for her to review. The co-coder identified eight themes. After I reviewed the themes she presented to me, we had a conversation to compare and contrast our themes. It was concluded that the co-coder had similar themes and reasoning for them as I did, she just used different names and phrases to identify them. I then shared both sets of themes with my thesis chair, and she agreed that they were similar and said that I could utilize the themes I identified: the narrative of Black love, what is Black love, and our healthy Black love. These themes were used in discussing the results of the data.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the lived experiences of eight Black couples who identify as being in love. Data were collected from eight couples who met these criteria. The interviews were guided by one open-ended question and followed by prompts. The audio recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed for common themes. The themes were reported using participants' comments from their love narratives.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of this qualitative study exploring the lived experiences of eight Black couples who identify as being in love. The first section of this chapter presents the description of the couples who participated. The second section will provide the themes that were identified during the interviews when the couples were asked to share their love story.

Researcher as Person

During the interview process, I found myself to be engrossed in the conversations with the participants. There were occasions that I found myself becoming emotional as I listened to the couples share their stories. I could see myself one day in their shoes expressing my love for my partners and discussing our experiences as a couple. I also noticed that, because I was intrigued by the conversations, I had to remind myself to stay in a researcher role. I wanted to ensure that I did not affect the interview or show bias as I engaged with the participants. During the interviews, I found myself taking mental notes as the couples provided advice, so that I could apply them to my own life. Overall, the interview process of my study was enjoyable.

Description of the Sample

The sample consisted of eight couples, each of whom were interviewed conjointly. The participant couples were living in Texas except for one couple who resided in Florida. There were two of the eight couples that participated in face-to-face interviews; the remaining six couples were interviewed via telephone. The participants

ranged in age from 25 to 49, with a mean age of 32.9 years, and a mode of 26 years. Of the eight couples, one couple identified as being in a same-sex relationship. All participants identified as Black and were currently in a romantic partnership.

Of the participants interviewed, 46% were male and 54% were female. The majority of the participants had a college degree, 5 (31%) held an associate degree, 7 (44%) a bachelor's degree, and 3 (19%) a master's degree. One (6%) participant had not completed a college degree but had some college.

The participants varied occupations, such as being a teacher, frack specialist, student, business owner, clinical research recruiter, truck driver, information technology senior project manager, secretary, homemaker, workforce management analyst, QA analyst, and traveling fellow. Table 1 shows the occupations listed by the participants in the study.

Table 1
Occupations and Gender of Participants

	Participant Number	Gender	Occupation
Couple 1	1	F	Teacher
	2	M	Teacher
Couple 2	3	F	Homemaker
	4	M	Frack Specialist
Couple 3	5	F	Secretary
	6	M	Sales Representative
Couple 4	7	F	Business Owner
	8	M	Teacher/ Business Owner
Coupe 5	9	F	Student/ Customer Service Specialist
	10	M	Workforce Management Analyst
Couple 6	11	F	Clinical Research Recruiter
	12	M	QA Analyst
Couple 7	13	F	Doctoral Student/ Traveling Fellow
	14	F	Teacher Assistant
Couple 8	15	F	Information Tech. Sr. Project Manager
	16	M	Truck Driver

Most of the couples interviewed ($n = 5$) were not married (63%) and had been together from 8 months to 6 years; 3 (37%) of the couples were married. Table 2 shows the relationship status of the couples in the study.

Table 2
Relationship Status of the Participants

	Number of years together	Number of years Married
Couple 1	2	-
Couple 2	6	-
Couple 3	5	-
Couple 4	26	20
Coupe 5	4	-
Couple 6	8 Months	-
Couple 7	4	2
Couple 8	27	26

Over half of the participants reported that they had children. Of the couples that participated, 5 (62%) stated that they had children; two of the 5 had more than one child which is shown in Table 3. The participants also were asked to share their spiritual or

religious affiliation if any. There were fourteen of the participants that reported a spiritual or religious affiliation, one couple did not provide an answer.

Table 3
Number of Children

Couple 1	0
Couple 2	0
Couple 3	0
Couple 4	3
Couple 5	1
Couple 6	1
Couple 7	1
Couple 8	2

Findings

Each of the couples in the study were asked the following interview question:

What is it like to be a Black couple in love?

There were three overall recurring themes that were found based on the narratives that the participants shared during the interviews. The three themes are: (1) Changing the narrative of Black love; (2) What is Black love; and (3) Our healthy Black love.

Theme 1: Changing the Narrative of Black Love

Most of the couples indicated that they saw generally negative representations of Black couples' relationships in society, media, and in their communities. While sharing

their insights, many of the participants stated that a change was needed and that the image of Black love needs to accurately reflect what was experienced in the Black community:

You know just being a Black couple in love [pause] and to be quote unquote cliché [pause] because we hear [pause] we always hear about Black love and in itself, right? So that kind of comes to mind [pause] and like she said [pause] you know just the African American community itself is very supportive, especially when it comes to Black love because although there is a [pause] stigma or statistics of [pause] you know the Black family not always being together [pause] There are plenty of Black families that are together and stay together for generations, you know throughout the generation. So that support is always better to try to go against that societal stigma. (Participant #10)

That's right [pause] because you got to seek it out [pause] because people are trying to tell you that it doesn't exist [pause] Black people loving Black people don't exist [pause] that's not true [pause] and that's what society and the media wants to tell you so that we're divided as a people [pause] that's not true [pause] it does exist [pause] it always has existed [pause] and people need to stop feeding into that [pause] and so I have always tried to talk to my children about that [pause] that's something I believe in [pause] it will go away [pause] it will die off if we don't talk to them about it or show them good examples of it [pause] so that's always been a concern for me [pause] and yeah just watching it [pause] just setting back watching social media and things like that [pause] because the picture that your seeing and what their portraying [pause] is not Black love [pause] that's not what you're seeing [pause] their painting us in a whole different light and it's not the best light. (#15)

Many of the participants expressed their belief that there is a lack of positive representation or a misrepresentation of Black couples' relationships in society, in media, and in their communities:

Role models like [pause] a lot of us don't grow up with the [pause] you know [pause] Claire and Cliff Huxtable...you know relationship...we don't necessarily always have that. So, it's like [pause] we're just walking through it with blinders on and trying to figure it out as we go along...but I do feel like it is worth it at the end [pause] so [pause] um [pause] yeah (#3)

I would love to see like more examples of like successful loving Black couples [pause] like not so much in the media [pause] but just out in the world [pause] because we were such a taboo these days. (#5)

I did have grandparents that were married [pause] but culturally they were different [pause] So, their love wasn't considered in love [pause] it was just kind of [pause] they had been married for so long [pause] So, they just kind of stayed together and then my father he was single, so I never really witnessed people actually being in love. (#9)

I wish we could see more Black love [pause] we don't see enough of it... we don't see enough of it because maybe they don't have anyone to identify with [pause] maybe that's the problem [pause] I don't know if it's [pause] you know [pause] we don't [pause] I think we see it more in movies [pause] and maybe we don't see it enough on social media [pause] we don't see it enough in society [pause] or they don't have anyone to identify with in their neighborhoods right [pause] we don't see enough of it [pause] that's my thing.. When you look around [pause] you don't see enough of it and that's what I would like to see [pause] I don't know how we [pause] I don't know how we get back to that. (#15)

I think [pause] I think so [pause] when you start looking at different age ranges [pause] you know, you look at our parents [pause] you know, it's covered [pause] they got it covered [pause] and then you look at people that are our age [pause] I feel like [pause] you know, the scale kind of tips a little bit [pause] it starts to decrease right [pause] and when you get a little younger even more so [pause] I feel that it's starting to die off [pause] I feel like it's getting lost somewhere in all of this [pause] and I don't know how or why [pause] but I don't know what has happened... I don't know if they're getting [pause] their receiving the wrong messages [pause] or their getting [pause] the pictures that they are seeing are the wrong thing [pause] their seeing [pause] you know, bad vibes [pause] or bad pictures of Black love [pause] their seeing [pause] you know, fighting [pause] and you know [pause] division [pause] and I don't know where they're getting it from [pause] I don't know where these messages are coming from [pause] because that's not true. (#15)

Some of the couples discussed how they have seen and heard about the negative aspects of being Black and in love, or even their own past experiences of unsuccessful love and how they want something different for themselves, their families, and for the Black community. So, they are aiming to be the example for others to follow:

Like that one of the reasons why we said [pause] when we get married that we want it to last forever. Because I want everybody in my family to see [pause] you know [pause] (Name) and (Name) have a good marriage [pause] you know so our kids can see how it is to have a marriage. (#4)

We should also teach our children [pause] because like it's almost like [pause]um the next generation is the one that really going to push the narrative that we're trying to push right now [pause] so like [pause] you know [pause] me and (name) being a successful Black couple we could teach our kids and [pause] you know be an example of that [pause] therefore they would want to keep it going and then go from there [pause] and hopefully [pause] you know [pause] create a whole generation [pause] new generation of successful Black couples. (#5)

So, as I grew up I just kind of learned from observing other people's situations [pause] So, the things that I had experienced [pause] I had observed [pause] I didn't want that for myself. So, I try my hardest to not put myself in those situations. (#9)

You have to believe that you can be a Black couple [pause] Black family and love [pause] and be supportive of one another because you have to see eye-to-eye in order for it to work [pause] and everybody has to be willing to want to do their part and everybody has to be willing to want to make things work in order for it to work and just because you know the stigma of the Black family is that they are not together [pause]and they will be a single mom [pause] it doesn't have to be that way. (#9)

That even as same sex couple with two Black women we didn't see that at all [pause] and we were just like [pause] you know [pause] what we will just create what we feel [pause] you know [pause] defines Black love within a same-sex relationship with a woman. (#13)

Theme 2: What is Black Love?

Amid telling their love stories, the couples helped define Black love using words and phrases as followed:

Awesome (#2)

Very authentic [pause] very real [pause] So very loving very [pause] very open and honest [pause] it's a great thing to be Black and in love. (#12)

Amazing [pause] it's exhilarating [pause] it's challenging. (#14)

Beautiful [pause] It's like the purest form of love [pause] I always felt like this was the greatest love besides the love that God gave us. (#13)

When the couples defined Black love, they stated that in order to have true love one must also have a connection with their partner and build their relationships on a foundation of friendship:

Like I can sit here all day and laugh with (name). Like I think it's our foundation is...we really were like friends...we started our relationship as friends...and we built something, and we continue to build something that's going to be strong. (#4)

It's just nice to have that person that you can just vent to, you can explain to, you know you're not going to be judged, she understands me. Because we've been together so long, we can already anticipate certain things, that's what makes this a special relationship. (#8)

We go to different phases of love, being in love those emotions and feelings are real and need to exist, but I think at the end of the day you have to like your partner just as much as you love your partner. Like I really enjoy spending time with her, being around her. Um besides from the being in love, just the genuine liking and the friendship. Those are the most authentic things for me in marriage. (#8)

We understand one another just based on cultural differences... cultural similarities [pause] and situations in our everyday life because he is a Black man and there are issues with that... and I'm a Black woman... So I'm Black and a woman... so there's issues with that... but at the end of the day, we talk to each other... come to each other about anything... he can relate to my situations just being Black and I can relate to him just the same way. (#9)

I think the biggest thing for us is that we are able to be one hundred percent ourselves when we are together. (#11)

But it's like people would say that we look at each other like we are looking at each other for the first time...or like...I always feel like I have known (name) for more than the four years that I've known her in my life...like I feel that in my soul that like somewhere we have...like our bodies... our souls have connected and we're just getting back to...you know...where we have left off. (#13)

As the couples helped shape the narrative of Black love, they also discussed the intersectionality of being Black and in love; they spoke about dealing with typical

relationship challenges in addition to those challenges uniquely associated with being Black and their gender in America:

When we got into an argument, we quit looking at it like it's me against you and we started looking at it as it's us against the problem. (#1)

So, when you're fighting against the statistics...that makes you fight a little harder and it makes you learn and work out things that you normally would just walk away from. (#1)

And I mean that not everything is going to be fine and dandy [pause] they got to see the fights [pause] they got to see us struggle with something that what seeing [pause] you know [pause] what's it all about [pause] it's not all glitter and gold. (#4)

Like especially the Strong Black woman that I was brought up around [pause] like I don't like using the term Strong Black woman because I feel like we're so much more than that [pause] we're also [pause] were just women period [pause] we're meek [pause] we're loving [pause] you know [pause] we're kind [pause] we're nurturing [pause] so whenever I say strong [pause] I mean those things not as far as strength. (#5)

I think that's a big issue for Black women currently [pause] is being vulnerable. Because I think [pause] in our way [pause] similar to Black men [pause] we also have to put on armor when we leave the house [pause] you know there's the wage gap [pause] there are some women that work in professions where they can't wear their natural hair and so Black women are being censored in so many different ways [pause] so we are almost are being harden...so that makes it hard to be vulnerable [pause] you know [pause] when someone is approaching you for a relationship. (#11)

Love is not easy [pause] Black love isn't easy [pause] there isn't anything easy about it [pause] it's always going to be work [pause] challenging [pause] and growing [pause] but you know if that person is the right one [pause] than it's worth it. (#14)

I guess it's almost too good for two Black women to be together because the whole stereotypical Black women being loud and being aggressive and then being hard to love [pause] you know [pause] and they're just like wow [pause] two Black woman together [pause] wow [pause] like what [pause] no we deserve to be loved [pause] we can be loved [pause] we do deserve love. (#13)

Even though it's a struggle [pause] even though it might not be the best of times [pause] it's still [pause] that's all part of love. (#15)

I think what we continue to fight for is to continue to learn one another and your relationship continues to mature and continues to grow [pause] evolve [pause] and it continues to evolve and I think a lot of people don't know that [pause] and they think that [pause] oh [pause] they have been married for 40 years [pause] they don't have to work on it [pause] and they just [pause] nothing has to be done [pause] and that's not true [pause] your relationship continuously evolves because situations arise [pause] and we stick together to handle those situations. (#15)

Theme 3: Our Healthy Black Love

Although the couples helped shape what Black love looks like and feels like in the Black community, they also provided insight on how they have uniquely experienced Black love in their own relationships. One participant said, “a healthy relationship doesn't have to be defined by strict terms [pause] just two people kicking it together and growing [pause] and not participating in toxic activities [pause] and focused on a healthy relationship.” (#14). This couple's commentary provides a description of love that was present amongst the couples.

Throughout the interviews, most of the participants expressed their love and appreciation for their partner. They thanked one another for being present in their lives, ensuring that they will always reciprocate the love, security, and support:

Having someone who pushes you and all of that stuff is cool [pause] and that's what makes us different than other people in love. Because other people in love have a submissive relationship. Or one is dominant, and one is submissive. And me and her can both coexist in dominance. (#2)

She provides me with my structure [pause] she provides my foundation [pause] she provides my support. (#2)

One thing I've noticed is (name) has definitely taught me a lot of patience and persistence and stuff and like he has a way about him that like help me like calm down whenever I am super anxious [pause] and like helped me like see things in a different light. (#5)

But um to be with somebody who completes me, who fulfill things I need fulfill, who helps me um more like don't necessary think I want the help and need the help, who sits through your work and I can count on regardless, without even thinking about it, and someone's just going to be there, and who lets me and puts me first in everything um is just a very um fulfilling, um it's almost euphoric, I mean it just puts me at ease. So, it's like one thing I don't have to worry about. If anything goes wrong in my life, I know that my marriage is a constant. (#7)

Encouragement [pause] there you go [pause] you know always encouraging and always supportive no matter what and just basically, you know wanting the best for me [pause] So it's always good to have that person there and it's kind of, you know, cheering you on [pause] coaching you and you know, just trying to you know, help you with what's best and that gives you that other [pause] that other [pause] It's just kind of like [pause] like a yin-yang type of thing. (#10)

And the way she carries herself as a woman [pause] you know she's strong [pause] very opinionated [pause] you know if I'm not around she can hold her own if I'm not physically there [pause] and you know that's good that she can cuss an MFer out [pause] and you know that what stood out to me about her [pause] she not afraid to be herself [pause] or afraid to prove who she is or where she comes from [pause] or even where she has to go...so with all that she has [pause] when you have something like that [pause] the same drive or even higher [pause] that motivates you to do better [pause] you know and to love her better [pause] and you know she's a precious gem [pause] I would love to say that. (#12)

Almost all of the couples said that communication has been a key challenge in their relationships and how important it was to improve it:

So, learning how to communicate with each other has to be the biggest compromise because you don't feel like you have to change for that person, I don't think people understand this. It's not this person is trying to change me, but you have to grow, and they have to grow for you to work together. (#1)

Um [pause] I would think going to therapy and working on our communication...because that's not necessarily our strength [pause] (#3)

In terms of struggles [pause] it would probably be my communication I guess when it comes to certain things like listening [pause] so she's taught me how to be a better listener, which I feel like my mind is all over the place sometimes but she taught me how to be a better listener when it comes to certain situations [pause] so I don't you know [pause] stray off and give her you know the attention she needs. (#6)

But I think we could have saved a lot of time if I knew how to better communicate things or if I weren't scared to communicate things because of what could possibly happen [pause] So, I would tell my past self to you know, be a little less stubborn and be better at communicating. (#9)

Well, you know one is communication because you know in any kind of relationship whether it's romantic or even friendship the [pause] everybody's different, right [pause] So, you know, you will have different viewpoints [pause] different opinions [pause] So, without communication [pause] like healthy communication [pause] it's never going to work, right. (#10)

I think that what I pulled from their relationship is [pause] I guess to be open and honest [pause] be upfront [pause] I guess try to talk through the issues [pause] communicate [pause] communicate better. (#15)

Some of the couples discussed the importance of balancing different aspects of life such as school, work, and children while still maintaining their relationship:

What else is hard to compromise [pause] let's see. Um [pause] time. Just because I have a really busy schedule [pause] I'm a teacher and a coach. And being a football coach [pause] I'm working at 6 a.m. Until sometimes 10 p.m. [pause] for the extra time that I have I make sure that she showered with love and affection because I don't want her to be to be to think that I'm just working [pause] working [pause] working and all I care about is work and I'm married to my job and I don't want to be married to her that's what I don't want her to think. (#2)

M: Um [pause] I guess work and how my work schedule is. You know I work in the oil field, so I'm gone two weeks out the month and I'm only home for a week. So I guess that can be challenging with her because her love language is quality time and mine is physical touch so it kind of like with both our love language [pause] like my job is like incapable of fulfilling both of our love languages sometimes.

I: So how are you two overcoming that?

W: Um [pause] a lot of phone calls [pause] face time [pause] whenever he has that free time. And whenever he is off...um we pretty much spend every day

together. So [pause] um [pause] yeah [pause] I think that's how it's working so far. (#3 & #4)

It was easy for us because it was intertwined with our relationship, our marriage was intertwined with our family activities, so again I look at my family as a unit, But I also look at my wife as differently. (#8)

Yeah. That's one thing [pause] it's not really a huge deal like where he was upset about it. I work full time and I also go to school so there are certain days of the week that I designated for him to not come over just so that I have that time for myself or even just to have some me time which I am really serious on [pause] and I let him know that from the beginning [pause] because some days I just need some time to myself to decompress or relax. I am actually really grateful that he does not take that personally [pause] and that he [pause] you know he really encourages it sometimes. (#11)

A topic that was readily discussed throughout the interviews was the role that each partner played in the relationship. The couples talked about how they are actively changing the narrative of gender roles by not following societal norms and how men give the okay to show emotions and be vulnerable:

But just the little things [pause] like me coming home and cleaning the whole house [pause] just not make her clean the whole house [pause] you know [pause] me cooking or just little stuff like that. Showing appreciation takes us a long way in both aspects. (#4)

I just want to make sure that we both respected each other's roles and responsibilities as we raise a family together and it was important that some roles were distinct and the some roles could be, you know, interchangeable there things that I could do with her or without her, but I can also do those things and vice versa. (#8)

[My dad] kind of showed me that, you know [pause] you know, we're human just like everybody else [pause] we don't have to be [pause] you know [pause] we're supposed [pause] of course we want to be strong and everything but we don't have to be [pause] you know as stale face [pause] you know [pause] Muscle Man type thing [pause] and I think that [pause] although that is still the quote unquote societal norm [pause] in 2019 is a lot different, you know, men being able to be vulnerable and express themselves is a lot [pause] It's a lot different now, you know, it's not frowned upon or looked at as bad and a lot more men do it whether you see it on, you know, shows or anything versus like, you know, the 50s and

60s where you know [pause] men went to work they don't complain [pause] they don't cry [pause] it is what it is kind of thing [pause] that as a whole has changed over time anyway, but, you know still just want to make sure that [pause] that is expressed and you know shown as well. (#10)

So [pause] I think for [pause] you know [pause] for Black men who will hear this [pause] to never be afraid to get your hands dirty and never be afraid to help [pause] It doesn't make you less than a man [pause] it frustrates me to see dudes on social media that [pause] you know [pause] that showcase sometimes that Black men don't really help out. (#12)

I want to piggyback off of that [pause] because I agree with you, but I think to [pause] um [pause] I think that Black men have unfortunately just kind of evolved into felling that they can't be sensitive or emotional [pause] you know [pause] they don't want to seek help or say that they need help [pause] so I think it is imperative that as a couple [pause] a Black couple that the woman acknowledges oh hey he probably feel like nobody understands him a Black man [pause] and that nobody supports him [pause] or that he doesn't have anybody that he can cry too or express his feelings [pause] because in the world that we live in [pause] everyone else...you know [pause] Black Men and women as well [pause] but as his partner it is kind of my duty to make sure that he understands that I hear and I'm listening and I'm watching [pause] if I notice that his mood changes I want to know what's wrong and that he can tell me anything [pause] if he needs to cry [pause] he can do that [pause] you know if he's upset about anything he can express those frustrations and just wanting him to know that he has that person. (#11)

It's okay for [my son] to cry [pause] it's okay for him to express his emotions [pause] It's okay for him to be Black boy joy [pause] it's okay for him to go through these crazy little phases [pause] like he's normal [pause] he's perfect. (#13)

As the couples ended their interviews, they wanted to provide advice for the next generation of Black couples to ensure that they too will have a healthy relationship that will continue to change the narrative of Black love:

I would say in the terms of relationships, I've used this word quite a few times this evening but let it happen organically. If it has to be forced it's probably not right, it's probably not right for you individually, it's probably not right for you collectively as a couple. You should not, I mean marriages work [pause] I don't want to misconstrue that; I mean marriages can definitely work but you have to work so hard just to make it right then it means it's not right for you guys. There

should be a certain level of easiness around each other. If you see yourself constantly arguing, and fighting and disagreeing maybe that person isn't compatible with you, there's nothing wrong with that person, there's nothing wrong with you, just together you're not right for each other so let the relationship happen naturally, organically. (#8)

You'll understand that, regardless how long you're together, your background, you're going to have to make compromises, that's a daily routine, making compromises. After a while you don't even, I don't look at certain things I have to do as a compromise after a while, it's just part of your marriage. You just understand it's like you go to work, there's part of your job that you may not love but overall you love your job so those daily sacrifices or compromises you have to make, you just understand when you go to work that's just something you have to do. (#8)

Um what I told my girlfriends and some guys that I'd talk too if they were contemplating marriage is a couple of things [pause] one of the things is marriage is hard work when it's right [pause] and that fine because anything worth having is worth working hard for [pause] and if it's not right [pause] it's not worth the hard work you're going to have to go through [pause] so if you know this is probably not a person you should be with [pause] there is something that does not align with you spirit or it's not a good match [pause] don't even waste your time truly [pause] because the longer you stay with them [pause] hoping they will change their mind [pause] you may end up experiencing things together that may bind you together for life [pause] and if you realize that this is someone you should be with at the beginning [pause] you need to evaluate what's going on [pause] either you need to sever ties or really work to make it work [pause] another thing I talk to them about sometimes is [pause] would you rather be right or would you rather be happy? (#7)

Without proper communication [pause] you know, like I said [pause] even amongst any kind of real relationship [pause] whether it's you know [pause] of course we are talking about romantic [pause] but whether is romantic [pause] friends [pause] co-workers [pause] anything without proper communication [pause] nothing will ever Last [pause] so that would be the first thing, you know, you have to learn how to communicate and you know, I don't always have to be verbal, you know, people [pause] there's plenty of ways to communicate [pause] but you have to be able to communicate with them to express yourself in an opportunity to be able to be respectful to what is being communicated to you, you know and be [pause] and be open-minded. (#10)

But you know look for someone that also pushes you to be greater as well kind of thing. (#10)

I would say that [pause] I'm really big on patience [pause] so I would just tell them to have some patience. Somebody will come around or you know, be a friend [pause] I feel like (name) and I [pause] you know in the beginning we were pretty decent [pause] associates [pause] kind of friends [pause] we developed a friendship [pause] So I would say have some patience and you know, try not to rush the situation and just really get to know a person [pause] but that's the only way you'll figure out if you really like them and you'll continue to like them. (#9)

Yeah so [pause] it's things like that [pause] that I would say for you know [pause] Black men [pause] to do things like that [pause] you know just show appreciation to your queen that you adore her. (#12)

I'm trying to think [pause] I would probably have to say [pause] learn to trust and let the previous things go. You know [pause] just [pause] you know this time to not to be afraid. (#6)

It's really in both partnerships stay true to yourself and stay true to others [pause] and know the intentions going in and just don't waste each other's time [pause] you know [pause] so have fun [pause] learn the person [pause] learn what makes them happy [pause] learn what makes them upset [pause] you know [pause] you know [pause] in a relationship [pause] you know [pause] you have to be willing to get in the dirt and fight for it [pause] because every day isn't a bed of roses and everything isn't lights camera action [pause] and don't go to bed mad [pause] don't do that [pause] you know [pause] if something is bothering you go sit on the couch and talk it out first and work on it. It may not be solved that night but there's that starting point of where okay yeah you can finish it off that next day. (#12)

I would say be supportive, especially for Black men [pause] gosh I mean [pause] be proud of your Black queen [pause] and support her because the thing is if nobody is hyping her up [pause] you as a Black man have to hype her up. (#12)

I think it's more like [pause] our past relationships we've been through and they all got us to that we really needed to love ourselves [pause] to [pause] you know first to be okay with being alone [pause] like you don't really need anybody [pause] it's okay to be by yourself... but also to truly be okay with you always see it is not that you are the problem that to just I just do this just to this love yourself [pause] and I always tell myself that the type of person that I want to be with forever [pause] is the type of person that can just love me for who I am [pause] no questions asked. (#13)

I think that you can't control somebody [pause] control isn't love [pause] control isn't respect [pause] you may want somebody to do what you want them to do [pause] but you know, that's not a healthy relationship [pause] so I think control

[pause] don't try to control somebody [pause] you know [pause] with words [pause] with actions [pause] or whatever it might be you got to allow them the freedom and the room to be who they are [pause] because if you don't [pause] if you don't allow them that then it's not going to work. (#8)

You can tell that someone will be a good provider because they are a hard worker [pause] or you can tell that someone cares a lot about their family based on the way they treat their mother [pause] so that's how I knew [pause] hey this is the person for me [pause] because you can't tell that right off the back [pause] you have to learn that person [pause] you have to see them with their family [pause] you have to see them in different situations [pause] and when you see them like that [pause] that's when you know that hey that person is going to make a great father [pause] or that person is going to make a great husband. (#15)

Maybe don't sweat the small stuff [pause] maybe just be more understanding and not so uptight about the little things [pause] because those little things don't even matter [pause] you know [pause] you get upset about something and a year from that you don't even remember [pause] not even a year or so [pause] a week from now you won't even remember [pause] some of those things are so small and insignificant that you waste a lot of time and energy on those things [pause] and it's not relevant [pause] it's not necessary. (#15)

Summary

The major findings of this study were presented in three main themes that emerged from the couples' interviews: Changing the Narrative of Black Love, What is Black Love?, and Our Healthy Black Love. Quotations from the narratives of the couples illustrated the themes.

Most of the couples believed that the current image of Black love displayed in media, society, and our communities was a negative and inaccurate depiction. Many of them agreed that being Black and in love was not all glitter and gold, but that it was worth it. Some of the couples highlighted key elements of their relationship that they had to overcome and/or what has been beneficial in keeping their love for one another strong.

They discussed changing the narrative of Black love and being an example of healthy relationships for future generations of Black love.

CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND
RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of eight Black couples who identified as being in love. A phenomenological qualitative methodology was used to collect and analyze the data of this study. In this chapter, the results of the study are discussed and conclusions are drawn that provide support for the research question. Limitations of the study are presented, and implications of the findings suggested. Recommendations for future research also are made.

Discussion

During the analysis of the data, three main themes emerged that shined light into the lived experiences of Black couples' narratives on Black love.

Theme 1: Changing the Narrative of Black Love

Many of the participants discussed the misrepresentation and the lack of representation of Black love in society, media, and amongst their own communities. They discussed feeling hurt about how Black couples are depicted in society. They also shared their disappointment in having very few examples of Black love in their own families and communities. Some of the participants highlighted the fact that healthy Black love does exist, but that it is just not highly visible. They reported that Black love has been falsely depicted, and that the narrative of Black love needed to be changed and that they were going to be the ones that changed the narrative.

When the participants discussed changing the narrative of Black love, they said that it is now in their hands to make the change. They reported needing to be an example for their children and generations that follow. One participant, a male in his 20s said that he believed that it not too late for grandparents to also help change the image of Black love.

The couples' discussion of lack of a positive representation and the misrepresentation of relationships in media and society and how they negatively impact those who consume the information, was consistent with other researchers. Wanzo (2011), Holmes (2007), Hopkins-Williams (2007) and Segrin and Nabi (2002) all reported that there is a misrepresentation of love in the media. They also discussed how this unrealistic representation of love influences the relationships of those that watched the media images. However, there was one researcher who did not align with the narratives of those in this study. Billingsley (2016) reported that the couples that participated in her study discussed how Black love was depicted as successful in nuclear family relationships in media. The disconnect between Billingsley and other researchers may be due to the year that the research was conducted. As mentioned in my study, there has been an increase in the representation of positive aspect of Black relationships in current literature, which could possibly be influencing media representations as well.

In the Hopkins-Williams (2007) study, they stated that some of their participants felt as though they had to be the exception of Black love, and that their marriages and families would not reflect the negative stereotypes of Black marriages and families. This

aligns with the findings of my study where the participants reported that they want to be the example and show that Black love exists and that it is healthy.

Theme 2: What is Black Love?

In this study, the term “Black love” was used throughout; however, it was never defined in order to allow for the participants to define it for their selves. Billingsley (2016) also provided some insight on what Black love is by using words such as “the norm,” “desirable,” “real,” and even going on to say that it was something that can only be experienced by those in the Black community. This finding aligned with what some of the participants in the study defined Black love to be.

There were some studies mentioned in my literature review that had participants who spoke to the internal and external challenges that Black couples encounter in relationship (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011; Dixon, 2009; Johnson & Loscocco, 2015). Their findings aligned with that of this study when the participants discussed the glitter and gold aspect of relationships. Many of the participants in this study reported that being Black and in love is challenging and is sometimes a struggle, but that it is worth the ups and downs. Billingsley (2016) even discovered a theme amongst the couples that were interviewed in her study called “A Beautiful Struggle.” The couples that were interviewed by Hopkins-Williams (2007) reported that racial and societal challenges have impacted their marriages negatively. This finding aligns with some of the narratives in this study where the participants discuss their appreciation to have someone who understand and can help support each other whenever they encounter the racial challenges in society.

Theme 3: Our Healthy Black Love

In this study, the couples often expressed words of affirmations, appreciation and reiterated their love for their partners, but this form of expression was not specifically discussed in the literature reviewed for this research. However, some of the researchers did mention that love, affection, and supporting their partners were key to their marital success (Billingsley, 2016; Chaney 2014a, 2014b).

The majority of the couples in this study highlighted healthy communication as the most important element when it came to their relationships. They discussed how it has also been the most challenging to learn, but that it was beneficial to improve it in order to ensure that they will continue to be successful. This conversation amongst the couples aligns with those that were interviewed by other researchers. Hopkins-Williams (2007) found that the couples in their study saw communication as a key factor to their strong marriages. In another study, the couples were asked how they overcame intramarital challenges, and they stated that they communicated (Marks et al., 2008). Philips et al. asked couples that had been married between 15–60 years three questions: What do the two of you believe is the top reason your marriage has lasted so long, What would the two of you describe as the biggest challenge or obstacle the you've had to overcome in your marriage, and Looking back over the years that you've been married, what would the two of you say is the one thing you've disagreed about the most. In the couple's responses to all three questions, communication fell in the top three.

As the couples in my study continued to discuss their experiences with being in love and their relationships, some of them shared that they had many other

responsibilities outside the relationships such as work, children, and school. They mentioned balancing their lives and relationships was challenging at first but that they found ways to overcome it. One of the couples talked about how when caring for their children, they still ensure that their marital responsibilities were met. They assured that it was not a challenge and how they are all one family. This narrative aligns with Hopkins-Williams (2007) who reported a finding that children were found to provide marriages with stability. However, Chamber and Kravitz (2011) found that parenting was so stressful that it negatively influenced relationship satisfaction. Marks et al, (2008) reported that all of their couples found it challenging to balance work and family.

Many of the couples discussed the stereotypes of Black women and men, and how they do not apply to them. The stereotypes they discussed aligned with that of other researchers, who highlight flaws of Black men and women and how those flaws influenced the decline of marriage rate in the Black community. Johnson and Loscocco (2015) reported that Black men and women hold gender expectations that do not match up with those of an ideal American marriage. They go on to say that this is due to the roles they took on during enslavement. Black women are thought to be too strong and self-sufficient (Chamber & Kravitz, 2011; Johnson & Loscocco, 2015). These researchers also reported that Black men were weak and unable to express their emotions (Chamber & Kravitz, 2011; Johnson & Loscocco, 2015). Most of the men in my study mentioned that they are able to express their emotions and take on responsibilities that are typically associated with women. They mention that it does not make them less than a man and helps show their appreciation for their partners. It is believed that when Black men or

women and/or their relationships are compared to their White counter parts, they almost always fall short because there are cultural differences (Johnson & Loscocco, 2015).

Broman (2005) also found that the Black couples in their study were thought to be in less satisfying relationship, because they were more willing to discuss negative aspect of their partners. This statement aids in the idea that Black relationship are not necessarily lesser than their White counter parts, but in fact have different beliefs and family dynamics that best suit their experiences and cultural influences.

The advice that the couples provided in this study, did not specifically follow what was discussed in the literature mentioned in chapter two of my paper. However, their narratives is are a representation of the participants wanting to change the narrative of black love. This focus on improving the state of Black relationship and families aligns with Banks-Wallace's (2002) explanation on the importance of storytelling. They reported that storytelling is an age-old tradition in the Black community used to heal and nurture the next generation by sharing the lived experiences of those who came before them

Strengths

While I conducted my study, I was able to identify a few strengths: me identifying as a Black American and being a trained marriage and family therapist, the ability to conduct interviews via telephone, and the participants eagerness to tell their stories. Due to me identifying as a Black American, I believe it provide the participants with a level of familiarity, which helped them freely express themselves. I am also a trained marriage and family therapist, which helped me be able to navigate the interviews and put my

biases to the side. Having the opportunity to conduct some of the interviews via telephone was useful and allowed for me to expand my reach for qualifying participants. The participants were excited and eager to share their love stories, which helped produce solid and valuable narratives from the couples.

Implications

There are a few of implications that can be drawn from this study for the Black community and for family science professionals. One implication is to change the image of Black love; Black communities should highlight and honor those amongst them who are in healthy partnerships. This will help counter the negative narratives in society and media around Black love. Another implication is for Black couples, this study can be used as a framework, along with other positive literature, on how to craft, sustain, and manage a healthy Black romantic partnership. The next implication is for Black women and men, who need to be made aware that it is acceptable not to subscribe to western societal gender norms. Black women need to know that being a Strong Black Woman will not hinder them from getting into romantic partnerships. Black men should know that it is acceptable to be vulnerable, and that it does not make them less of a man.

Lastly, family science professionals and marriage & family therapists, especially those that do not identify as being Black, will be provided with a positive perspective on Black relationships to aid in providing them with a wholistic understanding of Black couples and marriages. They will be able to understand that the dynamics of Black relationships and families differ that of others. Therefore, not all techniques or approaches can be used amongst them interchangeably. Lastly for society, these Black

love narratives will help fortify and shine light on what has been present in the Black community long before the enslavement of African people in America, and that is, love.

Limitations

There were some limitations in this study. The sample size was small, although small samples are acceptable in qualitative research. Therefore, the findings only reflect the Black couples who chose to participate in my study, and not the Black community as a whole. Another limitation was the way data was collected. Due to some of the interviews being conducted in person and some via phone, this likely could have affected how the participants interacted during the interview. The couples were also interviewed together, which also was a limitation, and could have possibly influenced how they responded to certain questions I asked. There were some couples that had been together for 20 or more years, and then there were some couples that had been together only a year or two. This also could have presented a limitation.

Recommendations for Future Research

Although there has been some increase in literature that highlights the positive aspects of Black couples and marriages, more is needed. There is a need for more studies that interview Black couples who identify as being in a healthy relationship, who grew up in single parent homes, to discover how they learned to sustain their relationships. It would also be interesting to compare Black couples from different generations to see how they differ in their relationship experiences. A study that reviews literature around Black couples and families that aims to build a workable framework or model for couples and aspiring couples, could be beneficial when working with Black couples in a family

therapy or counseling setting. Lastly, this study should be replicated with a bigger sample size in order to get a more generalizable finding that speaks to the lived experiences of Black couples that identify as being in love.

Researcher as Person

After the completion of my interviews and analyzing the data, I found myself reflecting back over my experience conducting the study. As a trained marriage and family therapist, I place interpersonal relationship as a high value in my life. I aim to ensure not only my own relationships are healthy, but that of others as well. Therefore, I am filled with joy to be able to interact with couples that are in healthy relationships. As I mentioned at the beginning of the paper, it was not until I became a young adult that I encountered a healthy intimate relationship. So, having had the opportunity to interview and hear the narratives of eight different couples that identified with being in love and in a healthy relationship, it reminded me of my purpose. I was reminded that my role as a research, scholar, and therapist is to continue to shine light on the positives of Black relationships. My purpose is also to be a catalyst for change when it come to the depiction of Black love in media, literature, and the society. From conducting this study, I also learned that Black love is beautiful and that everyone in the Black community should have the opportunity to experience it, even myself.

Conclusions

The researcher asked one question: What is it like to be a Black couple in love?

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions are warranted:

1. There is a lack of representation of healthy Black Love in American society.

2. Black relationships and family dynamics differ from others due to their lived experiences and cultural influences that make them unique.
3. Black love comes in all shapes and forms. It can be challenging, it can be beautiful, it can consist of real love and it is always worth the fight, whether the fight is for acknowledgment and respect in society, positive representation in media, or fought for in romantic partnerships.
4. There should be more platforms for the voices of Black couples to share narratives about their relationships.
5. In order to change the narrative, there need to be discussions around what is good, what needs to change, and how to continue to promote positive narratives of Black love.

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the lived experiences of eight Black couples who identified as being in love. Many of the findings in the study aligned with those of previous researchers. It was concluded that overall, Black love exists, is unique, and can be healthy. Limitations and implications were discussed. A need for many more studies that help promote the positive aspects of Black love is called for.

From this exploration of Black love, I was able to provide these individuals with voices. Some of the participants mentioned that this was the first time they were able to discuss their experiences with being in love with their partners. They said that the interview helped remind them of how much they valued their relationship, and they thanked me for that opportunity. It is my hope that this study will continue to shine light

on positive relationships in the Black community and remind Black individuals that their relationships and voices matter in society, media, literature and their communities.

Lastly, Black love narratives fortify and humanize what has long been present in the Black community, and that is love.

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APPENDIX A

Research Flyer

Black Love

ARE YOU BLACK AND IN LOVE?

If you identify with being a Black American/ African American and are currently in an intimate relationship with a partner who identifies as being a Black American/ African American, and believe that you and you partner are in love, you are invited to participate in a Texas Woman's University thesis research project being conducted by Kandra Jones.

The purpose of the study is to explore the lived experiences of Black couples who identify as being in love.



Would you like to tell your Black Love story?



All interviews will be conducted by me in a place that is convenient for both of us. Interviews will last no more than 1 hour. Interview material will be used in the thesis. Your name and any identifying information will remain confidential.

Participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time. If you would like more information on the study, please contact Kandra Jones at (214) 631-9924. You may also contact my advisor, Linda Brock, Ph.D., at (940) 898-2713 or email her at Lbrock@twu.edu

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

APPENDIX B

Initial Telephone Call Script

Initial Telephone Script

“Hello, this is Kandra Jones. Thank you for responding to my flyer. I am a master’s student in Family Therapy at Texas Woman’s University, and I am doing a study for my program and I’m wanting to explore Black couples in relationships. I have always been interested in what it was like for Black couples who are in love.

Before we begin, I want to make sure that you qualify.

Do you and your partner consider your selves to be Black or African American and currently in love?

[If the Answer is yes] If you and your partner agree to participate in my study, I only have one question to ask you two. What is it like to be a Black couple in love? The interview will last no more than an hour. I will be the only person that will know your names, and I will give you and your partner a participant number to identify you for the study.

“What questions do you have, so far?” (All questions will be answered by the researcher.)

“Would you like your story to be part of the study?” (If the potential participant says yes, a time and place for the interview will be scheduled.)

“Thank you for being willing to participate in my study. I am looking forward to meeting you and your partner and hearing your story. [Will re-state time and place]

[If the answer is no] Well thank you for giving me your time and being interested in my study, if you know another Black couple that is in love and would like to be in my study, please share my contact information with them!

APPENDIX C

Consent Form

TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY (TWU)
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title: The Black Love Narrative: A Qualitative Study

Principal Investigator: Kandra Jones..... Kjones85@twu.edu (214) 631-9924
Faculty Advisor: Linda Brock, PhD.....Lbrock@twu.edu (940) 898-2713

Summary and Key Information about the Study

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Kandra Jones, a student at Texas Woman's University, as a part of her thesis. The purpose of this qualitative research is to explore the lived experiences of 15 Black couples who identify as being in love. You have been invited to participate in this study because you identify as being Black and are currently in love with your Black partner. As a participant, you and your partner will be asked to take part in a face-to-face interview or phone interview regarding your experience of being in love. This interview will be audio-recorded, and I will use a participant number to protect your confidentiality. The total time commitment for this interview will be no more than one hour. The greatest risks of this study include the potential loss of confidentiality and emotional discomfort. We will discuss these risks and the rest of the study procedures in greater detail below.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you are interested in learning more about this study, please review this consent form carefully and take your time deciding whether or not you want to participate. Please feel free to ask the researcher any questions you have about the study at any time.

Description of Procedures

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to spend one hour of your time on the phone or in a face to-face interview with the researcher. If you agree, an additional time of approximately 10 minutes may be needed to verify information after the interview. You and the researcher will decide together on a private location where and when the interview will happen. The researcher will ask you a question about your experience with being in love. The interview will be audio-recorded, and then written down so that the researcher can be accurate when studying what you have said.

Potential Risks

The researcher will ask you a question about your experience with being in love. A possible risk in this study is discomfort with the question you are asked. If you become tired or upset, you may take breaks as needed. You may also stop answering questions at any time and end the interview. If you feel you need to talk to a professional about your discomfort, a list of resources will be provided with your signed consent form.

Another risk in this study is the loss of confidentiality. 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. A participant number, not your real name, will be used during the interview. No one but the researcher will know your real name.

Initials
Page 1 of 2

Approved by the Texas Woman's University Institutional Review Board Approved: June 18, 2019
The audio recording and the transcript of the interview will be stored in a locked cabinet in a locked room. Only the researcher and her advisor, will hear the audio recording. Only the researcher, her advisor, and the co-coder will read the transcript. The audio recording and the transcript will be destroyed four years after the study is finished. The signed consent form will be stored separately from all collected information and will be destroyed three years after the study is closed. The results of the study may be reported in scientific magazines or journals but your name or any other identifying information will not be included. There is a potential risk of loss of confidentiality in all email, downloading, electronic meetings and internet transactions.

The researchers will remove all of your personal or identifiable information (e.g. your name, date of birth, contact information) from the audio recordings and/or any study information. After all identifiable information is removed, your audio recordings and/or any personal information collected for this study may be used for future research or be given to another researcher for future research without additional informed consent.

If you would like to participate in the current study but not allow your de-identified data to be used for future research, please initial here _____.

The researchers will try to prevent any problem that could happen because of this research. You should let the researchers know at once if there is a problem and they will try to help 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 Benefits

Your involvement in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. If you would like to know the summary of the results of this study, we will email you. *

Questions Regarding 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 contact information is 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 TWU Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 940-898-3378 or via e-mail at IRB@twu.edu.

Signature of Participant Date

*If you would like to know the results of this study tell us where you want them to be sent:
Email _____ Address _____

APPENDIX D

Demographic Information

Participant Number: _____

Date of Interview: _____

Demographic Information

Please complete the following information.

1. Current age _____

2. Gender _____

3. Number of years with current partner _____

4. Number of years married to current partner _____

7. Highest level of education completed _____

8. Occupation _____

9. Spiritual/Religious affiliation _____

10. Annual Gross Income per Household

- Under \$20,000
- \$20,000 - \$39,999
- \$40,000 - \$59,999
- \$60,000 - \$89,999
- \$90,000 - \$119,999
- \$120,000 - \$149,999
- \$150,000 and above

11. Number of children _____

12. May I call you within the next week to see if you have questions or if you have additional

information to share?

- Yes Phone number _____
- No

APPENDIX E

Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Participant's Number: Partner 1: _____ Partner 2: _____

Date of Interview: _____

“Thank you for agreeing to be a part of my study.” (Pause) “The purpose of this qualitative research will be to explore the lived experiences of 15 Black couples who identify as being in love. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without penalty. Do you have any questions about the study?”

(Pause)

“You may take as many breaks as you need. I’ll audio-record our conversation to make sure it is accurate.” (Pause)

“Before we begin, I’ll give you the consent form to read and then sign.” “Do you have any questions about the consent form?” (Pause) (Each participant will be given the consent form to read and sign.)

“If you notice, there is a space at the bottom of the consent form that asks for your email address if you’d like a summary of the study results. Please initial on pages 1 and 2, and sign and date on page 3. Here’s a copy for each of you to keep.” (Researcher will give a copy of the signed consent form to the participants and keep one for herself.)

“Here is a form that will ask you to provide some background information, let me know if you have any questions.” (Once they have been completed, the researcher will collect the forms from participants.)

“We’re finished with the background information. We will now move on to the research question. I encourage you to speak freely and openly and to elaborate as much as you are comfortable.”

“I’m turning on the recorder now.” (Recorder now on)

“I only have one question for you two, what is it like to be a Black couple in love?”

(participants will begin to talk about their experiences)

Prompts, as needed:

mm-hmm

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?

What more would you like to add?

Is that how you see it too?

How was that experience for you?

What do you think about that?

“We’re finished with the interview now. If you gave me your phone number, I will be calling in a few days to see if you’d like to add more information. If you have asked for a summary of the results from this study, a copy will be sent to the email address you gave me. Thank you so much for your time and for sharing your wonderful story.

APPENDIX F
Counseling Resources

Counseling Resources

AAMFT Therapist Locator
at www.aamft.org

Counseling and Family Therapy Clinic
Texas Woman's University
418 Texas St., Denton, TX 76201
940- 898-2620

APPENDIX G

Follow-up Telephone Script

Follow-up Telephone Script

“Hello, this is Kandra. How are you doing? I am calling to just follow up with you and your partner about our interview and to ask if you have questions or if you would like to add more information to the interview.” (Participant will be given time to respond.)

(If there are questions, the researcher will respond to them. If there are no questions the researcher will say)

“I would like to thank you again for participating in my study. If you requested a summary of the study results, I would send it to the email you gave me after my study is completed. Thank you so much for your time and for your participation. Have a good day!”

APPENDIX H

Research Questions, Interview Questions, and Themes

Research Questions, Interview Questions, and Themes

<u>Research Question</u>	<u>Interview Question</u>	<u>Themes</u>
What are the lived experiences of Black couples who identify as being in love?	What is it like to be a Black couple in love?	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Changing the Narrative of Black Love2. What is Black Love?3. Our Healthy Black Love