PERCEPTIONS OF COMMITTED MARRIAGES IN AFRICAN AMERICAN

HETEROSEXUAL COUPLES MARRIED 25 YEARS AND LONGER

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MOSHAE MADDOX, B.S., M.S.W.

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DEDICATION

For my son, Cameron Fobbs, thank you for the never ending patience and the mature
understanding you demonstrated through this entire journey.
"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me….Philippians. 4:13"

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those who come behind.

ABSTRACT

MOSHAE MADDOX

PERCEPTIONS OF COMMITTED MARRIAGES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN
HETEROSEXUAL COUPLES MARRIED 25 YEARS AND LONGER

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The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and provide insight into meanings and factors that contribute to healthy committed marriages among African American heterosexual married couples. This study explored the experiences of couples who had been married for 25 years and longer.

This qualitative study was conducted using a phenomenological approach and provided the researcher an opportunity to understand life experiences of each participant. The research objectives were to explore (a) what marriage means to African Americans, (b) what African Americans attribute to the longevity of marriage (c) what family values, core beliefs and attitudes influence African Americans' thoughts of marriage, (c) how African Americans perceive happiness or joy as it relates to long-term marriages, and (e) how the challenges in a marriage help strengthen the relationship. The research questions attempted to determine the perceived factors of African Americans in committed marriage of 25 year and longer.

The study included 10 African American married couples who had been married for 25 years or longer. The majority of the couples for this study had been married between 31 and 45 years (60%). Based on semi-structured interviews, data were collected

by conducting in-depth face-to-face interviews.   The interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and analyzed to determine emerging themes

Ten major themes and 7 sub-themes emerged from this qualitative research study: (a) commitment, (b) lifelong, (c) marital satisfaction, (d) commitment to martial relationship, (e) vows to God, (f) family of origin, (g) spiritual beliefs with God, (h) managing normative and non-normative life events, (i) legacy and (j) family utilization of resources.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The institution of marriage exists throughout most of the world. The reason for this may be the numerous benefits that it offers (Goodwin, 2003; Schor, 2003; Karney & Bradbury, 2005; Dixon, 2009). A substantial body of evidence suggests that marriage brings a wide range of benefits to men, women, and children (Blackman, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colon & Roberts, 2005; Marsh, Darity, Cohen, Casper & Salters, 2007 & Fincham, Ajayi & Beach, 2011). On average, married adults are happier, healthier and wealthier than their unmarried peers (Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Blackman et al., 2005). Both married men and women are noticeably physically and emotionally healthier and are less likely to engage in health risk behaviors such as alcohol or drug abuse, than are unmarried adults. Married men and to a slightly lesser extent, married women live longer. These positive health outcomes reflect that people behave differently when they are married (Blackman et al., 2005; Karney & Bradbury, 2005).

Being in families and couple relationships also increases the number of people and social institutions with which an individual has contact; this in turn, increases sources of social support and increases the probability that the family will be a successful one. Blackman (2005) further states marriage is also good for the economy. Couples having adequate economic resources reduce strain and can serve as a buffer against tenuous

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economic environments (Goodwin, 2003). Married individuals earn and save more

money and are more likely to be homeowners (Barmlett & Mosher, 2001; Schor, 2003;

Blackman et al., 2005). The economic consequences of divorce can be severe for

women. Most often, children remain with the mother and the loss of the ex-husband's

income often results in a severe loss of income per capita (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001).

Despite many of the benefits, the family institution continues to be a subject of

intense and controversial public concern in the African American community. This

interest is generated, in part, by the lack of consensus on what its form and function

should be. With the case of minority groups, the controversy is heightened by the

depiction in literature and long debate by scholars on how their family lifestyle relate to

the larger society (Staples, 1980). Throughout the history of African Americans in the

United States, the circumstances and consequences of their unique arrival and subsequent

treatment during slavery profoundly influenced every aspect of their lives including

marriage. The conditions under which they were forced to live have exerted an ongoing

and unrelenting disruption of their efforts to build cohesive families with stable marriages

(Pinderhughes, 2002).

Social theorists have argued that slavery resulted in disorganization and instability

in African American families (Ruggles, 1994). Historians Frazier (1939) and Elkins

(1968) conducted some of the most groundbreaking research on Black families. Frazier

& Elkins (1968) used plantation records and slave-owners testimony to reach the

conclusion that the family was destroyed under slavery and the culture of slaves was

decimated. Several historians came afterwards to challenge these theories and demonstrate that African American family did exist within slave quarters as functioning institutions (Blassinggame, 1972; Staples & Mirande, 1980). To further counteract the original research, Fogel and Engerman (1974) used quantitative methods to document that slave-owners did not separate a majority of slave families but rather tried to keep them together because it was more practical for the slave family to be kept intact (Staples & Mirande, 1980).

As a result, very diverse life styles developed over time (McAdoo, 1988). Despite great odds, proof of solidarity of the African American family is evident (Coner-Edwards & Edwards, 1988; Littlejohn-Blake, 1993). The family is one of the strongest and most important traditions in the African American community (Franklin & Schweninger, 1997). Having proved themselves, African American families have demonstrated family pride, self-esteem and generally a strong "have" rather than a "have-not" mentality. The strong African American families have consistently demonstrated that they have what it takes to get what they need. This translates into empowerment and strong sense of self (Littlejohn-Blake, 1993).

The impact of slavery has played a vital role in the African American marriages. Frazier (1966), Franklin (1967), and Patterson (1998), three early historians and sociologists, contend that slavery was the preliminary factor which led to marriages being sabotaged (Pinderhughes, 2002). Law forbade slaves to marry in some states. Furthermore, any emotional bonds that slaves sought to create were substantially

undermined by the prevailing beliefs and social structures that reified the inferiority of African Americans (Pinderhughes, 2002).

Many examples of slaves running away in search of members of their family have been documented. The attachment was real, and the warmth of their relationships persisted, despite the separation (Franklin & Schweninger, 1997). When the Civil War ended and slaves were free, many made the reunions of their scattered families their first order of business. Freed men searched frantically for family members through the Freedmen's Bureau. Some were successful while others were not. Some discovered their mates had remarried, having given up hope on a reunion (Billingsley, 1974; Franklin & Schweninger 1997). Given that the suggestion and consent of their owners was the reason many slaves had married, they sought at the end of the war to make their marriages legal and their children legitimate. In 1866, for example, 9,542 former slaves from 17 North Carolina counties entered their names in the marriage records and took the next step of participating in formal secular or religions marriage ceremonies (Franklin & Schweninger, 1997).

Despite the legacy of slavery and post-war instability, African American couples were tenacious and resilient enough to be able to marry and maintain their relationships (Pinderhughes, 2002). The spirits of family and community bonds brought over from Africa were maintained during this period despite efforts to remove all vestiges of family life and African culture (Billingsley, 1974). The family has remained one of the strongest elements within the African American life. The African American family has managed

to hold together despite the efforts that have worked against the integrity of the family (McAdoo, 1988). African Americans have survived and it's due mainly to the family unit and the resilience of the family and to the spirit of family that exists. African Americans have also survived because of the ability to see reality for what it is and the capability of bouncing back to live another day. It has enabled many to survive and make contributions to the society (Billingsley, 1974).

Statement of the Problem

Americans now marry later, are less likely to stay married, are less likely to marry after divorce, and are more likely to live alone with non-relatives than in previous times (Zollar & Williams, 1987; Bramlett & Mosher, 2001; Marsh et al., 2007). Consequently, there is an overall decline in marriage. The rates for marital dissolution are high for all ethnic groups (Goodwin, 2003). The Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the National Vital Statistics Systems looked at the trends in marriage and divorce in the United States from 2000 through 2010. In 2000, there were 2,315,000 marriages as opposed to the 2,096,000 marriages in 2010 (CDC, 2012). The second half of the twentieth century saw a proportion of people's lives spent in marriage decline due to the postponement of marriage to later years, greater incidence of never marrying, and higher divorce rates. The increase in nonmarital cohabiting has also contributed to the decline of people's lives spent in marriage (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001).

Research from the CDC, the United States Census Bureau and the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) examined marriages over a span of time. It concluded

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men and women aged 15-44 years have yielded a continued decrease in the percentage currently married for the first time as compared with earlier years. In 1982, 44% of women studied were married as compared to 36.4% in 2006-2010. Of men in the study, in 2002, 35% as opposed to 32.8% of men in 2006-2010 were married (Copen, Daniels, Vespa & Mosher, 2012). Another trend as previously mentioned was the age in which men and women first married. The probabilities of first marriage by age 20, 25, 30 and 35 were lower in 2006-2010 than in previous NSFG years (Copen et al., 2012). A June 2010 Current Population survey indicated that the median age at first marriage for women is 26.1 and 28.2 for men (Elliott, Krivickas, Brault, & Kreider, 2012).

The trends we see in marriages and divorce rates in the American family formation are pervasive, though consistent with developments in many other Western nations; however, in a number of areas, African Americans change have been more substantial (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1997; Goodwin, 2003; Cherlin, 2009). This makes African Americans marriages less normative and more fragile (Goowdin, 2003). Rodgers and Thornton (1995) studied marriage patterns by sex and race in 1985. They saw the beginning of the trends that are prevalent and consistent with the trends of today. Using historical data through the early 1980s, they wrote of the increased propensity among all men and women to delay marriage and the greater decline in first marriage probabilities among blacks relative to whites (Tucker & Taylor, 1989; Elliott et al., 2012). The long-established pre-1950 pattern of African Americans marrying earlier than

Whites has been replaced by an increasingly divergent pattern of African Americans marrying later than whites (Cherlin, 1992; Tucker & Taylor, 1989).

Research revealed that African Americans are the least likely to marry, when they marry, they do so later, spend less time married than White Americans and are the least likely to stay married (McAdoo,1988; Bramlett & Mosher, 2001; Dixon, 2009). The rate of separation and divorce between 1965 and 1979, for example, implied that 47% of African American married women would separate from their husbands within ten years of marriage, compared to 28% of non-Hispanic Whites and 26% of Mexican Americans (Sweet & Bumpass, 1989; Furstenberg, 1994; Cherlin, 1998).

The rate of marriage for African Americans is lower in comparison to White Americans and had declined in the past few decades (McAdoo, 2007; Dixon, 2009). Several have argued that having a steady job and a good income are important factors in determining whether someone gets married (Nauert, 2011; Besharov & West, 2001). Because some African Americans and those with less education face disadvantages in the labor market, they might tend to hold off on marrying, thereby increasing the gaps in the marriage rates (Nauert, 2011). The rate is decreasing so noticeably that marriage has been referred to a minority life style for African Americans (McAdoo, 2007; Dixon, 2009).

Two major divides persist in academic research on the decline of African American marriages. They include structural as well as economic factors (Williams & Stockton, 1973, Hill, 1998; Hummer & Hamilton, 2010; Elliott et al., 2012). Among the structural factors is an imbalanced sex ratio among African Americans. There are fewer

eligible males than eligible female (Staples, 1980; Zollar & Williams, 1987). Another

structural implication referred to the majority of African American births are born to

single women and more than half of the households headed by black women are poor

(Staples, 1985; Zollar & Williams, 1987; McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi & Wilson, 2000).

Racism as a structural factor continues to be a major societal force that impedes the

advancement of African American families. There is still much disagreement about

whether racism has been declining or increasing. Many public opinion polls show a

decline in prejudicial attitudes among individuals (McConahay, Hardee & Batts, 1981).

If this is accurate, you can still find discriminatory actions amongst institutions. The

proponents of the declining significance of racism focus mainly on individual prejudice

and fail to assess the impact of institutional racism (Hill, 1998).

Experiences of diversity, particularly financial strain, predict decreased

relationship quality (Conger et al., 1990; Conger, Rueter & Elder, 1999; Bryant, 2010).

Economic inequality in both yearly income and wealth accumulation increased quite

substantially between 1975 and 2000 as the United States economy became more

technologically, informationally and financially oriented. With this shift, particularly the

accompanying loss of unionized manufacturing jobs, employment that offered wages

adequate to supporting a family now depended on postsecondary education (Hummer &

Hamilton, 2010). Unemployment and underemployment, the public assistance complex,

the educational system, and the health care system all produced economic alienation in

the African American families (Staples, 1985). Economic constraints may be detrimental for some African American families (Bryant, 2010).

While both structural and economic factors persist among the African American community, many United States men and women as a whole continue to regard marriage as an important goal (Bryant, 2010; Hummer & Hamilton, 2010). African Americans also value marriage and it is a goal for them as well. Although factors of structural and economic strain persist, these factors must be navigated to form stable relationships (Dixon, 2009). Since marriage increases the quality of life, it is a preferred status for many (McAdoo, 1988). In 1988, 77% of African Americans and 83.3% of White singe adults aged 19-35 said in a national survey that they wished to get married (South, 1993; Blackman et al., 2005).

Despite the precipitous decline in the marriage rates for African Americans, there are still a large numbers of African Americans who desire marriage. Many African American men and women are married at least once (McAdoo, 1988). The single most important finding of a study by Blackman, et al. (2005) revealed that marriage matters. Marriage typically and substantially improves the well-being of African American men, women and children (Blackman, et al. 2005). Researchers on family have sought on occasion, to distinguish happy, satisfying marriage from an unsatisfactory one. Much of the work has relied on self-reports and interview methods (Kaslow & Robinson, 1996; Fincham, 1991). Although less is known about how and why the marriage premium on adult well-being differs between African Americans and Whites, public policies as well

as civil society initiatives aimed at strengthening marriage in African Americans could, if successful, significantly increase the well-being of African Americans adults, children and communities (Blackman et al., 2005). The positive social changes generated by such policies and initiatives could also contribute to reducing the U.S. racial inequality and improving American society as a whole (Blackman et al., 2005).

Statement of the Purpose

African American marital stability has garnered relatively little empirical scrutiny (Allen & Olson, 2001). There is little known about the factors that contribute to relationship satisfaction and long-term stability among African American couples (Cutrona, Russell, Bruzette, Bryant, & Wesner, 2011). The more African Americans identify with and live by constructive cultural values and strengths, the better prepared they will be to support healthy marriages (Malone-Colon, 2007).

The purpose of this research was to provide insight and convey meaning and understanding into the factors that contribute to healthy long marriages among African American couples. The researcher explored how satisfied couples leverage their relationship strengths to relationship challenges. The study aimed to explore the perception and lived experiences of African American male and female couples who have been married for long periods of time. This research investigated the perceived everyday lives of married couples from a strength-based perspective. The researcher interviewed married African American heterosexual couples who had been married for 25 years and longer. This approach allowed participants to respond in a personal and meaningful

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matter with regards to their lived experiences and contributed to the literature on African American marriages.

Research Questions

1) What does marriage mean to you?

2) What do African Americans attribute to the longevity of a marriage?

3) What family values, core beliefs and attitudes influence African Americans thoughts of marriage?

4) How do African Americans perceive happiness or joy as it relates to long-term marriages?

5) How do challenges in a marriage of 25 years and longer help strengthen or weaken the relationship?

Assumptions

A review of the literature on African American marriages provided evidence for the following assumptions.

1. African American families and marriages are complex phenomena that have overcome many obstacles.

2. The participants in the study will be open and honest.

3. The participants are in a long-term marriage and do not want to dissolve the marriage.

4. The resilience of African Americans from a historical perspective will demonstrate the strength in many enduring African American marriages.

Theoretical Orientation

The theoretical orientation provides researchers with a set of ideas and assumptions. We need frameworks and methods through which to understand difference and commonalities in couples and families across the United States and around the world. To analyze the enormity of data, we need linkages to framework (Bengston, Acock, Allen, Dilworth-Anderson & Klein, 2005).

The theoretical orientation of this study was Family Life Course Theory with a Phenomenological Approach. The life-course perspective emphasizes transitions and trajectories. People make transitions from being unmarried to being married, being divorced then later remarried and or widowed. Lives are linked across generations and through bonds such as marriage, although the meanings of those linkages change over time and are historically specific. From the life-course perspective, an individual is viewed as following, over the course of his or life, a life trajectory (Elder, 1983). Each person's life trajectory is marked by a sequence of life events or transitions and is made up of intertwined bundle of decisions about family and work (Holland, 2009).

Phenomenological research identifies the essence of human experiences concerning a phenomenon, as described by participants in a study. This type of research helps in understanding the "lived" experiences, usually involves a small number of subjects and aims to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Creswell, 2003; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology takes the phenomenon of consciousness, and, in its

most comprehensive sense, it refers to the totality of lived experiences that belong to a single person (Giorgi, 1997).

A systems paradigm may be as effective in viewing the African American community as well. All people or groups of people in a system share a reciprocal influence on one another. Causes are considered to be circular rather than linear (Daly, Jennings, Beckett & Leashore, 1995; Hanson, 1995). Systems theories possess structure, consisting of predictable patterns of behaviors and boundaries. Along with a degree of structure, which lends them predictability, the complexity of systems lends them the opposite quality. Because everything affects everything else in a circular, reciprocal fashion, it can be observed that different interventions can have similar effects (Rothery, 2001, p. 69). This method links family members to the demands and resources of external subsystems in the African American community and in the wider society (Hill, 1998). When families begin to see in terms of wholes rather than parts, patterns appear and they can begin seeing things differently (Hanson, 1995).

Delimitation

Delimitation describes the limits of the research process (Creswell, 2003). African Americans experience well-functioning marriages yet little research exists. This research was restricted to only African Americans who were born in the United States and who had been married for at least 25 years. This study did not include other racial groups.

Definition of Terms

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

Family is generally considered to be a group of individuals related to each other by ancestry or marriage and living together in the same household. When referring to African American families, however, there are many facets. They are also a group of people of African heritage related to each other by blood or marriage and who live together or who have lived together in the same household. There is a concept of belonging to the same closely related unit. People who have very strong bonds of kinship are included in the African American family (Billingsley, 1974).

African American or Black- according to United States Office of Management and Budget (OMB) refers to a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (U.S. Census, 2010). Black and African American were used interchangeably in this study.

Commitment – Commitment has been recognized as a critical factor in the development and stability of personal relationships (Adams & Jones, 1997; Weigel, Bennett & Ballard-Reisch, 2003). It is one's desire to remain indefinitely in a relationship (Rusbult, 1983; Weigel, Bennett & Ballard-Reisch, 2003).

Healthy Marriage – The National Healthy Marriage Act Initiative (NHMI) defines a healthy relationship as one that is mutually enriching and one in which there is mutual respect between spouses.

Longevity of Marriage - While most researchers agree that a long-term marriage is one that has endured considerable length of the time, the exact number of years vary across studies (Field, & Weishaus, 1984; Fenell, 1993; Bachand & Caron, 2001). As lifespan increases, some researchers have lengthened the requirements for years a couple must be married. Many researchers include couples married between 25-49 years as "long-term marriages" (Bachand & Caron, 2001).

Marriage – According to the United States Code (USC7), marriage means only a legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife, and the word spouse refers only to a person of the opposite sex who is husband or a wife.

Marital satisfaction – Is viewed as subjective satisfaction with the marriage as a whole as well as with the perceived quality of specific aspects of the marriage (Gray-Little, 1982).

Religiosity and spirituality are distinct but confluent domains of human life. The similarities between religion and spirituality have inspired active debate about the meaning of the terms and about the extent to which they name the same or different experiences (Mattis, 2000; Mattis & Jagers, 2001). In this paper, religion is defined as a shared system of beliefs, mythology and rituals associated with a God. Religiosity, by extension, is an individual's degree of adherence to the beliefs, doctrines and practices of a religion (Mattis, 2000).

Spirituality derives from the Latin word spiritus, which means "the breath of life."

It refers to an acknowledgement of a non-material force that permeates all affairs of

human and non-human (Jagers & Smith, 1996; Mattis, 2000; Mattis & Jagers, 2001).

Summary

In the last half of the twentieth century, African American families have

responded to major developments including a society-wide shift in values. These

changes have been particularly damaging to African Americans. The society-wide shift

was the weakening of the institution of marriage (Chaplin, 1996). Research, however,

reveals that marriage increases the quality of life and is still a preferred status for many

African Americans males and females (McAdoo, 1988).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions and provide insight into the meanings and factors that contribute to healthy long marriages among African American heterosexual couples. It looked to determine how satisfied couples leverage their relationship strengths to relationship challenges. It will also aim to explore the perception and lived experiences of African American male and female couples who have been married for long periods of time.

Information will be provided to demonstrate insight and understanding into the factors that contribute to healthy long-term marriages within the African American community. The literature review addressed (a) The African American Family, (b) African American Kinship, (c) Marriage in the African American Community, (d) Healthy Marriages, (e) Enduring African American Marriages and, (f) Religious and Cultural Influence in African American Families and Marriages from the life course perspective. Life course could be thought of as a path, but certainly not a straight path. It is a path with both continuities and twists and turns (Hutchinson, 2010). Life course looks at cohorts, transitions, trajectories, life events as well as turning points (Hutchinson).

The African American Family

As an institution, the family continues to be a subject of intense and controversial public concern. In the case of minority groups, the controversy is heightened by the depiction in the literature and an ongoing debate over how their family lifestyles relate to the larger society (Staples & Mirande, 1980). The family has remained one of the strongest elements within Black life. The family has managed to hold together despite all of the efforts that have worked against the integrity of the family. From the earliest time that African Americans were on this continent until the present, the majority of families were composed of parents living with their children (McAdoo, 1988). The family is a strong and functional institution in the African American community. As Hill (1971) identifies *in The Strength of Black Families*, African American families are sustained by five major sources of strength including, strong achievement orientation, strong work orientation, flexible family roles, strong kinship bonds and strong religious orientation (1971).

The discourse surrounding African American families during the past thirty years has primarily consisted of reaction to the Moynihan Report (1965), which presented evidence supporting the contention that the African American family was falling apart (Dickson, 1993). When this report was issued, a husband and wife headed more than three-fourths of all African American families with children. Within the next 20 years, only half of all such families included parents of both sexes. One of the most significant changes in the African American family has been the proliferate growth of female-headed

household. The most visible reason for the dramatic increase has been a corresponding

increase in out-of wedlock births (Staples, 1985). Non marital births accounts for 39.7%

of all United States births in 2007, up from 18.4% in 1980. These current percentages are

highest among African Americans, American Indians and Hispanics (Hummer &

Hamilton, 2010). In 2006, the share of births to unmarried mothers ranged from 75%

among African American non-Hispanic women to 13% among white women (Hummer &

Hamilton, 2010). Because children from racial and ethnic minority groups are much

more likely than white children to be born to unmarried parents, family structure is a key

mechanism through which racial and ethnic inequality persists across generations

(Hummer & Hamilton, 2010; Taylor, Cohn, Livingston, Wang & Dockterman, 2010).

Despite these inequalities and the strains on contemporary families, strengths remain

evident and the majority of African Americans are part of family units (Billingsley &

Caldwell, 1991).

African American Kinship

The extended family is perhaps the most enduring cultural strength that has

enhanced the functioning of African American families since their days in West Africa.

Strong kinship bonds also helped thousands of African American children and adults to

survive 250 years of slavery (McAdoo, 1988; Hill, 1998; Stewart, 2007).

Billingsley offers the following definition of the extended family or kinship network,

> …an intimate association of persons of African descent who are related to one
> another by a variety of means, including blood, marriage, formal adoption,
> informal adoption, or by appropriation; sustained by a history of common
> residence in Americans; and deeply embedded in a network of social structures
> both internal and external to itself (Billingsley, 1992, p. 28).

This definition is important because it not only defines this type of family; it also operationalizes the family in terms of what many African Americans families have done over time, thus demonstrating the concept of strength (McAdoo. 1988; Bell-Tolliver & Wilkerson, 2011).

As our society ages, multigenerational families will be more common, resulting in longer years of shared lives across generations (Bengston, & Roberts, 1991; Bengtson, 2001 & Waites, 2009). African Americans are more likely to reside in extended family households than are whites (McAdoo, 1988; Stewart, 2007; Bell-Tolliver & Wilkerson, 2011). These arrangements are recognized to have important economic benefits and are viewed as an effective mechanism for pooling resources (Taylor, Chatters, Tucker & Lewis, 1990).

The members are interdependent and may share the responsibilities of childrearing and household funding across or among nuclear family units (Stewart, 2007). The practice of "doubling up" in extended households has an important bearing

on economic welfare in comparison to direct cash exchange (Taylor et al., 1990).

African American families remain interconnected and involved with each other over time

(King et al., 2006). Once strong kinship or fictive kin were established, they were

difficult to break. Most who claimed enduring relationships identifies betrayal and the

loss of trust as the primary mechanism that could destroy the bond (Stewart, 2007). These

families have a legacy of resiliency, spirituality and hope that has served to fortify,

support and preserve vulnerable African American families. Effective strategies to help

families as they contend with issues are rooted in African American cultural strengths.

Cultural values and practices that sustain families in the past can be used to empower

families today (Waites, 2009).

Marriage in the African American Community

African Americans are the least likely to marry, when they marry, they do so later

and spend less time married than White Americans, and they are the least likely to stay

married (Tucker & Taylor, 1989; Dixon, 2009). There has been a steady decline in

marriages over the last several decades. Goldstein and Kenney (2001) looked at whether

Americans were retreating from marriage altogether or postponing their marriages to

older ages. They researched cohorts born in the 1960s and early 1970s. With the

disparity in marriage rates between blacks and whites, the researchers found evidence

that a new pattern is emerging in which marriage will be more common for women with

college degrees than those without. This may become the new source of socioeconomic

inequality. Findings from this study suggested that women's economic independence is

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becoming associated with higher not lower rates of marriage (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001).

Women's median age at first marriage has risen close to 4 years in the last 30 years (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001; U.S. Census, 2010). Shifts in marriage patterns indicate an older age in marriage is not leading to women "buying out" of marriage outright (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001). Dobson and Houseknecht, (1998) found that the age of first marriage increases with higher levels of education for both African American and White American women. However, at lower levels of education, African American women tend to marry later than White American women, but between the associates and bachelor's degree, they marry about the same age (Dixon, 2009).

In an article written by Nadelson and Notman (1981), it is noted that it is now more socially acceptable for women not to marry. For women whose expectations to marry are not realized, they believe that a change in self-concept is necessary for their successful adaptation. Women who wanted to have children must deal with their disappointment at being unable to do so. Others must deal with a degree of social isolation or ostracism. However, of these same women, many reported having greater freedom and autonomy, along with more opportunities for solitude and self-reflection than their married counterparts (Emery & White, 2006).

Although marriages have decreased in the African American community; theories on marriage have risen to explain why people marry and the timing of these events. Marriage is viewed as a social institution and entering into marriage is seen as a social

norm. Marriage is also seen as a rational choice made by an individual for whom the benefits of married life outweigh that of the single life (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001). The institutional theories emphasize that marriage is a structure of norms, values, laws and a wide range of social pressures (Goldstein & Kenney; Blackman et al., 2005). As a social institution, marriage confers to men and women a set of norms that provide them with new meaning, order their lives together, and signal to the outside world that their status in life has changed (Blackman et al., 2005). Married women and especially men may engage less in risky behavior and overspending after they marry, insofar as marriage is associated with settling down and acting responsibly. These changes, in turn, may help change spending habits and encourage homeownership, which would explain research findings linking marriage to higher levels of household equity among African Americans (Barmlett & Mosher, 2001; Schor, 2003; Blackman, et al., 2005).

How do African American marriages survive given the odds? Some researchers are beginning to identify protective factors that support marriage and enhance marital satisfaction (Pinderhughes, 2002). Orbuch and his colleagues (1998) suggested how wives successfully managed their husbands' sensitivity to power threats. In stable marriages, African American and White women were supportive in different ways. White wives were cooperative, offering an over compliance, while African Americans were collaborative and there was a meshing of ways during interaction. African American men placed a great value on the strength of their partner knowing that it usually takes two active partners for family survival (Orbuch, Veroff & Hunter, 1998).

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Gender Roles in African American Marriages

The work and family interface has become increasingly important in this changing society. Current trends suggest that more women and minorities are entering the workforce whether they are a part of dual earner households or single-parent households (Evans & Bartolome, 1984).

It is important to understand the cultural prescription or role expectation which marriage partners bring with them into their marriage. The empirical literature on African American male and female role relationships presents a more integrated view of expressive and instrumental role functions than generally characteristic of their white counterparts (Orbuch & Custer, 1995; Bryant & Beckett, 1997; Sayer & Fine, 2010). A traditional role of men in Western societies has been that of provider, with men being expected to secure primary economic support for their families and be the family leader (Staples, 1985; Taylor, Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1999). There have been indications, however, that a majority of African American males cannot implement these roles (Staples & Mirande, 1980; Staples, 1985). In the case of women, those roles have been defined traditionally as the carrying out of domestic functions such as cooking and cleaning; giving birth to children and socializing them; providing sexual gratification, companionship and emotional support to their husbands (Staples & Mirande, 1980; Staples, 1985; Taylor, Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1999). Society charges women with the major responsibility for the family and the enactment of familial roles may conflict with work roles (Broman, 1991). There has been an emphasis on the need for African-

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Americans families to continue more egalitarian patterns as a way of coping with poverty, racism and discrimination. These structural features of daily existence may have important implications for work-family roles among African Americans (Broman, 1991).

In one study, greater levels of egalitarianism in the division of household labor among African American couples are maintained when the analysis controls for wife's employment status (Ross, 1987; Taylor et al., 1990). Despite their movement into paid work and widespread normative acceptance of shared marital roles, married women continue to do much more housework compared with married men. They are also more likely to feel overworked than African American men (Taylor et al., 1980; Broman, 1988; Sayer & Fine, 2010).

Two hundred and sixty-four African American and White couples in their third year of marriage were examined to determine the impact of women's work on the well-being of husbands (Orbuch & Custer, 1995). Orbuch and Custer (1995) argued that social context variables, which influence the meaning given to women's work, are the key to understanding the relationship between women's work and the well-being of husband. The results indicated that social context is embedded differently for African American husbands and White husbands. When women define their work as an important aspect of their lives, the impact of women's work on the well-being of the husband depends on the ethnicity/race of the couple. For African American husbands, the effect of having a career wife is associated with less depressions, but greater anxiety, if husbands participate in household labor and have children. The overall meaning of woman's work can depend

on couples cultural background as well as the type of work the woman performs (Orbuch & Custer, 1995).

Married African American adults do better than their divorced, widowed, separated and never married peers. African Americans who are married earn more money and attain higher levels of occupational prestige than their unmarried peers (Keith & Herring, 1991; Williams et al., 2000; Mincy & Pouncy, 2003; Blackman et al., 2005). Marriage also appears to protect against economic trouble for African Americans. Specifically, married African Americans are significantly less likely to suffer from material hardship or poverty and more importantly, they secure an important part of the American dream (Blackman et al., 2005; Karney, 2007).

Healthy Marriages

The cultural attitudes toward marriage continue to change. As recent as 2000, findings show that marriage is food for people mentally, physically and economically (Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Blackman et al., 2005). Healthy marriage initiatives are now appearing in several states. In the late 1990s, the common wisdom was couples who had conflictual, unhappy marriages should separate and divorce, now we know that many unhappy and conflicted couples will later report being happily married—if they stay together (Karney, 2010).

In 1997, most clinicians and researchers assumed that happy marriages were built on exchanging positive interactions and unhappy marriages occurred because such positive reciprocity did not exist. Now, research shows that the key is how couples

handle negativity (Karney, 2007). Happy marriages break their negative exchange quicker. Positive exchanges suggest mutual support and affection, but they are not the mechanism that produces marital happiness. They are the signs that mechanisms are working. Partners who feel valued and who value their mate are less likely to lash back when their spouse says something negative. The emotional valuing of the partner seems to be the mechanism (Neff & Karney, 2005; Karney 2007: Karney, 2010).

The thoughts on emotional valuing have intensified and are shifting since earlier research on marriage (Worthington et al., 2005). Culturally, the emotional bond in the marriage is being weakened. This is evident in forms of increasing cohabitation, and shifting views away from marriage as a lifetime commitment. Yet, in the last seven years of research on marital processes, it is suggested that is it not simple positive interaction but a strong emotional bond that holds marriage together. That positive bond tends to override many negative events (Worthington et al., 2005).

Understanding how marital satisfaction changes require understanding how thoughts and opinions about a marriage and a spouse are structured (Karney, 2010). Researchers have often sought to determine which factors distinguish a happy, satisfying marriage from an unsatisfactory one (Kaslow & Robinson, 1996; McCabe, 2006; Marks et al., 2008). Much of the work has relied on self-reports and interview methods of couples in their early years of marriage (Kaslow & Robinson, 1996). One underlying assumption was the couples who have spent more than 25 years together probably share a cluster of characteristics and attributes that have enabled them to sustain the relationships

through the stresses and problems that inevitably arise during the course of life (Kaslow & Robinson, 1996).

Although we sometimes focus on divorce as developmental issues, it is important to remember that more marriages succeed than fail (Craig & Dunn, 2007). According to Lauer, Lauer & Kerr (1990), most middle-aged men and women report different reasons for remaining married, however, both list, "My spouse is my best friend" as a primary reason. They also list the top seven reasons men and women reported being married for 15 years or more: They are (a) my spouse is best friend, (b) I like my spouse as a person, (c) marriage is a long-term commitment, (d) marriage is sacred € we agree on aims and goals, (f) my spouse has grown more interesting and (g) I want the relationship to succeed (Lauer, Lauer & Kerr, 1990).

Factors related to marital satisfaction have varied substantially depending upon the focus of the researchers conducting the studies (McCabe, 2006). Some have focused primarily on the characteristics of the individuals involved in the relationship (personality, attributions), while others have focuses on the dynamics of the relationships (e.g. communication, sex). Still others have considered the broader context of the relationship (e.g. role of the children) (McCabe, 2006). The developmental course of marital adjustment largely involves increasing levels of satisfaction in late adulthood (Gilford & Bengston, 1979; Henry, Berg, Smith & Florsheim, 2007). Older marriages appear to involve less potential for conflict, greater potential for pleasure and more

affectionate behavior during conflict discussions (Levenson, Cartensen & Gottman 1993; Cartensen, Gotman & Levenson, 1995; Cartensen et al., 1995; Henry et al., 2007).

Fenell (1993) derived, from a study of 147 married couples in first marriages with over 20 years of duration, eight characteristics with the greatest frequency. They were (a) lifetime commitment to marriage, (b) respect for one's spouse as a best friend, including marital self-disclosure (c) loyalty to spouse and the expectation of reciprocity, (d) strong shared moral values, € commitment to sexual fidelity, (f) desire to be a good parent, (g) faith in God and spiritual commitment and (h) companionship with spouse, including spending a great deal of enjoyable time together over the course of a lifetime (1993).

While investigating differences in age cohorts, marital researchers have focused primary on global levels of marital satisfaction rather than on separate positive and negative relationship characteristics that might compose such global measures (Steinberg & Steinberg, 1987; Henry et al., 2007; Gorehoff, John & Helson, 2008). Many studies of age differences in marital satisfaction have suggested that spouses experiences a high level of satisfaction during the first years of marriage, decrease in marriage when children are born and another increase in their older years (Anderson, Russell & Schumm, 1983; Henry et al., 2007).

Reflecting on the importance of this social institution, research on marriage and marital relationships enjoys a long and rich history in the areas of family studies and family demography (Cherlin, 2000). However, beyond the demographic information gleaned from Census reports, relatively little is known about marriage, marital

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relationships, marital satisfaction and stability among African Americans (Cutrona et al., 2003; Bryant et al., 2008; Cutrona et al., 2011). In a decade review of research on African American families, McLoyd (2000) and colleagues concluded that current evidence, although limited, does not support fundamental differences in the predictors of marital satisfaction and stability for African Americans versus European American couples. There were a few distinctive characteristics of African American marriages, which include egalitarianism, involvement with extended family and mutual self-disclosure (McLoyd et al., 2000; Cutrona et al., 2003).

Enduring African American Marriages

Over the course of African American's history in the United States, African American families have endured the experience of slavery; existed under the Jim Crow laws, experienced political and social disenfranchisement, geographic migration and urbanization and chronic economic and hardship. They have repeatedly, with the support of Black families and their support networks, overcome various threats to their existence and well-being (Taylor, Chatters & Jackson, 1997). Connor and White (2006) noted that scholars typically view African American families from a "deficit perspective" which emphasizes problems and pathology. In actually, African Americans experience well-functioning marriages, however, little research exists on marital happiness and satisfaction (Lassiter, 1998; Marks et al., 2008).

In an attempt to fill the research gap, Marks et al., (2008) employed a qualitative method to examine strengths of happy, enduring African American marriages. They

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sought to examine how couples build strong, happy, enduing marriages in the face of

challenges and barriers by examining 30 African American couples. The broad core

revealed four key themes, which included, (a) challenges in African American marriages,

(b) overcoming external challenges to marriages, (c) resolving intra-marital conflict and

(d) unity and the importance of being equally yoked. Many narratives from involving

family and fictive kin, death in families, dealing with financial strains to having to deal

with personality differences, and overcome conflict within the marriage were revealed.

In many aspects, the ability to overcome challenges defines strong marriages. Many

African American women and men who desire marriage are faced with the experienced

reality that marriage, especially a strong, happy enduring one, can be problematic. It is a

testament to the strength of the marital pull that many African Americans still value and

desire to wed (Jarrett, 1994; Chaney, 2006; Marks et al., 2008).

Religious, Spiritual and Cultural Influence in African American Families

The church contributes to cohesion in the African American community by acting

as an agency of moral guidance, a conservator of political leadership and the center of

community life (Pew, 2009). This is a primary strength of African American families

(Ellison, 1997; Pew, 2009; Bell-Tolliver & Wilkerson, 2011). The potential benefits of

religion and spirituality form an important coping mechanism for negotiating life's

stresses (Brody, Stoneman, Flor & McCrary, 1994). It is what has buffered things such

as economic deprivation, structural racism and oppression. Spirituality has been an

important part of the African American experience, and its corporate manifestation

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through religion provides on the few institutions some African American couples have access to and trust (McAdoo, 1991; Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Fincham et al., 2011).

Although many African Americans have been raised with and have internalized a sense of spirituality, all are not members of organized religions or churches however; spirituality is deeply embedded in the African American psyche (Littlejohn-Blake, Darling & Anderson, 1993). Historically, the church, the family and the school are the three most critical institutions whose interactions have been responsible for the viability of the African American community (Roberts, 1980). The strengths of these three institutions are due in large measure to their function as expressions of the most basic values of the African American cultural heritage. These include spirituality, high achievement aspirations and commitment to family as enduring, flexible and adaptive functional mechanisms for survival (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991).

Compared with other racial and ethnic groups, African Americans are among the most likely to report a formal religious affiliation; 87% of African Americans described themselves as belonging to one religious group or another (The Pew, 2009). The analysis finds that nearly eight in ten African Americans (79%) say religion is very important in their lives, compared with 56% among all United States adults. In data from previous studies, African Americans were just as likely to consider themselves religious, 71% attended church at least once a month and nearly 70% were members of a church (Billingsley,1998). The African American church continues to hold the allegiance of

large numbers of African Americans and exerts great influence over their behavior (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991).

Religion has both direct and indirect association with marital quality. The direct relations include increased social support of norms and values of marriage and relationship-enhancing behaviors, while indirect effect included fostering increased psychological well-being, temperance and sexual fidelity (Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008). Several studies have examined the role of religiosity and spirituality in the lives of African Americans married couples (Beach et al., 2011; Bell-Tolliver & Wilkerson, 2011;). While efforts to strengthen marriage attract widespread attention, identification of barriers to disseminate and ways to overcome these barriers are timely. These efforts are particularly important for African American couples who are undeserved by typical means of health-related program delivery and may perceive family bases services to be culturally irrelevant (Beach et al., 2011).

Why is the church so important for married couples? Religious institutions play a central role in family and marital life. The concept of religiosity has emerged as an important mechanism for understanding marital stability, yet little is known about whether religiosity is linked to marital stability over time (Brown, Orbuch & Bauermeister, 2008). Religious communities typically promote generic norms and relationship specific norms (e.g. forgiveness) that help define appropriate marital and relationship conduct, encourage partners to fulfill their familial roles and responsibilities,

and handle conflict in a constructive manner (Fincham, Hall & Beach, 2006; Ellison, Burdette & Wilcox, 2010).

Family-centered social networks found in religious communities offer formal and informal support to couples and families. These could include social, educational, medical and economic needs of communities (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991; Mattis & Jagers, 2001; Ellison, Burdette & Wilcox, 2010). Community involvement through the church is widely described as integral in reducing health disparities (Plescia, Herrick & Chavis, 2008). The church also remains a very dynamic and formidable force for change in the political society. There is a continued recognition by those in politics of the strong historical platform of the African American pulpit (Slayton, 2012).

Brown, Orbuch and Bauermeister (2008) examined the links between religiosity and marital stability over the first seven years of marriage for a sample of 199 urban African American couples and 174 White American couples who participated in a longitudinal study. Overall, the findings indicated that religiosity was predictive of marital stability over time but only when assessed by organizational religious participation (service attendance) and only as reported by wives. The more frequently African American and White American wives attended religious services, the less likely that couple was to divorce over time.

Fincham, Ajayi and Beach (2011) also explored the relationship between spiritual experiences of African American partners and their marital quality with 487 African American married and engaged couples. Marital satisfaction was investigated with a

uni-dimensional tool, the Quality of Marriage Index while spirituality was measured with the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale and religious participation was measured by assessing the degree of participation in church-related activities. Husband religiosity was particularly important here in that it related not only to own but also wife satisfaction. Spirituality, however, was related to both own and partner satisfaction for both husband and wife data. The relationships documented for spirituality could not be accounted for by religiosity, and vice versa. Therefore, spirituality and religiosity operated independently despite some conceptual overlay and their perceived co-variation in the general population (Fincham, Ajayi & Beach, 2011).

Religion and spirituality within a therapeutic setting can be beneficial for African Americans. A group of researchers (Beach et al., 2008) offered a framework that allows for integration of prayer into marital interventions (educational and therapeutic), and argued that when culturally appropriate, prayer can serve multiple functions in interventions that are consistent with traditional goals of skill-based approaches. This approach could be effective because the integration of spiritual practices is common within these groups.

Overall, there is a crucial role of religious faith for minority couples, both historically and currently (Marks & Chaney, 2006; Ellison, Burdette & Wilcox, 2010). Ellison, Burdette and Wilcox (2010) reported that couples in which partners share core religious beliefs and values tended to report greater satisfaction than others. Within the African American community, religious institutions and spiritual values are used to

promote this sense of connectedness, and to shape individuals' understanding of their moral obligation to the community and to society at large.

Summary

Marriage remains an important part of the American family system, even if its dominance has diminished (Cherlin, 2005). Marriage is a life transition which is a signification occurrence with life-lasting effects (Hutchinson, 2010). The changes involved in transitions are discrete and bounded. When they happen, an old phase of life ends and a new phase of life begins (Hutchinson, 2010).

African American family patterns were influenced by the institution of slavery, in which marriages were not legal and perhaps by African cultural traditions, in which extended families had more influence and power compared to married couples (Pinderhughes, 2002; Cherlin, 2005). Despite the many challenges African Americans have faced since their arrival, the family is still a very strong and functional institution (Hill, 1971; Pinderhughes, 2002). Literature revealed marriage amongst African Americans is clearly linked to positive economic, psychological and social outcomes (Blackman et al., 2005). On virtually every indicator of economic well-being, married African Americans adults do better than their divorced, widowed, separated and never-married peers. African Americans are significantly less likely to suffer from material hardship. They are also more likely to secure an important part of the American dream (Krivo & Kaufman, 2004; Blackman et al., 2005).

Many studies have found that married African Americans report more happiness, life satisfaction and fewer emotional problems than their unmarried peers (Ellison, 1990; Zollar & Williams, 1987; Broman, 1988 & Blackman et al., 2005). Socially, African American marriages offer clear benefits in civic involvement, virtue, crime and family relations (Blackman et al., 2005). African Americans who are married are significantly more likely to report that they reject illegal and unethical behavior and they are more likely to attend religious services (Swaidan et al., 2003; Blackman et al., 2005). Overall, socially considered, marriage promotes satisfaction with family life (Blackman et al., 2005; Karney, 2010). Marriage confers to men and women a set of norms that provide them with new meaning, order their lives together, and signal to the outside world that their status in life has changed. Marriage typically provides individuals with important social, structural and psychological resources. For these reasons, marriage matters to African Americans adults (Blackman et al., 2005).

Since there are limited studies based on the positive perceptions of African Americans being married and remaining married, existing literature was reviewed and research was conducted to include in the discussion and further the understanding of this phenomenon.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter focused on the research design. It included information on the

research strategy, the sampling method, the researcher's role and the participation of

human participants involved in this study. Furthermore, it included the instrument design,

procedures, data analysis, and trustworthiness.

The purpose of this study was to explore the subjective meaning of a successful

healthy marriage with African Americans husbands and wives who have been married for

twenty-five years and longer. This study allowed for married couples to select critical

experiences from their lives, which they believe, affected the longevity of their marriage.

A qualitative methodology along with phenomenological research strategies provided the

researcher an opportunity to understand the lived experiences of each participant.

Research Design

A qualitative study combined with phenomenological research strategies was

employed. Phenomenological research identifies the essence of human experiences

concerning a phenomenon, as described by participants in a study. This type of research

helps in understanding the "lived" experiences, usually involves a small number of

subjects and aims to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Moustakas, 1994;

Creswell, 2003). Lived experience gathers hermeneutic significance as we reflectively

gather them by giving memory to them through mediations, conversations, daydreams, inspirations and other interpretative acts we use to assign meaning to the phenomena of lived life (Van Manen, 1990).

Qualitative research implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, among, intensity or frequency. Qualitative stresses the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Qualitative research is effective in uncovering patterns of social change in a whole society and even in examining relationships among societies (Babbie, 2013). Lofland and Lofland (1995) suggest six different ways of looking for patterns. The questions you might ask yourself to make sense of the data include frequencies, magnitudes, structures, processes, causes and consequences.

To understand the participants' perspectives, insights and meaning related to their beliefs on the longevity of their marriages, face to face interviews with open-ended questions were conducted individually. An interview protocol was utilized to ensure all participants were asked the same standard questions and also to develop a pattern of consistent sequencing of questions for aide in the natural flow storytelling. Each interview was audiotaped and the recordings were transcribed. Additional notes were taken to capture observations and the researcher's thoughts and feelings during the interview.

The population of the study included 10 African American couples who reported committed and satisfied marriages and who had been married for 25 years and longer. In order to be included in the study, participants had to (a) be African American and born in the United States, (b) must have been married to another African American of the opposite sex for 25 years or longer and (c) both husband and wife had to be willing to participate in individual interviews.

Population and Sampling Procedure

This study obtained data through individual interviews. A purposive sampling approach was taken in addition to snowballing. In purposive sampling, the researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to lean or understand the phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). Snowballing sampling is often used when members of a special population are difficult to locate. In snowball sampling, the researcher collects data on the few members of the target population then asks those individuals to provide the information needed to locate other member of that population who they happen to know. Snowballing refers to the process of accumulation as each located subject suggests other subjects (Babbie, 2013). After purposely selecting couples who the researcher knew had been married 25 years and longer and met other qualifications, the researcher then employed those participants to pass out recruitment flyers (Appendix A) to people they knew. Furthermore, the researcher solicited participants by dropping off flyers at a local dance studio, several churches and other specialty stores within the African American

community. Flyers were also left with friends and colleagues for distribution within the community.

Protection of Human Subjects

This study was conducted in accordance with the requirements of Texas Woman's University Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix C). Prior to conducting the study, approval was obtained by the IRB and the Texas Woman's Graduate School (Appendix D). Participants' rights were protected by discussing with them the purpose of the study and the methodology for data usage. The researcher also provided the participants with a detailed account of the risks involved such as loss of confidentiality, loss of time, physical and emotional distress and fatigue and included ways to minimize each risk. Participants were assured however of their confidentially to the extend allowed by law and asked to sign an informed consent form found in Appendix B. Participants were left with a copy of the consent form as well as a list of local counseling resources found in Appendix E.

Confidentially of each participant was protected by the assignment of alpha-numeric codes. Participant's names appeared only on the signed consent forms which remained locked until the competition of the study. At that time, the consent forms were turned in to the IRB at Texas Woman's University. No other identifying information appeared only any other documents including transcripts and demographic surveys. All forms of electronic correspondence with potential participants were erased from the researcher's electronic mail system account. The audio recordings containing the

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transcribed text will be erased and destroyed five years after the competition of the study.

Additionally, hard copies of the transcriptions, demographic survey and the researcher's

field notes will be shredded five years after the completion of the study. One additional

peer reviewer reviewed the written transcripts during the analysis stage but did not have

access to any hard copies or the participants' identifiable information.

Instrument Design

A researcher generated interview protocol was used for this study. This included

semi-structured interview questions, additional follow-up questions and possible prompts.

The instrument used was the Perception of Committed Marriages Questionnaire found in

Appendix G. The semi-structured interviews, is a conversation, the art of asking

questions and listening. This method allows for situated understandings grounded in

specific interactional episodes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Each participant was able to

share their experiences, thoughts and feelings freely with each question.

The individual interview protocol consisted of 22 semi-structured, open ended

questions designed to extract responses that relate to the research questions. The

following research questions were addressed:

I.   What does marriage mean?

II.   What do African Americans attribute to the longevity of a marriage?

III.   What family values, core beliefs and attitudes influence African Americans

        thoughts of marriage?

IV.   How do African Americans perceive happiness or joy as it relates to long-term

marriages?

V.   How do challenges in a marriage of 25 years and longer help strengthen or

weaken the relationship?

Demographic Information Form

Participants completed a demographic survey (Appendix F) created by the

researcher to gather additional data. The questions included participants' gender, age,

age at time of marriage, marital history, number of siblings, level of education, number of

children, and income status. The demographic information helped the researcher to

maintain eligibility for the study and to determine the sampling distribution.

Procedures

Flyers were distributed to potential participants. This flyer included a description

of the study, its purpose, criteria for participation and contact information for both the

researcher and the researcher's advisor. Some participants called the researcher; others

were contacted based on their initial inquiry. The researcher conducted interviews with

participants after he/she met the criteria to be included in the study. A date and time was

scheduled for each interview. Each interview was audio-taped. Most interviews were

done in the homes of the participants. Two interviews were done at the workplace of one

of the married couples. Each interview lasted between 35 and 60 minutes. The researcher

used the rapport established during the arrangement time to accomplish strong, rich the

in-depth interviews. The participants were mostly from friends or family members who

had either gone through the interview or knew someone fitting the criteria. The

researcher made the participants feel a sense of security and emphasized the harmless

nature of the questions to ease and establish relaxed atmosphere. Before starting any

questions, the participants were assured of confidentiality, asked to sign the consent

forms and the audio recorder was turned on. The researcher read the question and then

paraphrased them to make the process seem unscripted and the interaction more like a

conversation. At the conclusion of the interviews, the researcher thanked the participants

for their cooperation in the research and asked if they had concerns or any questions

about the study. Table 1 list the research questions and related interview questions that

were used for this study.

Table 1

Research Questions and Related Interview Questions

Research Questions	Corresponding Interview Questions
What does marriage mean to you?	How would you describe your marriage? What does commitment mean to you? • When did you realize you were committed to this relationship?
What do African Americans attribute to the longevity of marriage?	Why do you believe your marriage has lasted as long as it has? • Was there a time when you thought your marriage was going to end, but it didn't? What held it together?
What family values, core beliefs and attitudes influence African Americans' thoughts of marriage?	Would you consider your parent's marriage a strong marriage? • What expectations of marriage did =you draw from your parents?

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	• Describe the role generational influences had in your marriage. What are some important values, beliefs and traditions developed from your marriage?
How do African Americans perceive happiness or joy as it relates to long-term marriage?	How has happiness/joy looked over the past 25 years in your marriage? What do you think is the greatest source of strength in your marriage? • What experiences have given you the greatest pleasure during marriage?

How do challenges in a marriage of 25 years or longer help strengthen or weaken the relationship?	In what capacity have your children influenced or guided your marriage?
	
	What has been the biggest challenge you've faced in your marriage?
	    • How did you solve this challenge?
	    • Did you seek outside help?
	
	What did you learn about your marriage from this challenge?
	
	Throughout the 25 plus year of marriage, how have you maintained autonomy while recognizing the importance of oneness?

Data Analysis

Analyzing the data consisted of examining the spreadsheet to address the research questions. Qualitative data begins with coding the data, dividing the text in to small units, and assigning a label to each unit (Creswell & Clark, 2007). Qualitative data

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analysis has proven fruitful in the examination of small-scale, face-to-face interactions. It is equally effective in uncovering patters of social change in a whole society and even in examining relationships among societies (Babbie, 2013). Analysis is a continuous process that requires continual reflection and questioning of the date in an effort to understand and interpret meaning (Creswell, 2003).

For the description in this study, the researcher analyzed the interview for transcription. The transcripts were reviewed to several times to capture the essence of the interviews in their original form and to gain an overall impression of the data. The information was identified and coded using Microsoft Excel. Excel is a spreadsheet software program which allows for the storage of large volumes. The information was coded using significant comments and phrases used by the participants. Patterns begin to emerge from the different categories. Additional data emerged and subcategories were also derived.

Role of the Researcher

Qualitative research is interpretative research which typically involves the researcher enmeshed in a sustained and intensive experience with the participant (Creswell, 2003). The role of the researcher necessitates the identification of personal values, assumptions and biases at the outset of the study (Creswell & Clark, 2007). The researcher has a background in education, school counseling and social work. The researcher has been a high school counselor for ten years. Students in the public education system often come from broken homes. If some of the problems students face

at home are addressed, they might be more inclined to perform better in school. As a school counselor, the researcher has worked with students from strong healthy families as well as those from more challenging home environments. Strong healthy marriages with both a mother and father present can help alleviate some of these issues. It is through this lens of lived experiences that the researcher viewed participants' responses.

For this research, all attempts of reflexivity were exercised in order to recognize and understand the lived experiences of each participant and proceed without preconceived ideas of the outcome. The researcher kept a journal and noted the atmosphere and the couple's dynamics. On several occasions, once an interview had started, the participant's spouse passed through the room which led the researcher and both the husband and wife to share a laugh. All occasions of interviewing the participants were very friendly, warm and inviting. There was never a feeling of anxiousness; however, when asking particular questions, there may have been some hesitation due to the previous response. As the researcher, there were many "aha moments." Some of the participants' responses were so deep, rich and honest; it led the researcher to reflect back on personal relationships. The researcher understood her perspective and sought to separate her experiences to allow the individuals to associate with their own experiences.

Trustworthiness

Validity is seen as strength of qualitative research. It is used to suggest whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the research, the participant, or the reader

of account (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Creswell, 2003). According to Creswell (2003),

there are eight primary strategies including (a) triangulation, (b) member-checking to

determine the accuracy, (c) Use rich, thick description to convey the findings, (d) clarify

the bias the researcher may have, € present negative or discrepant information that

counters the themes, (f) spend prolonged time in the field, (g) use peer debriefing to

enhance the accuracy and (h) use an external auditor. Creswell suggest identifying one or

more strategies to check the accuracy of findings (2003)

In this study, multiple strategies were used to ensure the trustworthiness.

Triangulation is the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals, types of

data or methods of data collect in descriptions and themes in qualitative research

(Creswell, 2012). The researcher used an external auditor. An external auditor is usually

not involved in the research and examines both the process and product of the study

(Creswell, 2012). The external auditor read the interview questions prior to the study.

In addition, both researcher's field notes and interviews were used as well as audio-taping

each interview. Field notes captured all phases of the interview including those taken

prior to the interview as well as observations taken before, during and immediately after

the interview. The researcher examined each information source and found evidence to

support themes as suggested by Creswell (2012). This method ensures accuracy because

it is not drawn from a single source, individual or process of data collection (Creswell,

2012).

Member checking was done with one participant. Member checking is the process where the researcher asks one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of the account (Creswell, 2012). The research sought out one participant and played back the audio as well as showed the transcript from the interview. The participant agreed with the researcher's account of their interview. Peer debriefing was conducted on several occasions with both the major chair of the research as well as with the additional reader. All the strategies were taken to help minimize any errors and increase the accuracy of the research. This provided rigor to the study and also helped to strengthen the analysis for themes.

Summary

This chapter discussed the methodology used for this research study including the research design, the population and sample, the researcher's role, protection of human participants, instrument design, procedures for collecting data, and data analysis. It employed both a qualitative and phenomenological approach to provide the researcher an opportunity to understand the participants' individual lived experiences. The researcher maintained the confidentiality of the participants. In-depth interviews were conducted, audio-taped and transcribed. Data were analyzed and themes identified. The prime role of the researcher was to ensure the accuracy of the findings.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore insight and convey meaning and understanding into the factors that contribute to healthy long marriages among African American married couples. A qualitative method combined with a phenomenological research strategy employing retrospective, in-depth interviews was used by the researcher to gather descriptive data. This chapter reports the findings obtained in the research study including the description of the participants, the process of analyses and present emergent themes.

Sample Demographics

A purposive sampling approach was taken in addition to snowballing. In purposive sampling, the researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to lean or understand the phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). Snowballing sampling is often used when members of a special population are difficult to locate. In snowball sampling, the researcher collects data on the few members of the target population then asks those individuals to provide the information needed to locate other member of that population who they happen to know. Snowballing refers to the process of accumulation as each located subject suggests other subjects (Babbie, 2013).

Table 2 presents demographic information specific to the participants and includes gender, ethnicity, age, education and level of income. All participants were

African American males and females born in the United States. The majority of the

couples (80%) currently lived in the Dallas/Ft. Worth metropolitan area (n=8), followed

by the remaining 20% living in Louisiana (n=2). Males represented 50% of the sample

(n=10) and 50% were females (n=10). The ages of the participants ranged from 52 to 87

with the mean age 65. The highest educational level obtained by 40% of participants

(n=8) was a Master's degree, followed by 25% with Bachelor's (n=5), 20% with

trade/vocational or some college (n=4), 10% completed high school or a GED (n=2) and

5% with under a high school diploma (n=1). Participant's annual income was also

reported. At the time of this study, 55% of participants income was $75,001 and or

higher (n-11) followed by 20% with income ranging from $50,000 to $75,000 (n=4),

10% with income from $30,000 to $49,999 (n=2), 10% making less than $15,000 (n=2)

and 5% making $15,000 to $29,999 (n=1).

Table 2

Demographics –General Characteristics

Variable	Number N=20	Percent %
Gender		
Male	10	50
Female	10	50
Ethnicity	20	100
African American		
Age		
50-55	4	20
56-60	4	20
61-65	3	15
66-70	4	20
71-75	1	05
76-80	2	10
81-85	1	05
86-90	1	05
Highest Level of Education		
1-8th Grade	1	05
High School Graduate GED	2	10
Trade/Vocational/Some College	4	20
Bachelor's Degree	5	25
Master's Degree	8	40
Annual Income		
Less than $15,000	2	10
$15,000 to $29,000	1	05
$30,000 to $49,999	2	10
$50,000 to $75,000	4	20
$75,001 +	11	55

Table 3 provides demographic information for the participants and family

characteristics and includes marital history, number of years currently married, age at

marriage, and number of children. All participants of the study (100%) assured they were

married (n=20). Of all the participants, only 5% had been previously married (n=1), the remaining 95% were in their first marriage (n=19). The total number of years couples had been married the longest for this study was between 31-45 years. This included 60% of the participants (n-6), followed by 20% married between 51-55 years (n=2) and 10% married 25-30 years (n=1) and another 10% married between 61 and 65 years (n=1). The age of participants at marriage ranged from 17 to 29 years of age. Between both men and women, most were between the ages of 21-25 when first married, 90% of men (n=9) and 70% of women (n=7). More women were younger when first married than men. Thirty percent of women participants married at the age of 20 and younger (n=3) compared to no men marrying at that age. Number of children for couples ranged from 0-5, with the majority, 50% having 3 children (n=5), followed by 20% having four or more children (n=2), 10% having 1 child (n=1), and 10% having 2 children (n=1). One couple had no children.

Table 3

Demographics – Family Characteristics

Variable	Number	Percent %
Marital History	N=20	
First Marriage	19	95
Second Marriage or More	1	5
Number of Years Currently Married	n=10	
25-30 Years	1	10
31-45 Years	6	60
46-50 Years	0	0
51-55 Years	2	20
56-60 Years	0	0
61-65 Years	1	10
Age at Marriage		
	n=10	n=10
Male		
20 or Younger	0	0
21-25	9	90
26-30	1	10
Female		
20 or Younger	3	30
21-25	7	70
26-30	0	0
Number of Children by Couples **(including biological, adopted, step and deceased)**	n=10	
No Children	1	10
One	1	10
Two	1	10
Three	5	50
Four or More	2	20

Table 4 provides demographic information specific to the participants and their self-reported religion. Participants were asked if they identified with a specific religion and the degree of their involvement if they did. If they did not identify with a specific religion, they were asked if they believed in some form of higher power or spirituality. All participants identified with a specific religion which included 35% Christian (n=7), 25% African Methodist Episcopal (n=5), 25% Baptist (n=5) and 15% Methodist (n=3). Degree of involvement within their religion ranged from regular to very involved. Those reporting regular involvement, 40%, described such as weekly attendance (n=8). The other participants, 60%, described their involvement as very active (n=12). These self-reports ranged from evangelist and ministers to those attending church three to four times a week.

Table 4

Religious Characteristics

Variable	Number N=20	Percent %
Identify with a Religion		
Yes	20	100
No	0	0
Religion		
African Methodist Episcopal	5	25
Baptist	5	25
Christian	7	35
Methodist	3	5
Degree of Religious Involvement		
Not Active	0	0
Attend but Limited	0	0
Regular	8	40
Very Involve	12	60

Research Findings

Data Collection Process

There were 20 participants in this study. Demographic information as well as completing the consent form was collected prior to beginning the interview. An initial rapport was established during the first 30 minutes prior to taping. Mutual feelings of comfort were established by the end of the interview. Additionally, data collection was accomplished by the researcher through in-depth face to face interviews. Each participant responded to a predetermined set of open-ended questions from the researcher. Both the researcher and each participant conducted all interviews at a format and time agreed upon by the participant and the researcher. All interviews were

conducted in the participants' homes with the exception of two. The two included both a husband and wife who worked together. The interviews were conducted on their job site due to scheduling issues.

All interviews were audio taped and later transcribed with the consent of each participant. Each participant understood the reason for audio taping and agreed to be taped during their interview session. The reasons were outlined in the consent form found in Appendix B. The researcher used a small digital voice recorder with a capability of storing up to 1073 hours and an optional expandable memory card. In addition, the researcher maintained a journal to note additional follow-up questions, key features of the discussions, unsolicited comments, and field notes from the participants.

Before each in-depth interview, the researcher reached out to explain the process of the interview and to ensure the strong rapport was still intact. Participants appeared comfortable and at ease. During each conversation, the researcher gauged the body language and facial expressions of the participants in order to proceed to the next question and to see if the participants appeared uncomfortable. At the end of the conversation, most participants were usually comfortable and in a joyful mood. One participant was uncertain about why certain questions were asked. The researcher assured the participant that all participants in this research study were asked the same set of predetermined questions.

Method of Analysis

Data were analyzed in different phases. The first phase included the analysis of the demographic information obtained prior to each interview. The demographic information allowed the researcher to analyze data which was relevant and added richness and authenticity to the research.

The second phase of the process included analysis of the transcription notes of all interviews while documenting common themes. All interviews were audio taped and completed face to face. They were audio taped to minimize the loss of data, to capture the very essence of each participant's raw response and to assist in the verification of data analysis. Tape-recorded interviews, like texts and tapes of naturally occurring interaction, allow you to return to your data in its original form as often as needed (Silverman, 2005).

Data analysis included a process of the researcher reading the participant's transcripts and identifying significant comments and phrases. All participants' responses were entered into an Excel spreadsheet. The information was coded according to significant comments and phrases. The information was grouped into categories and subcategories. Major themes were presented by integrating the participant's statements and narratives. The themes presented in this study were the most salient and those mentioned most frequently by the participants. The data were substantiated by the numeric content analysis.

Data collected from the Demographic Survey and Perceptions of Committed

Marriages Questionnaire were analyzed in two phases. First, the demographic survey was

analyzed for family characteristics, general characteristics and religious characteristics.

In phase two, the Perceptions of Committed Marriages Questionnaire was analyzed. Step

by step procedures were used to follow Creswell's (2012) guide to ensure a systematic

process for analysis. In this process, the first step in the analysis of data collected from

the interviews was to listen to the audio recordings and transcribe them verbatim after

each interview was complete. Next, the researcher analyzed each transcript to identify

significant comments, phrases and patterns which emerged. Information was coded then

entered into a spreadsheet. Then using the spreadsheets and verifying against the

transcripts, the researcher continued to code for significant comments. Information was

grouped by similar categories. An additional coder was used. After the reviews, a

discussion was held and an agreement was reached on the resulting themes. The

participants' confidentiality was protected at all times during the study. Table 5 provides

an outline of the ten major categories that were identified along with seven sub-themes.

Quotes that were symbolic of most participants and reflective of the research study were

included in this chapter.

Table 5

Major Themes and Sub-themes

Overview of Research Questions, Themes and Sub-themes Number				
Research Question I **What Does Marriage Mean?**	**Research Question II** **What do African Americans attribute to the longevity of marriage?**	**Research Question III** **What family values, core beliefs and attitudes influence African American thoughts of marriage?**	**Research Question IV** **How do African Americans perceive happiness or joy as it relates to long-term marriage?**	**Research Question IV** **How do challenges in a marriage of 25 years and longer help strengthen or weaken the relationship?**

Theme 1:
 	
 Commitment.
 	
 Theme 2:
 	
 Lifelong Relationships
 	
 Theme 3:
 	
 Marital Satisfaction
	Theme 4:
	
	 Commitment to Marital Relationship
	
	 Theme 5:
	
	 Vows to God
		Theme 6:
		
		 Family of Origin
		   a. Lifelong Martial Relation-ships
		   b. Spiritual Beliefs
		   c. Family Rituals
			Theme 7:
			
			 Spiritual Belief with God
			
			 Theme 8:
			
			 Managing Normative and Non-Normative Life Events
			   a. Love & Commitment To Each Other
			   b. Tolerance and Respect
			   c. Reflective Opportunities
				Theme 9:
				
				 Legacy
				   a. Non-Negotiable of Marriage
				
				 Theme 10:
				
				 Family Utilized Resources

Comments were drawn from transcripts and are reflective of conversation with

each participant. The findings of the research were reported as it related to the five

research questions. The research questions that guided the study are:

Research Question One

The first research question was "What does marriage mean to you? Participants were asked the following open-ended questions:

1. How would you describe your marriage?

2. What does the term commitment mean to you?

3. When did you realize you were committed to this relationship?

Three themes were identified from the interview questions associated with research question one. Themes included commitment, lifelong relationships and marital satisfaction. The perceptions of the participants were positive and expressed insight into what makes marriages sustainable.

Theme one: Commitment. Analysis from participants' interview transcripts revealed that one of the very salient and overarching themes was commitment. Participants, overwhelming expressed the commitment they made and how that commitment associated with their meaning of marriage. This commitment took time to develop; it went through a maturation period and progressively got stronger during various stages of their relationships. Expression of their strong commitment was exemplified by some of the participants in this manner.

> {41C} I was committed early. There was an expectation that she was made for me. I had this unusual feeling, it was a force beyond me, and it was bigger than me. I knew I was supposed to be with her.

> {41M} I didn't exactly know the first time we met. I think I knew when she went home during a break from college. I begin missing her.

{41O} We dated for about four years, however, I think I fell in the love the first time I saw him. He wasn't where I was at first. I just kept going with the relationship. I didn't let him change what I wanted to do for me at that time. He just kept coming. I decided in year four that I didn't want to be here and I was preparing to leave, he soon came to his senses.

{41P} I knew I was committed. It was something going into it, of which I had no intentions of backing out. I knew I was going to be in for the long-haul. If it dissolved, it was because of my partner, not me.

{41Q} My husband and I met on a blind date. We dated for two years. I knew where the boundaries were….You begin to grow and miss this person, then you realize, you really like this person.

Theme two: Lifelong. Responses from participants indicated that during this whole concept of marriage, both commitment and the thought of making a lifelong promise to their spouse was "paramount" as one participant stated. Through life's ups and downs, the majority of participants realized early on they were in this marriage for life. Participants' responses identified their long-term commitment to their relationship:

{41B} Give you marriage your all through good times and bad.

{41D} …Till death do us part.

{41F} God wants us to stay together once we're married.

{41M} One person, the entire length. Till death.

{41Q} When you know what your plans are and you find the right person, you want to spend the rest of your life with that person.

Theme three: Marital satisfaction. One interview question asked participants how they would describe their marriage. All of the participants tended to give one-word descriptors of their overall view of their marriage. The majority of the participants

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(n=18), gave positive responses such as "good," "satisfying," great," "fulfilling,"

"stable," as well as "committed."

Research Question Two

The second research question asked, "What do African Americans attribute to the

longevity of a marriage?" The following questions helped to answer research question

two:

4. Why do you believe your marriage has lasted as long as it has?

5. Was there a time when you thought your marriage was going to end?

6. What has held your marriage together?

Three themes emerged and were identified from interview questions associated

with research question two. The themes which arose are commitment to the martial

relationship, and the strong marriage vows made with and before God.

Theme 4: Commitment to the marital relationship. Interview question four

and five asked participants why they believed their marriage had lasted as long as it had

and what held it together during those times when they thought it could have ended.

Participants' responses were very open and honest and many made an undeniable

commitment to each other early on in the relationship. Their perceptions were centered

on the responsibility they had to stay committed in their marriage. Not only was there a

commitment, many discussed the friendship and the overall respect for the other person.

There were reported times of despair and times they could have left the marriage, but

because of the commitment they made, it was never an option to leave. Participants'

responses regarding their initial perception on the longevity included the following:

{41B} It goes back to commitment. You take your marriage vows and it says through the good and bad times. You have to realize that you're in. The next relationship would be the same if you left this one.

{41E} Love has to be fed and taken care of. I give glory to God.

{41G} Because it was true love; Because when we first met, we really needed each other. She had more in here than I was ever looking for.

{41H} Because we were friends first….We like to do the same things.

{41K} We were committed to each other. We took our vows seriously before God.

{41N} We went through a period where I insisted we go through counseling because I saw some horrible stuff with my brother and sister. It was my faith and I grew, I learned and matured over time.

{41O] I think one reason my parents were married for 49 years. I wasn't like any of the other girls he met. I just saw a commitment from my parents and decided I was only going to do it once.

{41P} It was a commitment to on another. We said early on, divorce was never to be mentioned. Don't know where I picked it up…Heard reference of commitment at some marriage retreat.

{41T} Because we're friends. You treat your friends with respect. We made a verbal contract to always respect each other. We're kind to each other.

Theme 5: Vows to God. When asked what things held marriages together,

participants viewed their commitment to God or their spiritual belief as the guiding force.

A deep covenant they made was significant to maintaining their marriage. Some

participants' responses regarding this covenant with God and with their spouses are

included:

{41F} The only thing then and even now; looking back and looking sideways was God.

{41K} Our commitment to on another; Faithfulness to Christ and Obedience to our marriage vows.

{41P} All the reason I stayed were spiritual. I can't think of anything I would have done. It was a high level of I don't want to hurt this other person.

Research Question Three

The third research question asked, "What family values, core beliefs and attitude influence African American thoughts of marriage?" The following questions helped to answer question three:

7. Would you consider your parents' marriage a strong marriage?

8. What expectations of marriage did you draw from your parents?

9. Describe the role generational influences had in your marriage.

10. What are some important values, beliefs and traditions you developed for your marriage?

11. Has religion or spirituality played a part in your marriage?

12. If so, in what capacity.

13. Has religion or spirituality ever been a challenge in your marriage?

14. How has other outside resources contributed or taken away from your marriage?

One theme and four sub-themes were identified from the interview questions associated with research question three. The theme was family of origin. Out of family of origin came lifelong marital relationships, spiritual beliefs, and family rituals.

Theme 6: Family of origin. Interview question seven, eight and nine asked participants about their parents and grandparents marriages and the beliefs and ideas they may have drawn from these relationships. Who they are now, in a committed long-term relationship of 25 years, have been framed by their values, beliefs and attitudes which were developed out of family of origin. Data analysis from participants' interview transcripts revealed one theme and four sub-themes. The major theme for this research question was family of origin.

The data indicated that the participants over all perception of healthy marriages were formed by a member they identified within their family. There were evident family influences. Family members demonstrated, either positive or negative, participants' thoughts on marriage. Some comments included the following:

> {41C} Yes, I saw a healthy marriage with my parents. My father once said, "Once an "X" (represents last name) ties the knot, he always stays together.

> {41H} My mom and dad were married forever. I think I looked at the commitment between the two of them. My mom was really easy to please and I didn't want to be easy to please. I wanted my marriage to be based on independence of me.

> {41K} It was a good marriage. I saw they worked hard; worked together to provide for us. They were good examples. We knew they loved each other; they were balanced.

> {41P} No, it wasn't healthy at all. They lived in a different era. Thought they were going to kill each other at times. I didn't want my marriage to be like theirs. I hardly ever argue.

> {41S} Healthy to a point…Neither wanted to split up. My father was an alcoholic, but still a good man.

{41T} No, but she had a healthy friendship with my dad. I never saw her 1st husband. My dad was in the military. My mom and dad made such a great arrangement. We lived with my grandfather; my dad came to vise and took me places.

Additional comments on how multigenerational family members influenced

participants' views on family and marriage included

{41A} My aunt, she's still married and been married over 60 plus years. I saw my grandparents, uncles. The expectation according to how we were reared was that you stayed married… Never spoken, but understood!

{41B} My grandparents really didn't talk about it, It just happened; Spiritually connected.

{41I} Grandfather was married 70 or 80 years before he died. He was a preacher. He made sure we went to church.

{41J} Developed my own ways. Father and mother had been married for a long time. Good role models. We did a lot more than my parents.

{41L} I saw uncles and aunts who had been married for a long time. Good role model in some. I didn't have the best uncles. Some were alcoholics and womanizers. But my aunts were strong women of faith and it didn't matter how bad it got, they stuck it through.

{41N} My grandparents were married until death. My uncle on my dad's side was good. Grew up in the church and saw healthy marriages. I thought about the differences between what I saw and what Peter saw growing up. I just don't remember a lot of divorce. I don't remember a lot of divorce people in my growing up.

{41O} I saw them but I needed to develop for myself. Yes, it was a commitment, a lifelong commitment. Through the thick and thin, you stick and stay.

Sub-theme: Lifelong martial relationships. A pattern that was identified in the

data analysis was the lifelong commitment the participants 'witnessed in family

members. Participants' commented on strong family influences. Some of what they

learned was often demonstrated, but never spoken or actually taught.

Sub-theme: Spiritual beliefs. Interview questions eleven, twelve and thirteen

asked participants about the impact of religion and or spirituality on their marriages. This

is another identifying strategy participants used in defining their perceived commitment

to the relationship. Religion and spirituality played a major role in the participants' lives.

All 20 participants agreed that in some scope of their life, religious and spiritual beliefs

were the cornerstone of these relationships. Many had been raised in the church and

patterned their life as such. Participants' comments included the following:

> {41A} We were both reared AME. That helped, we didn't have to fight about
> what church to go. We joined the church early on…that's all we've known.

> {41E} It has transformed my life!

> {41H} Oh sure, we are both church going people. We work in the church. When
> we first met, we weren't as active, but we were a lot younger then. ….When two
> people are in church it only gets stronger.

> {41M} Yes, from day one. We've always been spiritual…Grew up in the church.
> Mother was always praying for us…Always had a background in church.

> {41O} Oh huge! Going to couple retreats and leaning about our differences
> helped. Once I heard other people share, I knew we were similar to many other
> couples. The rule book is the same, the players are different though.

> {41S} 100%; At my conversion, I was 21; I knew I wanted to get married one
> day. I wasn't going to associate with anyone that I couldn't see being the one.
> My whole conversation was completely different. God's wisdom can have you
> that of a 50 or 60 year old when you're as young as 21.

Participants were asked if religion or spirituality was ever a challenge in the

marriage. While most of the participants, 65% (n=13), identified that it was not a

challenge, many would however report that it was something they had to work through and adjust over the years. The participants' comments are included below:

> {41E} It was a challenge because it wasn't being explained right.

> {41K} Yea, a little bit once. Once he became serious and accepted Christ, he was REALLY serious.

> {41L} No, she had an even stronger background than I did. Our beliefs were the same. Early in our marriage, I was spending too much time. It was a strain because I was going to work then church. She was right.

> {41P} No, as a matter of fact, it is the glue! If keeps you from messing up.

> {41S} Well, initially it was. Because of all the playing around I did, once I committed, I was going 100 miles per hour. She had the values, but it wasn't at my warped speed. I tried to help God out, but later realized he didn't need my help. I saw amazing growth in her.

> {41T} The part about submission was a challenge at first. I was trying to figure that out. What does that look like? He knew I had an issue with this as well. I was always very independent growing up. We worked through it with counseling.

Sub-theme: Family rituals. Based off the family of origin, participants patterned their values, beliefs and traditions off of things they experienced within their families. Participants were excited to report on some of the traditions, values and beliefs that were established since getting married to their spouse. Family routines and rituals were significant to parenting competence as well as marital satisfaction. Some of the participants' descriptions and accounts of family rituals are chronicled below:

> {41B} We value family, God first. We put God first and everything else would come. Holidays are important to us. Do things together helps strengthen the marriage. For years now, we've had a date night. My aunt always told me to save at least $1.00 so I share a drink with my husband.

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{41E} I try to recognize my wife. I thank her for everything, yard work, housework, etc. Holidays come up, I do things. If you appreciate a person then you encourage them.

{41I} I wanted a nice home; do things together; send my daughter to college.

{41K} I want to walk the other to the grave. Never say the word divorce; we pray together, and have bible study together. We talk a lot. We communicate very well.

{41L} I think families doing things together. It was something I really enjoy doing as a child…Everything as a group. All kids together going everywhere together. When we do something, we do it together.

{41M} I always wanted to be there for my kids. Because of my dad's work schedule, he never saw any of my games. I didn't ever miss anything with my kids.

{41N} I wanted to be a Christian family. Not just going through the motion but doing it; living it.

Research Question Four

The fourth research question asked, "How do African Americans perceive happiness or joy as it relates to long-term marriage? The following questions were asked of participants to help answer research question four:

15. How has happiness and or joy looked over the past 25 years in your marriage?

16. What has been your greatest source of strength in your marriage?

17. What experiences have given you the greatest pleasure during marriage?

Two themes and three sub-themes were identified from the interview questions associated with research question four. The themes that were most prevalent in this researcher were (1) Spiritual beliefs with God and (2) Managing normative and non-

normative life events. Sub-themes that emerged were (a) love and commitment, (b)

tolerance and respect for each other, and (c) reflective period.

Theme 7: Spiritual beliefs with God. Interview question sixteen asked

participants what they believed was their greatest source of strength. Of the 20

responses, 12 of those identified with God or their faith as their greatest source of

strength. They associated the covenant relationship with God back to their marriage and

back to the strong commitment they made to their spouse. By understanding that God had

sanctioned their marriage, they were able to enjoy the relationship through all stages.

Featured participants comments included:

> {41B} Because of us putting God first, I believe my husband has been my
> greatest source of strength. I can lean on him for everything.

> {41C} She has been the greatest source….Of course with the understanding that
> God had put us there.

> {41E} My wife. Of course God had to be in her…

> {41H} Our love for each other.

> {41L) Faith…belief in God and our savior the Lord Jesus Christ. It gets us
> through the times. We know we're going to be together. I think families doing
> things together helps.

> {41S} It's been the Lord. I would not have even considered marriage not being a
> Christian.

Theme 8: Managing normative and non-normative life events. Interview

questions fifteen and seventeen asked participants how joy and happiness has looked like

over the years they've been married as well as identifiable experiences which have given

great pleasure. Managing the normative and the non-normative of life events were the

overarching theme for this question. Pleasure and joy was bought on by everything from the birth of children to spending time alone traveling with one another. It was also noted that some of the days weren't always good, but the good day did always outweigh the bad.

Sub-theme: Love and commitment to each other. A patterned that was identified in the data analysis was the commitment these participants had made to one another. They enjoyed speeding time with each other and surprising with small gifts and tokens of their love to show their undying commitment to the marital relationships.

{41G} Yes, we use to go out together. There was a time when we wouldn't go anywhere without each other…dentist appointments, grocery store, etc. Still ble 6today, we go a lot of places together. If a woman don't want to show you in public, something's wrong!!

{41S} We have a good time just doing nothing. So when we actually do something, that's' just a bonus. We can ride in the car and just talk. A lot of the times you really have to like the person. You have to like them before you can love them.

Sub-theme: Tolerance and respect. Data analysis revealed times of respect and admiration for one another. It was in some of those times, that even if someone had "reached the limits," they still respected and honored their spouse. Some of those excerpts are listed below:

{41A} Some days it wasn't happy, but then you have to remember who you are and who you belong to. My spiritual belief….

{41F} We can share things together. A lot of time, men won't go and do, but he does…

{41L} The good times are when we're on one accord…..When we're in sync…When my ideas and her ideas are jiving. It's never 100%, you have to accept the friction. The differences in males and females will always be there…

{41L} Overall, I always thought of my marriage as being really great. I think I'm like most males, I like it when my wife strokes me ego. When she acknowledges me being a male and when she shows me how much she appreciates me. I'm happy when I see in her eyes the respect she has for who I am.

{41T} It just flowed. He was a very nice person. When we first started dating, people were like," your boyfriend is good looking." I was looking at how nice he was. He's a true friend, he makes me laugh. Even when it's bad, we can talk about it. He's just a very nice person and I respect that.

Sub-theme: Reflective time. Participants consistently identified times in their marriages that were reflective over all the years together. These were mostly times of learned experiences and growth for the participants. They let past experiences in some situations, guide them to new, more productive ways of doing things. The participants reflected on many life events which were both satisfying and sometimes challenging. These individual times were reflected in participants' comments listed below:

{41A} I gave my life to the Lord and things changed. I had a different response to it all.

{41B} Our best vacation was going to Hawaii. We've traveled a lot during our marriage. Most places he plans the trips for us. He loves to buy flowers, gifts. He likes surprising me with gifts.

{41C} Ever since we got married in….on all her birthdays and our anniversaries, I've gotten her something special. She doesn't need anything else. I knew she liked it and made her happy.

{41M} The birth of our children has always been a big plus and to see them all graduate has been a great joy. To see them be successful…

{41N} When we travel together…I would probably say we have had some really good times. Because you're always together. We both love sports. I was a

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daddy's girl growing up so I know a lot about sports and can enjoy them with my husband.

{41P} I remember once I saw my wife speaking before a group, I couldn't have been more proud.

{41Q}. When our boys were young, we would go to the drive in movies. It was our Friday thing. As they got older, they became involved in athletics.

{41R} The birth of my sons has always been a great pleasure.

Research Question Five

The final research question was "How do challenges in a marriage of 25 years or longer help strengthen or weaken the relationship?" The following open-ended interview questions were asked to help answer this research question:

18. In what capacity have your children influenced or guided your marriage?

19. What has been the biggest challenge you've faced in your marriage?

20. How did you solve this challenge?

21. What did you learn about your marriage (yourself) from this challenge

22. Throughout the 25 plus years of marriage, how have you maintain autonomy while recognizing the importance of oneness?

Two themes and one sub-theme were identified from this final research question. Those themes included (1) Legacy and, (2) Resources Utilized by Families.

Theme 9: Legacy. Interview questions eighteen examined the participants' thoughts on their children. It further described how their children impacted their marriage. The category mirrors much of the family of origin theme mentioned earlier in this chapter. This theme emerged when participants' were asked to describe what their

children meant and also if they ever felt like they stayed together just for their children.

Overwhelmingly, the participants all wanted their children to see good quality of life,

strong role models, positive extended family relationships and a strong sense of security.

The overarching theme of legacy was the guiding principles while raising children

amongst these participants. Here are the accounts of some participants:

{41A} When they were younger, they loved their daddy so much. There were times I would have left but it was because of the children I stayed. They would have thought I was crazy.

{41B} Never thought I had to stay married for my children. They knew we had fights. We were real. No household is perfect. We were just an ordinary family. We use to always do Sunday dinner so the children could see family and what it was like to set the table, and eat on good china and be one family. They had good experiences.

{41C} Never felt any pressure to stay together for the children. Our kids would sanction my marriage. They brag about us now.

{41D) Stayed married for them (children). So they would have a mother and father. Do things so they can see what a good marriage is like.

{41G} Tried to teach my children about getting along with their husband. Children need to be around their mommy and daddy.

{41H} We tried to teach longevity of marriage.

{41L} We always wanted children. I always thought we were going to have children. I wanted to pour my love. I was thinking I never had a role model in my life. I was prepared…

{41N} I would definitely say they've been a positive influence. Not that we stayed together for them, I understand family of origin. I wanted them to feel secure…have a really good foundation for their own life.

{41Q} You would be surprised at the type of young men they are. You would never find three more grown, mannerly, polite men one who believes in God's

word like they do. They are who they are because they watched us. We wanted
our children to see a certain role model.
{41S} I'd like to think we influenced them, not the other way around...Never a
time when I thought had we had to stay for the children.

{41T} It was two of them and the two of us. We had to be together unless they
would have conquered. Our kids are real head strong.

Sub-theme: Non-negotiable of marriage. While participants worked to leave a

legacy, they also realized things weren't always easy. There certainly were times they

had problems, but again, they knew they were in these marriages because of a long-term

commitment they made to each other. They were grounded in family and worked to move

forward with problems in such a way, that those problems became opportunities of

growth within their relationships. Some accounts of challenges and the growth achieved

are listed below:

{41B} Parenting issues were always a challenge in our marriage. He wanted to
parent one way and I had another idea in mind.

{41C} Money; don't let it break you up.

{41H} In our early days, I think wanting to much financially.   We wanted more
than we needed.

{41J} We moved and sold our house we had been in for over 25 years. It drained
our resources but we were still trying to make it work.

{41K} Getting him to really open up….We can talk on subject matters of the
world, jobs, etc., but when it comes to him, I want him to open up more.

{41P} I think the hardest piece has been watching a wayward child go in the
direction I had not taught him. That was an eye opener.

{41S} God's challenges for us were finances. When I first met, she had credit
card bills. Learned this was a form of bondage. One good thing we both have the

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same concept about finances now. When we talk about challenges, it was never anything that was ending. Never been anything that taxed us like that…

Participants reported learned experiences from the challenges they faced. They learned thing about themselves, their spouse as well as their marriage. A few participants' responses are listed below:

{41B} Learned there were times I should have stayed silent! I should have let him make the final decisions. Through it all, we raised two beautiful kids. They are not warped by our parenting.

{41C} Keep outside influences out; Challenges are a part of life. You were going to have bumps and bruises.

{41F) I learned that God is able to do anything but fail with whatever your challenge is. There is none too big.

{41H) We learned how to stop spending. It took both of us to sit down and realize this…

{41K} I learned patience, still keep lines of communication open; let it go; move on.

{41L} The thing learned the most, when you love someone, you have to accept everything about that person. It's about every flaw, focus on who they are and why you love them. I accept the flaw, and this person is wonderful. There's more good here than bad. You start seeing all the good that person has to offer. Spent a lot of time early on wanting to change, not now. I focus on the love we have and who she is. The flaws are a part of the package.

{41M} I think we learned that us depending on our spirituality really helped during those trying times. Friends really helped us…

{41N} I learned about myself, him, the marriage. I just thought I was being a good wife; being a trooper.

{41O} Each time I've gone through, I've discovered it's not about us. We are not individual when it comes to family stuff. We are a unit. Being willing to make adjustments…being willing to be what the other person needs.

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{41P} Learned that I could let go and it wouldn't hurt so bad. Our marriage was strengthened by this challenge. He had been diagnosed with a illness, but I learned that I needed him to be around. I needed him to know that I needed him to be around.

{41R} Nothing is impossible if you have faith and talk about it.

{41S} You have to know who you're involved with. You have to know the character of the person you're dealing with.

Summary

Summary of the Sample Demographic

Ten males and ten females made up the participants of this research study. The majority of the participants (80%) lived in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area, 20% live in Louisiana.   All of the participants were African American. Ages of the participants ranged from 52 to 87 years with an average age of 65. The average length of marriage was between 31-45 years. All participants identified with a specific religion which included 35% Christian (n=7), 25% African Methodist Episcopal (n=5), 25% Baptist (n=5) and 15% Methodist (n=3).

Summary of the Research Findings

In depth interviews were conducted using open ended interview questions in a face-to face format. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed with the support of one additional reader. The average interview lasted between 35 and 45 minutes. The analysis of data were conducted and themes identified to the five research questions: Ten major themes and 7 sub-themes emerged from this qualitative research study: (a) commitment, (b) lifelong, (c) marital satisfaction, (d) commitment to martial

relationship, (e) vows to God, (f) family of origin, (g) spiritual beliefs with God, (h) managing normative and non-normative life events, (i) legacy of family and (j) family utilization of resources. Conclusions, implications and recommendations for future studies were identified.

Chapter four provided demographic characteristic for the sample populations and identifies the finding of this research study. This study attempted to explore the perceived factors which contributed to committed marriages in African Americans married 25 years and longer. The implications of the current study will be discussed in Chapter V along with the relationship to the literature and the findings.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Chapter four presented a summary of the research study, detailed the findings and expressed the conclusion of this research. This chapter considered the implications of the research, and drew conclusions from the findings. Recommendations for future research in the areas of perceived factors of committed marriages in the African American community are presented.

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceived factors of committed marriages within African American heterosexual couples married twenty-five years and long. Ten married couples who had been married for twenty-five year or longer participated in this study. A qualitative research method combined with a phenomenological research strategy provided an opportunity to interview participants regarding their married life experiences. The specific research objectives were to discover: (a) what does marriage mean, (b) what do African Americans attribute to the longevity of a marriage, (c) what family values, core beliefs and attitudes influence African Americans thoughts of marriage, (d) how African Americans perceive happiness or joy as it relates to long-term marriages, (e) how do challenges in a marriage of 25 years and longer help strengthen or weaken the relationship.

In this study, two theoretical perspectives were used to provide a framework to the research. The perspectives used for this study was Family Life Course Theory with a

Phenomenological Approach. Life-course perspective emphasizes transitions and

trajectories. People make transitions from being unmarried to being married, being

divorced or widowed and or so forth (Elder, 1983). Lives are linked across generations

and through bonds such as marriage, although the meanings of those linkages change

over time and are historically specific. From the life-course perspective, an individual is

viewed as following, over the course of his or life, a life trajectory (Elder, 1983). Each

person's life trajectory is marked by a sequence of life events or transitions and is made

up of intertwined bundle of decisions about family and work (Holland, 2009).

Participants clearly identified life trajectories throughout the study. This life course

perspective using in-depth interviews allowed subjects to respond in a personal and

meaningful manner.

A total of 20 participants were interviewed. Each participant had to meet the

following criteria: (a) self-defined committed marriage, (b) an African American, (b)

born in the United States, (c) married to someone of the opposite sex and who was still

living, (d) married for 25 years or longer and (e) willing to interview separately. This

criterion was chosen to represent a population who is often reported from a problem-

oriented perspective versus strength-based.

Of the 20 participants (10 married couples) all were African Americans, ranging

in age from 52 to 87 years. They had been married on average between 31 and 45 years.

The educational back gourd of the participants ranged from grade level education to 40%

having masters, 25% with bachelors and the remaining 30 % having some college, trade

and or vocational training. Fifty-five percent of participants made above $75,000

followed by 20% making between $50,000 and 75,000 and 25% making from $30,000 to

less than $15,000. All participants reported identification with a specific religion with

the majority Christian, 35%, followed by 25% African Methodist Episcopal, 25% Baptist

and 15% Methodist. Demographic information can be found in Tables 2, 3, and 4.

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews. These interviews were conducted

in the private home setting of most participants and audio-recoded to ensure accuracy and

validity of each interview. The analyses of the interviews captured emerging themes and

sub-themes. An additional peer-reviewer was used to verify the findings. Data analysis

revealed 9 themes and 6 sub-themes They are: (a) commitment, (b) lifelong, (c) marital

satisfaction, (d) commitment to martial relationship, (e) vows to God, (f) family of origin,

(g) spiritual beliefs with God, (h) managing normative and non-normative life events, (i)

legacy. The research questions that guided the study are:

1) What does marriage mean?

2) What do African Americans attribute to the longevity of a marriage?

3) What family values, core beliefs and attitudes influence African Americans'
   thoughts of marriage?

4) How do African Americans perceive happiness or joy as it relates to long-term
   marriages?

5) How do challenges in a marriage of 25 years and longer help strengthen or
   weaken the relationship?

Discussion of Findings

The purpose of the study was to understand the perceived factors of committed African Americans married for 25 years and longer. There have been previous studies which led to a pessimistic outlook marriage within the African American community regarding marriage (Phillips, Wilmoth & Marks, 2012). Goldstein and Kenney (2001) looked at whether Americans were retreating from marriage altogether or postponing their marriages to older ages. Other research indicates, African Americans are the least likely to marry, when they marry, they do so later and spend less time married than White Americans, and they are the least likely to stay married (Tucker & Taylor, 1989; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan,1995 & Dixon, 2009). However, there has not been enough research conducted from a strength based perspective. The current study incorporated a holistic strength based approach.

Research Question One

1. What does marriage mean?

The goal of the first research question was aimed at capturing the overall meaning of marriage by participants. Finding the participants meaning of marriage established the basic premise of the research question which aimed to explore perceived factors leading to committed relationships. The collection of their stories offered a concept of commitment. The commitment however, didn't develop overnight. It took time; it went through a period of maturation and development. The commitment got progressively stronger. The pairing of romantically attracted couples is an important part of the

development of most young adults. Individuals often achieve part of their personal

identity as a member of a relatively stable couple. Erick Erickson proposed that

establishing a meaningful intimate relationship was the primary developmental take in

early adulthood (Craig & Dunn, 2007).

Theme 1: Commitment. Analysis from participants' interview transcripts

revealed that one of the very salient and overarching themes was commitment.

Participants, overwhelming expressed the commitment they made and how that

commitment associated with their meaning of marriage. This commitment took time to

develop; it went through a maturation period and progressively got stronger during the

relationships.

Using in-depth interviewing and observations, the researcher was able to

document detailed information regarding the participants' perspective about commitment.

The following expressions exampled the participants' feelings:

> "I was committed early. There was an expectation that she was made for me. I
> had this unusual feeling, it was a force beyond me, and it was bigger than me. I
> knew I was supposed to be with her."

> "I didn't exactly know the first time we met. I think I knew when she went home
> during a break from college. I begin missing her."

> "We dated for about four years, however, I think I fell in the love the first time I
> saw him. He wasn't where I was at first. I just kept going with the relationship.
> "I didn't let him change what I wanted to do for me at that time. He just kept
> coming. I decided in year four that I didn't want to be here and I was preparing to
> leave, he soon came to his senses."

> "I knew I was committed. It was something going into it, of which I had no
> intentions of backing out. I knew I was going to be in for the long-haul. If it
> dissolved, it was because of my partner, not me."

"My husband and I met on a blind date. We dated for two years. I knew where the boundaries were….You begin to grow and miss this person, then you realize, you really like this person."

The majority of the participants (n=18) revealed a strong commitment they made to each other early in the dating process evolving over into their marriage. They made this commitment not only to their partner, but to the institution of marriage.

Theme 2: Lifelong. Responses from participants indicated during this concept of marriage, both commitment and the thought of making a lifelong promise to their spouse was significant. Through life's ups and downs, participants realized early on they were in this marriage for life. Participants' responses below identified their lifelong commitment to their relationship:

"Give your marriage your all through good times and bad."

" …Till death do us part."

" God wants us to stay together once we're married."

"One person, the entire length. Till death."

"When you know what your plans are and you find the right person, you want to spend the rest of your life with that person."

Simply stated, commitment refers to one's desire to remain indefinitely in a relationship (Rusbult, 1983; Weigel, Bennett & Ballard-Reisch, 2003). Participants acknowledged their willingness to stay in their marriages for a lifelong commitment.

Theme 3: Marital satisfaction. Participants responded positively when asked about the marital satisfaction.   Measures of relationship satisfaction typically comprise self-report items that solicit global evaluative judgments about the relationships (e.g. Indicate the degree of happiness) on a bipolar response scales (Fincham, Sjayi & Beach, 2011). All of the participants tended to give one-word positive descriptors of their overall view of their marriage. The majority of the participants (n=18), gave positive responses such as "good," "satisfying," great," "fulfilling," "stable," as well as "committed."

Researchers have often sought to determine which factors distinguish a happy, satisfying marriage from an unsatisfactory one (Kaslow & Robinson, 1996; McCabe, 2006; Marks et al., 2008). Much of the work has relied on self-report and interview methods of couples in their early years of marriage. One underlying assumption was the couples who have spent more than 25 years together probably share a cluster of characteristics and attributes that have enabled them to sustain the relationships through the stresses and problems that inevitably arise during the course of life (Kaslow & Robinson, 1996).

Research Question Two

2.   What do African Americans attribute to the longevity of a marriage?

Theme 4: Commitment to the marital relationship. Commitment has been long recognized as a critical factor in the development and stability of personal relationships (Adams & Jones, 1997; Weigel, Bennett & Ballard-Reisch, 2003). Relationships persist

due to features of the relationship or of the partner that are rewarding, pleasurable and valuable. They also have this idea of commitment being influenced by constraining forces. Either imagined or not, there is a force that may prevent the dissolution of a relationship even if a person's motivation to leave is high (Adams & Jones, 1997; Weigel, Bennett & Ballard-Reisch, 2003).

Participants were asked why they believed their marriage had lasted as long as it had and what held it together during those times when they thought it could have ended. Participants' responses were very open and honest and many made an undeniable commitment to each other early on in the relationship. Their perceptions were centered on the responsibility they had to stay committed in their marriage. Not only was there a commitment, many discussed the friendship and the overall respect for the other person. There were reported times of despair and times when they could have left the marriage, but because of the commitment they made, it was never an option to leave. Participants' responses regarding their initial perception on the longevity included the following:

> "It goes back to commitment. You take your marriage vows and it says through the good and bad times. You have to realize that you're in. The next relationship would be the same if you left this one."

> "Love has to be fed and taken care of. I give glory to God."

> "Because it was true love; Because when we first met, we really needed each other. She had more in her than I was ever looking for."

> "Because we were friends first….We like to do the same things."

> "We were committed to each other. We took our vows seriously before God."

Theme 5: Vows to God. When asked what things held marriages together, participants viewed their commitment to God or their spiritual belief as the guiding force. A deep covenant they made was significant to maintaining their marriage. Religiosity fosters a sense of commitment not only to an individual but to the institution of marriage (Lambert & Dollahite, 2008). Thus, perhaps religious involvement increased an individual's commitment to both a religious institution which forbids or strongly discourages divorce and the institution of marriage itself (Lambert & Dollahite, 2008). Some participants' responses regarding this covenant with God and with their spouses are included:

> "The only thing then and even now; looking back and looking sideways was God."

> "Our commitment to one another; Faithfulness to Christ and Obedience to our marriage vows."

> "All the reasons I stayed were spiritual. I can't think of anything I would have done. It was a high level of-- I don't want to hurt this other person".

Research Question Three

3. What family values, core beliefs and attitudes influence African Americans' thoughts of marriage?

Theme 6: Family of origin. Families are organized within biological, legal, cultural, and emotional structures, as well as according to generation, age, gender and other factors. Where you fit in your family structure can influence your functioning, relational patterns and the type of family you form in the next generation (McGoldrick, Gerson & Shellenberger, 1999). Expectations regarding marriage, particularly

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expectations regarding how spouses should behave are influenced by a variety of sources, such as individuals' views of their parents' relationships (Dixon et al., 2012). Research has consistently found a connection between one's family of origin and the quality of future personal and marital relationships (Weigel, Bennett & Ballard-Reisch, 2003).

Interview questions asked participants about their parents and grandparents marriages and the beliefs they may have drawn from these relationships. Who they are now, committed and in a long-term relationship of 25 years or longer, have been framed by their values, beliefs and attitudes which were developed out of family of origin. Data analysis from participants' interview transcripts revealed participants over all perception of healthy marriages were formed by a member they identified within their family. There were evident family influences. Family members demonstrated, either positive or negative, participants' thoughts on marriage. Some comments included the following:

> "Yes, I saw a healthy marriage with my parents. My father once said, "Once a "Roosevelt" ties the knot, he always stays together."

> "My mom and dad were married forever. I think I looked at the commitment between the two of them. My mom was really easy to please and I didn't want to be easy to please. I wanted my marriage to be based on the independence of me. "

> "It was a good marriage. I saw they worked hard; worked together to provide for us. They were good examples. We knew they loved each other; they were balanced."

> "No, it wasn't healthy at all. They lived in an different era. Thought they were going to kill each other at times. I didn't want my marriage to be like theirs. I hardly ever argue."

> "Healthy to a point…Neither wanted to split up. My father was an alcoholic, but still a good man."

"No, but she had a healthy friendship with my dad. I never saw her first husband. My dad was in the military. My mom and dad made such a great arrangement. We lived with my grandfather; my dad came to visit and took me places."

Families repeat themselves. What happens in one generation will often repeat itself in the next; this is referred to as multigenerational transmission (McGoldrick, Gerson & Shellenberger, 1999). Additional comments on how multigenerational members influenced participants' views on family and marriage included

"Developed my own ways. Father and mother had been married for a long time. Good role models. We did a lot more than my parents"

"My aunt, she's still married and been married over 60 plus years. I saw my grandparents, uncles. The expectation according to how we were reared was you stayed married. Never spoken, but understood."

"I saw uncles and aunts who had been married for a long time. Good role models in some. I didn't have the best uncles. Some were alcoholics and womanizers. But my aunts were strong women of faith and it didn't matter how bad it got, they stuck it through."

"My grandparents were married until death. My uncle on my dad's side was good. Grew up in the church and saw healthy marriages. I thought about the differences between what I saw and what Peter saw growing up. I just don't remember a lot of divorce. I don't remember a lot of divorce people in my family growing up."

"I saw them but I needed to develop for myself. Yes, it was a commitment, a lifelong commitment. Through the thick and thin, you stick and stay."

Sub-theme: Lifelong martial relationships. A pattern identified in the data analysis was the lifelong commitment the participants witnessed in family members. Participants' commented on strong family influences. Some of what they learned was often demonstrated, but never spoken or actually taught.

Sub-theme: Spiritual beliefs. Manifestation through religion provides one of the few institutions some African American couples have access to and trust (Fincham, Ajayi & Beach, 2011). In terms of religion and marriage, divorce rates are lower and marital satisfaction and quality scores highest among religiously involved couples of the same faith (Marks et al., 2012). Participants were asked about the impact of religion and or spirituality on their marriages. This is another identifying strategy participants used in defining their perceived commitment to the relationship. Religion and spirituality played a major role in the participants' lives. All 20 participants agreed that in some scope of their life, religious and spiritual beliefs were the cornerstone of these relationships. Many had been raised in the church and patterned their life as such. Participants' comments included the following:

> "We were both reared AME. That helped, we didn't have to fight about what church to go. We joined the church early on…that's all we've known."

> "It has transformed my life!

> "Oh sure, we are both church going people. We work in the church. When we first met, we weren't as active, but we were a lot younger then….When two people are in church it only gets stronger."

> "Yes, from day one. We've always been spiritual…Grew up in the church. Mother was always praying for us…Always had a background In church."

> "Oh huge! Going to couple retreats and leaning about our differences helped. Once I heard other people share, I knew we were similar to many other couples. The rule book is the same, the players are different though."

> "100%; At my conversion, I was 21; I knew I wanted to get married one day. I wasn't going to associate with anyone that I couldn't see being the one. My whole conversation was completely different. God's wisdom can have you that of a 50 or 60 year old when you're as young as 21".

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Participants were asked if religion or spirituality was ever a challenge in the marriage. While most of the participants, 65% (n=13), identified that it was not a challenge, many would however report that it was something they had to work through and adjust over the years. The participants' comments are included below:

"It was a challenge because it wasn't being explained right."

"Yea, a little bit once. Once he became serious and accepted Christ, he was REALLY serious."

"No, she had an even stronger background than I did. Our beliefs were the same. Early in our marriage, I was spending too much time. It was a strain because I was going to work then church. She was right".

"No, as a matter of fact, it is the glue! If keeps you from messing up."

"Well, initially it was. Because of all the playing around I did, once I committed, I was going 100 miles per hour. She had the values, but it wasn't at my warped speed. I tried to help God out, but later realized he didn't need my help. I saw amazing growth in her."

Sub-theme: Family rituals. Family strengths are often linked to cultural traditions, and the family is the major context for ethnic or cultural reflection (McCullough-Chavis, 2004). Based off the family of origin, participants patterned their values, beliefs and traditions of the things they experienced within their families. Participants were excited to report on some of the traditions, values and beliefs that were established since getting married to their spouse. Family routines and rituals were significant to parenting competence as well as marital satisfaction. Some of the participants' descriptions and accounts of family rituals are chronicled below:

"We value family, God first. We put God first and everything else would come. Holidays are important to us. Do things together helps strengthen the

marriage. For years now, we've had a date night. My aunt always told me to save at least $1.00 so I share a drink with my husband."

"I try to recognize my wife. I thank her for everything, yard work, housework, etc. Holidays come up, I do things. If you appreciate a person then you encourage them."

"I wanted a nice home; do things together; send my daughter to college."

"I want to walk the other to the grave. Never say the word divorce; We pray together, and have bible study together. We talk a lot. We communicate very well"

"I think families doing things together. It was something I really enjoy doing as a child…Everything as a group. All kids together going everywhere together. When we do something, we do it together."

Research Question Four

4. How do African Americans perceive happiness or joy as it relates to long-term marriage?

Theme 7: Spiritual beliefs with God. Two themes and three sub-themes were identified from the interview questions associated with this research question. Spirituality appears to serve as a buffer for life stressors that are more acute for African American couples; Spirituality has been an important part of the African American experience, and its corporate manifestation through religion provides one of the few institutions some African American couples have access to and trust (Fincham, Ajayi & Beach, 2011).

Interview questions asked participants what they believed was their greatest source of strength. Of the 20 responses, 12 of those identified with God or their faith as their greatest source of strength. They associated the covenant relationship with God back to their marriage and back to the strong commitment they made to their spouse. By

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understanding that God had sanctioned their marriage, they were able to enjoy the

relationship through all stages. Featured participants comments included:

> "Because of us putting God first, I believe my husband has been my greatest source of strength. I can lean on him for everything."

> "She has been the greatest source….Of course with the understanding that God had put us there."

> "My wife. Of course God had to be in her…"

> "Our love for each other."

Theme 8: Managing normative and non-normative life events. The participant

were asked questions about how joy and happiness has looked over the years they've

been married as well as identifiable experiences which have given great pleasure.

Managing the normative and the non-normative of life events were the overarching theme

for this question. Pleasure and joy was brought on by everything from the birth of

children to spending time alone traveling with one another. It was also noted that some

of the days weren't always good, but the good day did always outweigh the bad.

Sub-theme: Love and commitment to each other. A patterned identified in the

data analysis was the commitment these participants made to one another. They enjoyed

speeding time with each other and surprising with small gifts and tokens of their love to

show their undying commitment to the marital relationships.

> "Yes, we use to go out together. There was a time when we wouldn't go anywhere without each other…dentist appointments, grocery store, etc. Still today, we go a lot of places together. If a woman don't want to show you in public, something's wrong!!"

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"We have a good time just doing nothing. So when we actually do something, that's' just a bonus. We can ride in the car and just talk. A lot of the times you really have to like the person. You have to like them before you can love them."

Sub-theme: Tolerance and respect. Data analysis revealed times of respect and admiration for one another. It was in some of those times, that even if someone had "reached the limits," they still respected and honored their spouse. Some of those excerpts are listed below:

" Some days it wasn't happy, but then you have to remember who you are and who you belong to. My spiritual belief…."

" We can share things together. A lot of time, men won't go and do, but he does…"

"The good times are when we're on one accord…..When we're in sync….When my ideas and her ideas are jiving. It's never 100%, you have to accept the friction. The differences in males and females will always be there…"

"Overall, I always thought of my marriage as being really great. I think I'm like most males, I like it when my wife strokes me ego. When she acknowledges me being a male and when she shows me how much she appreciates me. I'm happy when I see in her eyes the respect she has for who I am."

"It just flowed. He was a very nice person. When we first started dating, people were like your boyfriend is good looking. I was looking at how nice he was. He's a true friend, he makes me laugh. Even when it's bad, we can talk about it. He's just a very nice person and I respect that."

Sub-theme: Reflective time. Participants consistently identified times in their marriages that were reflective of the years together. These were mostly times of learned experiences and growth for the participants. They let past experiences in some situations, guide them to new, more productive ways of doing things. The participants reflected on

many life events which were both satisfying and sometimes challenging. These individual

times were reflected in participants' comments listed below:

> "I gave my life to the Lord and things changed. I had a different response to it all."

> "Our best vacation was going to Hawaii. We've traveled a lot during our marriage. Most places he plans the trips for us. He loves to buy flowers, gifts. He likes surprising me with gifts. 'Because of us putting God first, I believe my husband has been my greatest source of strength. I can lean on him for everything."

> "Ever since we got married in…, on all her birthdays and our anniversaries, I've gotten her something special. She doesn't need anything else. I knew she liked it and made her happy."

> "The birth of our children has always been a big plus and to see them all graduate has been a great joy. To see them be successful… "

> "When we travel together…I would probably say we have had some really good times. Because you're always together. We both love sports. I was a daddy's girl growing up so I know a lot about sports and can enjoy them with my husband."

> "I remember once I saw my wife speaking before a group, I couldn't have been more proud."

> "When our boys were young, we would go to the drive in movies. It was our Friday thing. As they got older, they became involved in athletics."

> "The birth of my sons has always been a great pleasure."

Research Question Five

> 5. How do challenges in a marriage of 25 years and longer help strengthen or
>
>   weaken the relationship?

Theme 9: Legacy. Family resilience is a relatively new construct that describes

how families adapt to stress and bounce back from adversity (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996).

Family resilience is described as the path a family follows as it adapts and prospers in the face of stress, both in the present and over time. Several common threads are evident in family resilience. First, resilience is seen as surfacing in the face of hardship, secondly, resilience carries a property of buoyancy or the ability to bounce back or return to a previous way of functioning and thirdly, resilience tend to be viewed in terms of wellness rather that pathology (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996). Goddard and Allen (1991) suggest resilience addresses the ways in which families are successful rather than in ways in which they fail. According to life course, parents and children's lives are linked—when parents experience stress or joy, so do the children. The connection between family hardship, family nurturance and child behavior is now well established (Hutchinson, 2010).

Interview questions examined the participants' thoughts on their children. It further described how their children impacted their marriage. The category mirrors much of the family of origin theme mentioned earlier in this chapter. This theme emerged when participants' were asked to describe what their children meant and also if they ever felt like they stayed together just for their children. Overwhelmingly, the participants all wanted their children to see good quality of life, strong role models, positive extended family relationships and a strong sense of security. The overarching theme of legacy was the guiding principles while raising children amongst these participants. Here are the accounts of some participants:

"When they were younger, they loved their daddy so much. There were times I would have left but it was because of the children I stayed. They would have thought I was crazy."

"Never thought I had to stay married for my children. They knew we had fights. We were real. No household is perfect. We were just an ordinary family. We use to always do Sunday dinner so the children could see family and what it was like to set the table, and eat on good china and be one family. They had good experiences."

"Never felt any pressure to stay together for the children. Our kids would sanction my marriage. They brag about us now."

"Stayed married for them (children). So they would have a mother and father. Do things so they can see what a good marriage."

"Tried to teach my children about getting along with their husband. Children need to be around their mommy and daddy."

"We tried to teach longevity of marriage."

"I would definitely say they been a positive influence. Not that we stayed together for them, I understand family of origin. I wanted them to feel secure, have a really good foundation for their own life."

"You would be surprised at the type of young men they are. You would never find three more grown, mannerly, polite and believe in God's word like they do. They are who they are because they watched us. We wanted our children to see a certain role model."

Sub-theme: Non-negotiable of marriage. While participants worked to leave a legacy, they also realized things weren't always easy. There certainly were times they had problems, but again, they knew they were in these marriages because of a long-term commitment they made to each other. They were grounded in family and worked to move forward with problems in such a way, that those problems became opportunities of

growth within their relationships. Some accounts of challenges and the growth achieved

are listed below:

> "Parenting issues were always a challenge in our marriage. He wanted to parent one way and I had another idea in mind."

> "Money; don't let it break you up."

> "In our early days, I think wanting to much financially.   We wanted more than we needed."

> "We moved and sold our house we had been in for over 25 years. It drained our resources but we were still trying to make it work."

> "I think the hardest piece has been watching a wayward child go in the direction I had not taught him. That was an eye opener."

Participants reported learned experiences from the challenges they faced. They

learned thing about themselves, their spouse as well as their marriage. A few

participants' responses are listed below:

> "Learned there were times I should have stayed silent! I should have let him make the final decisions. Through it all, we raised two beautiful kids. They are not warped by our parenting. "

> "Keep outside influences out; Challenges are a part of life. You were going to have bumps and bruises."

> "I learned that God is able to do anything but fail with whatever you challenge is. There is none too big."

> "We learned how to stop spending. It took both of us to sit down and realize this…"

> "I learned patience; still keep lines of communication open; let it go; move on."

> "The thing I learned the most…when you love someone, you have to accept everything about that person. It's about every flaw, focus on who they are and why you love them. I accept the flaw, and this person is wonderful. There's more

good here than bad. You start seeing all the good that a person has to offer. Spent a lot of time early on wanting to change, not now. I focus on the love we have and who she is. The flaws are a part of the package."

"Each time I've gone through, I've discovered it's not about us. We are not individual when it comes to family stuff. We are a unit. Being willing to make adjustments…being willing to be what the other person need."

"Learned that I could let go and it wouldn't hurt so bad. Our marriage was strengthened by this challenge. He had been diagnosed with a illness, but I learned that I need him to be around. I needed him to know that I needed him to be around."

Theme 10: Family resources utilized. Consistent with the literature, participants reported the use of outside resources to help through challenges as well as enhance their marriage. They used counseling, books, family members, church members and friends. The most often used resource was church and pastoral counseling. Pastors using brief counseling helps African American parishioners examine their theological beliefs as they work together to create solutions for problems. The emphasis is refocusing sights from past and present to future (Kacela, 2003). One participant stated, "Yes, we used counseling…saw some gaps in the relationship," another states, didn't seek professional counseling, we sought the advice of our mentors and longtime church member. A few participants indicated they didn't seek additional help and just worked through their issues. One summed up the response saying, "No, didn't need counseling. We know right from wrong."

Conclusions

The basis for this qualitative study was to explore the perceived factors of African American heterosexual couples married 25 years and longer. Gaining insight into such a

phenomenon utilized narratives of both the husband and wives. The specific research objectives were used to explore: (a) what marriage means (b) what African Americans attribute to the longevity of a marriage, (c) what family values, core beliefs and attitudes influence African Americans' thoughts of marriage, (d) how African Americans perceive happiness or joy as it relates to long-term marriages and (e) how challenges in a marriage of 25 years and longer help strengthen or weaken the relationship.

Throughout the study, three overarching themes constantly ascended. Table three provides those themes. They included (a) commitment, (b) spiritual beliefs and (c) strong sense of family. Commitment was formed early on in the relationships. The participants continually developed through prior family of origin knowledge, utilization of resources and maturation of life course trajectories and events. The thought of their marriage being life-long was paramount. Many said they entered the relationship knowing that divorce was not an option and they were determined to make their marriages last over time. Secondly, spiritual beliefs impacted the participants. Many of these beliefs were patterned after family of origin. The participants' individual beliefs guided their marriage. The spiritual beliefs many of the participants developed early on helped to strengthen the relationship and also guide their marriage according to biblical principles. Finally, a strong sense of family was revealed. The participants made commitments to each other and also wanted to leave legacies for their children and other members in their family.

Table 6

Overarching Themes

OVERARCHING THEMES				
Commitment				
Spiritual Beliefs				
Strong Sense of Family				
Research Question I **What Does Marriage Mean?**	**Research Question II** **What do African Americans attribute to the longevity of marriage?**	**Research Question III** **What family values, core beliefs and attitudes influence African American thoughts of marriage?**	**Research Question IV** **How do African Americans perceive happiness or joy as it relates to long-term marriage?**	**Research Question IV** **How do challenges in a marriage of 25 years and longer help strengthen or weaken the relationship?**

This study also confirmed the five strengths of the African American family as posed by Hill (1971). He reported that African American families are sustained by five major sources of strength which included strong achievement orientation, strong work orientation, flexible family roles, strong kinship bonds and strong religious orientation. The participants of the study were unique in their socio-economic status. More than 75% (n=15) made above $50,000. As a couple, the potential income was well over $100.000. Sixty-five percent had a Bachelor's degree or higher and many reported higher levels of education amongst their children. Educational and achievement ambitions may have led to their ability to commit and remain committed in their marriages for 25 years and

longer. Both husbands and wives in the study revealed kinship bonds that were important in the development of their marriage. All participants also reported having a strong religious orientation which was apparent throughout the interview. This religious orientation may have also led to their marriages lasting 25 years and longer. Adding this component enhanced the participant's quality of their relationship. Believing in God seemed to give meaning to the relationship, each other and the institution of marriage (Lambert & Dollahite, 2007).

A qualitative research method combined with a phenomenological strategy provided an opportunity to explore the perceptions of participants using face to face interviews. Based on these narratives and other findings in current research, themes and the conclusions reached included the following:

1. Commitment. This was one of the very salient and overarching themes. Participants, overwhelming expressed the commitment they made and how that commitment associated with their meaning of marriage. This commitment took time to develop; it went through a maturation period and progressively got stronger during various stages of their relationships.

2. Lifelong. Responses from participants indicated that during this whole concept of marriage, both commitment and the thought of making a lifelong promise to their spouse was "paramount." Through life's ups and downs, the majority of participants realized early on they were in this marriage for life

3. Martial satisfaction. Participants responded positively when asked about their marital satisfaction.

4. Commitment to Marital Relationships. Participants demonstrated an undeniable commitment to each other early on in the relationship. Their perceptions were centered on the responsibility they had to stay committed in their marriage. Not only was there a commitment, many discussed the friendship and the overall respect for the other person. There was reported times of despair and times when they could have left the marriage, but because of the commitment they made, it was never an option to leave.

5. Vows to God. Participants viewed their commitment to God or their spiritual belief as the guiding force. A deep covenant they made was significant to maintaining their marriage.

6. Family of Origin. Who they are now, committed and in a long-term relationship of 25 years and longer, have been framed by their values, beliefs and attitudes which were developed out of family of origin. Perceptions of healthy marriages were formed by a member they identified within their family.

   a. Life Long Marital Relationships. A pattern identified in the data analysis was the lifelong commitment the participants 'witnessed in family members. Participants' commented on strong family influences. Some of what they learned was often demonstrated, but never spoken.

b. Spiritual Beliefs. Religion and spirituality played a major role in the participants' lives. All participants agreed that in some scope of their life, religious and spiritual beliefs were the cornerstone of these relationships. Many had been raised in the church and patterned their life as such.

c. Family Rituals. Based off the family of origin, participants patterned their values, beliefs and traditions of the things they experienced within their families. Family routines and rituals were significant to parenting competence as well as marital satisfaction.

7. Spiritual Beliefs with God. Spirituality has been an important part of the African American experience, and its corporate manifestation through religion provides one of the few institutions some African American couples have access to and trust (Fincham, Ajayi & Beach, 2011). The majority of participants identified with God or their faith as their greatest source of strength. They associated the covenant relationship with God back to their marriage and back to the strong commitment they made to their spouse

8. Managing Normative and Non-Normative Life Events. Managing regular life events were central to these marriages. Pleasure and joy was bought on by everything from the birth of children to spending time alone traveling with one another. It was also noted that some of the days weren't always good, but the good day did always outweigh the bad.

a. Love and commitment to Each Other. A patterned identified in the data analysis was the commitment these participants had made to one another. They enjoyed speeding time with each other and surprising with small gifts and tokens of their love to show their undying commitment to the marital relationships.

b. Tolerance and Respect. Several patterns of respect and admiration for one another were revealed. It was in some of those times, that even if someone had "reached the limits," they still respected and honored their spouse.

c. Reflective Opportunities. Participants consistently identified times in their marriages that were reflective of the years together. These were mostly times of learned experiences and growth for the participants. They let past experiences in some situations, guide them to new, more productive ways of doing things. The participants reflected on many life events which were both satisfying and sometimes challenging

9. Legacy. Family resilience is described as the path a family follows as it adapts and prospers in the face of stress, both in the present and over time (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996). The participants were introduced to various stressors or influencers throughout marriage, however, they worked to overcome and leave legacies for generations to come. They mentioned the desire of wanting their

children to feel safe and secure, wanting their children to see good marriages, being strong role models, and having positive extended family relationships.

    a.   Non Negotiable of Marriage. While participants worked to leave a legacy, they also realized things weren't always easy. There certainly were times they had problems, but again, they knew they were in these marriages because of a long-term commitment they made to each other. They were grounded in family and worked to move forward with problems in such a way, that those problems became opportunities of growth within their relationships.

10. Family Utilized Resources. Consistent with the literature, participants reported the use of outside resources to help through challenges as well as enhance their marriage. They used counseling, books, family members, church members and friends to help through life situations.

Implications

Results of the study have implications. These implications are suggested recommendations for research and best practices. Implications are suggested to researchers and policymakers, religious leaders, educators, health professionals and family science professionals and therapists when working with African American families. The implications of this study add to the limited research on African American healthy marriages. The results reinforce the strong commitments that some African Americans make to their marriages and the idea of these commitments being life-long.

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Implications for Researchers

1. African Americans report more happiness, life satisfaction and fewer emotional problems than their unmarried peers (Ellison, 1990; Zollar & Williams, 1987; Broman, 1988 & Blackman et al., 2005). Marriage confers to men and women a set of norms that provide them with new meaning, order their lives together and signal to the outside world that their status in life has changed (Blackman et al., 2005). There is a continued need for strength-based research. Because families are not all the same, policymakers and nonprofit agents cannot assume the same approach to programs that promote marriage formations (Marks et al., 2008).

Implications for Religious Leaders

2. The participants used God as the third cord in their marriage and this added an element of meaning to the relationship. Believing in God seemed to give meaning to commitment to a spouse or even perceiving long-term commitment to marriage as a powerful calling (Lambert & Dollahite, 2008). Religious institutions, leaders and community representatives should promote the significance of these findings to encourage long-term healthy marriages. Premarital counseling must play an important role prior to marriage. If couples are members of a church which has the faculty to support counseling, a mandatory premarital counseling class or sessions with pastors should take place before marrying. Pastors, counselors and leaders in the church must develop a strong counseling department to support

couples before they marry as well as couples who are married and may seek

additional outside resources. The church should aim to serve married couples and

families. Retreats, date/dinner nights, small group activities, and planned

organized weekend trips are a few suggested ways the church community could

support healthy marriages. Lambert and Dollahite (2007) reported that couples

who had God in their marriage seemed to enhance and stabilize couples'

commitment to each other and the institution of marriage.

Implications for Educators/School Counselors

3. Reaching young adults who are forming attitudes about marriage will reveal rich

   educational possibilities, build and continue to sustain healthy relationships

   (Hawkins, et al., 2004). We must move to show that positive traits articulated by

   African American families can be supportive of success (Strmic-Pawl & Leffler,

   2011). School systems need to incorporate in their Family and Consumer Science

   curriculum program a facet of healthy family and marriages. Some courses

   currently taught at the high school level include half semester classes in Child

   Development, Responsible Parenting, Interpersonal Studies and Food Science.

   These courses are considered electives and each student has a certain number of

   electives they must complete in order to graduate from high school. A course

   should be developed to cover healthy marriage and families. A student could pair

   two classes together such as Child Development for the first semester and Healthy

   Family and Marriage the second semester. Content could include education, job

and career development, financial literacy, health and mental health services, attitudes toward marriage and family, relationship education, building self-resiliency and other components for strengthening marriage and family. The incorporation of this course sets precedence for young men and women who are developing and forming attitudes about relationships and marriage.

Implications for Health Professionals

4. Typically, married adults are happier, healthier and wealthier than their unmarried peers (Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Blackman et al., 2005). Both married men and women are noticeably physically and emotionally healthier and are less likely to engage in health risk behaviors such as alcohol or drug abuse, than are unmarried adults (Blackman et al., 2005; Karney & Bradbury, 2005). Health professionals should promote healthy marriages. Healthy marriage improves health outcome and possibly lowers stress. Spouses are also more likely to encourage healthy behaviors among each other. Pamphlets and magazines advertising and promoting healthy relationships are positive ways to promote healthy families within the traditional "doctor's office setting". In addition, sponsoring family health fairs, workshops, 5k runs and Couples' Yoga Night Out could develop strong, fun interactions between the medical field and the married community.

Implications for Therapist/Family Study Professionals

5. The study also offers implications for professionals who work in the field of marriage and family therapy as well as family studies. A long-term satisfying

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marriage is not merely finding someone who makes you happy; it's a matter of people who have shared an understanding of what their marriage means for them. When couples enter therapy, it may be useful for therapist to facilitate a discussion in this area (Bachand & Caron, 2001). Therapist must develop a sense of cultural competence to work with African American families. Family studies professionals could continue to develop programs which promote healthy marriage. These programs could be implemented by non-profit and public agencies across states. Wraparound services and multilevel approaches should be utilized strengthen marriage. Therapist and family study professional should continue to research and develop programs for healthy marriage.

Limitations

The participants were recruited for the Dallas/Ft. Worth area. Limitations of the study are the initial parameters associated with the research. Limitations included the following: (a) participants needed to be African American and born in the United States (b) must have been married to another African American of the opposite sex for 25 years and longer and (c) both husband and wife had to be willing to participate in individual interviews. Additionally, participants were recruited using a purposive non-random sampling and snowballing approach.

Recommendations

Future studies should consider research that continues to broaden the sample included in this study. Researchers could investigate personal attributes of individuals such as resilience, adaptation, and self-efficacy, and whether those attributes play a greater role in an individual's ability to stay in a committed long-term relationship. Researchers need to engage in empirical longitudinal studies of couples who are in long term marriages. While this study limited couples to those married 25 years and longer, most agree that a long-term marriage is one that has endured considerable length of time, the exact duration of this type of marriage varies (Bachand & Caron, 2001). Defining long-term healthy marriages may be greater than or less than 25 years.

Research on adolescents and young adult's perceptions of marriage could be studied as well. Ideas about marriage are formed early; possibly studying how adolescents and young adults view marriage could help guide counselors, community and religious leaders toward appropriate program development. There is a need to form collaborations with other fields to broaden the discussion of healthy marriages in the African American community across the board.

Summary

This study attempted to explore perceived factors of committed marriages in African American couples marred 25 years and longer. This chapter provided a brief summary of the research, discussed the findings in relation to ongoing literature and provided conclusions. It also covered limitations, implications for varies fields and

recommendations for future research. In order to achieve strong stable marriage in the African American community, continued research is necessary. Therefore, highlighting the impact of positive perceived factors which contribute to healthy marriages, from the perceptions of married couples, will lead to greater understanding in curtailing divorce and alleviating broken families.

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APPENDIX A

Recruitment Flyer

Perceptions of Committed Marriages in African American Heterosexual Couples Married 25 Years and Longer

SEEKING AFRICAN AMERICAN MARRIED COUPLES TO SHARE STORES OF THEIR EXPERIENCES

If you are willing to share your story, you are invited to participate in a research study conducted by a Family Studies major at Texas Woman's University. The title of the study is, Perceptions of Committed Marriages in African American Heterosexual Couples Married 25 Years and Longer.

The purpose of this study is to provide insight and convey meaning and understanding into the factors that contribute to healthy long marriages among African American couples. It will look to explore how satisfied couples handle their relationship strengths and relationship challenges. It will also aim to explore the perception and lived experiences of African Americans male and female couples who have been married for long periods of time. This research will investigate the perceived everyday lives of married couples from a strength-based perspective.

This study is part of a requirement for the completion of a doctoral program in Family Studies at Texas Woman's University.

To participate in this study:

- Must be born African American and born in the United States.
- Must be married to an African American of the opposite sex for 25 years or longer.
- Both husband and wife must be living and willing to participate in individual interviews.

Participation will be voluntary, confidential and requires a face-to face interview that will be audio-taped and conducted in a private setting. Each interview will last approximately 60 -90 minutes. At the end of the interview, participants will receive a $5 Starbucks gift card.

If you are interested in participating or would like more information, you may contact me Moshae Maddox) at 469-383-2885 or at Moshae@att,net. You may also contact my research advisor, Joyce Armstrong, PhD at 940-898-2690 or at jarmstrong@mail.twu.edu.

APPENDIX B

Consent to Participate in Research Form

TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title: Perceptions of Committed Marriages in African American Heterosexual Couples Married 25 Years and Longer

Investigator.   Moshae Maddox, MSW.....................mtobbs@twu.edu 469-383-2884
Advisor.   Joyce Armstrong, PhD ....jarmstrong@twu.edu 940-898-2690

Explanation and Purpose of the Research

You are being asked to participate in a research study for Ms. Maddox's doctoral dissertation at Texas Woman's University   The purpose of this research study is to explore perceptions, provide insight and convey meaning and understanding into the factors that contribute to healthy long-term committed marriages among African American couples born in the United States.

Description of Procedures

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to spend 60-90 minutes of your time in a face-to face interview with the researcher. This time will also include a brief demographic survey. The researcher will ask you questions about your experiences during your marriage. These interviews will take place in a private location. You and the researcher will decide together upon the location where and when the interview will happen   Every effort will be taken to ensure your privacy and comfort. The interview will be audio recorded and then transcribed so that the researcher can be accurate when studying what you have said

All information will be kept completely confidential and only the researcher and her advisor will know your name, have access to the recordings or any other identifiable data. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The audio recordings, the written interview transcripts, demographic surveys, the researcher's field notes and the external computer storage drive containing the transcribed text will be stored in a locked safe in the researcher's home. The audio recordings and the written interview transcript will be destroyed within 5 years after the study is finished. The results of study will be reported in the researcher's dissertation as well as scientific magazines or journals but your name or any other identifying information will not be included.

The consent form will be the only document that will contain your name and your assigned code   This form will be turned in to the Texas Woman's University Institution Review Board at the completion of the study.

_____
Initials
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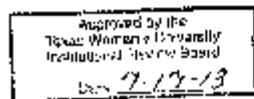
In order to participate in this study, you must be an African American male or female born in the United States. You must be married to an African American of the opposite sex for 25 years or longer and both members must be living and willing to participate in the study. The interviews will be conducted separately and the researcher will not share information between spouses.

Potential Risk

You will be asked questions about your experiences during your marriage. A possible risk you may experience in this study is emotional discomfort with the questions you are asked. If you feel uncomfortable or become 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, the researcher has provided you with a list of resources.

Another possible risk in this study is 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 code name and number, not your real name, will be used during the interview. No one but the researcher and the researcher advisor will know your real name.

Information identifying you will be kept separate from your interview material and your demographic survey. The tapes and written interview will be stored in a locked safe in the researcher's home office. This material will be shredded/destroyed within 5 years after the study is finished. The results of the study will be reported in the researcher's dissertation as well as scientific magazines and journals but your name or any other identifying information will not be included.

One other possible risk for you is the loss of your time. To minimize your loss of time the researcher will be prepared for your interview, arrive in advance of the start time of your interview, and conduct the interview in a timely manner.

A final risk you may encounter is the possibility of fatigue or tiredness. You are encouraged to take as many breaks as needed to minimize these symptoms. You can also end the interview at any time if these symptoms persist.

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 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 without penalty. A potential benefit to you taking part in this study is that you will have the opportunity to share your experiences. Following the completion of the interview, you will receive a $5.00 gift card to Starbucks or Subway for your participation. If you would like to know the results of this study we will mail them to you.*
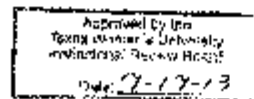
Initials
Page 2 of 3

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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 phone numbers are at the top of this form. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this research or the way this study has been conducted, you may contact the Texas Woman's University Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 940-898-3378 or via e-mail at IRB@twu.edu.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

*If you would like to know the results of this study, please list where you want them to be sent:

Mailing Address:

_____
_____
_____

APPENDIX C

IRB Approval Letter

TWU
TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY
DENTON   DALLAS   HOUSTON

Institutional Review Board
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
P.O. Box 425619, Denton, TX 76204-5619
940-898-3378   FAX 940-898-4416
e-mail: IRB@twu.edu

July 17, 2013

Ms. Moshae Maddox
116 Jordan Drive
Red Oak, TX 75154

Dear Ms. Maddox:

Re: *Perceptions of Committed Marriages in African American Heterosexual Couples Married 25 Years and Longer (Protocol #: 17341)*

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

If applicable, agency approval letters must be submitted to the IRB upon receipt PRIOR to any data collection at that agency. A copy of the approved consent form with the IRB approval stamp is enclosed. Please use the consent form with the most recent approval date stamp when obtaining consent from your participants. A copy of the signed consent forms must be submitted with the request to close the study file at the completion of the study.

This approval is valid one year from July 17, 2013. Any modifications to this study must be submitted for review to the IRB using the Modification Request Form. Additionally, the IRB must be notified immediately of any unanticipated incidents. If you have any questions, please contact the TWU IRB.

Sincerely,

Rhonda Buckley

Dr. Rhonda Buckley, Chair
Institutional Review Board - Denton

cc. Dr. Karen Petty, Department of Family Sciences
     Dr. Joyce Armstrong, Department of Family Sciences
     Graduate School

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APPENDIX D

Prospectus Approval Letter

TWU
TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

DENTON DALLAS HOUSTON

The Graduate School
P.O. Box 425649, Denton, TX 76204-5649
940-898-3415   FAX 940-898-3412   gradschool@twu.edu

0610418

August 21, 2013

Moshae Maddox
116 Jordan Drive
Red Oak, TX 75154

Dear Ms. Maddox:

I have received and approved the prospectus entitled *Perceptions of Committed Marriages in African American Heterosexual Couples Married 25 Years or Longer* for your Dissertation research project.

Best wishes to you in the research and writing of your project.

Sincerely yours,

Ruth A. Johnson, Ph.D.
Associate Dean of the Graduate School

kjb

cc: Dr. Joyce Armstrong, Family Sciences
     Dr. Karen Petty, Interim Chair, Family Sciences

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APPENDIX E

Counseling Resources

COUNSELING RESOURCES

In addition to your own health care provider, the following resources are available:

Dallas County Metrocare is a non-profit organization that cares for individuals and families struggling with mental illness, disability or severe emotional problems in clinks across Dallas, programs in the community and even in clients' homes.

Dallas Metrocare Administrative Office
1380 River Bend Drive
Dallas, Texas 75247
(214) 743-1200 – Toll Free (877) 283-2121

MENTAL, CRISIS SERVICES, TELEPHONE COUNSELING SERVICES AND OTHER HELPFUL NUMBERS IN DALLAS COUNTY

Contact Crisis Line	972-233-2233
The Family Place– 24 Hour Crisis Line	214-941-1991
Adapt Community Solutions & Mobile Crisis Line	866-260-8000
Dallas Metrocare Services	277-283-2121
Parkland Psychiatry Emergency	214-590-8761
Green Oaks Hospital (NorthStar approved)	972-991-9504
Timberlawn Mental Health Services	800-426-4944
Crisis Intervention Mental Health Liaison	214-681-1795

APPENDIX F

Research and Corresponding Interview Questions

Research and Corresponding Interview Questions

Research Questions	Corresponding Interview Questions
What does marriage mean to you?	How would you describe your marriage? What does commitment mean to you? • When did you realize you were committed to this relationship?
What do African Americans attribute to the longevity of marriage?	Why do you believe your marriage has lasted as long as it has? • Was there a time when you thought your marriage was going to end, but it didn't? What held it together?
What family values, core beliefs and attitudes influence African Americans' thoughts of marriage?	Would you consider your parent's marriage a strong marriage? • What expectations of marriage did you draw from your parents? • Describe the role generational influences had in your marriage. What are some important values, beliefs and traditions developed from your marriage? Has religion or spirituality played a part in your marriage? • If so, in what capacity? • Has religion or spirituality been a challenge in your marriage? • How has the frequency in religious or spiritual practices affected your

marriage?
- How have you other outside resources contributed to or taken away from your marriage?

Research Questions	Corresponding Interview Questions
How do African Americans perceive happiness or joy as it relates to long-term marriage?	How has happiness/joy looked over the past 25 years in your marriage? What do you think is the greatest source of strength in your marriage? • What experiences have given you the greatest pleasure during marriage?
How do challenges in a marriage of 25 years or longer help strengthen or weaken the relationship?	In what capacity have your children influenced or guided your marriage? What has been the biggest challenge you've faced in your marriage? • How did you solve this challenge? • Did you seek outside help? What did you learn about your marriage from this challenge? Throughout the 25 plus year of marriage, how have you maintained autonomy while recognizing the importance of oneness?

APPENDIX G

Perceptions of Committed Marriage Questionnaire
Interview Questions

Perceptions of Committed Marriage Questionnaire
Interview Questions

1) How would you describe your marriage?

2) What does the term commitment mean to you?

- Possible follow-up question: When did you realize you were committed to this relationship?

3) Why do you believe your marriage has lasted as long as it has?

- Possible follow-up question: Was there a time when you thought your marriage was going to end, but it didn't?

- Possible follow-up question: What held it together?

4) Would you consider your parent's marriage a healthy marriage?

- Possible follow-up question: What beliefs or ideas did you draw from your parents regarding marriage?

- Possible follow-up question: Describe the role generational influences had in your marriage.

5) What are some important values, beliefs and traditions developed from your marriage?

6) Has religion or spirituality played a part in your marriage?

- Possible follow up question: If so, in what capacity?

- Possible follow-up question: Has religion or spirituality been a challenge in your marriage?

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- Possible follow-up questions: How has the frequency in religious or spiritual practices affected your marriage?

- Possible follow-up question: How have other outside resources contributed/taken away from your marriage?

7) How has joy or happiness looked over the past 25 years in your marriage?

8) What do you think is the greatest source of strength in your marriage?

- Possible follow-up question: What experiences have given you the greatest pleasure during marriage?

9) In what capacity have your children influenced or guided your marriage?

10) What has been the biggest challenge you've faced in your marriage?

- Possible follow-up question: How did you solve this challenge?

- Possible follow-up question: Did you seek counseling/outside help?

- Possible follow-up question: What did you learn about your marriage from this challenge?

11) Throughout the 25 plus years of marriage, how have you maintained autonomy while recognizing the importance of oneness?

APPENDIX H

Demographic Form

12) Participant Code: _____   Date of Interview: _____

Demographic Survey
Please read each question and provide your response.

What is your gender?   ○Male   ○Female

Current Age:	Age @ Marriage:
How long have you been married?	Is this your 1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc. marriage? If you've been married before, how long? Have you ever cohabitated?
Do you have siblings?	Length of sibling's marriage (if applicable) ○Brother or ○Sister _____ ○Brother or ○Sister _____ ○Brother or ○Sister _____ ○Brother or ○Sister _____
What is your birth order?	Example: Only child, first born, second, etc.
Do you identify with a specific religion? If yes, what religion?	What is the degree of religious involvement? If not, do you believe in some form of spirituality or higher power?
Highest level of education completed:	❏ 1st-8th Grade ❏High School Graduate/GED ❏Trade/Vocational/Some College ❏Bachelor's Degree ❏Master's Degree ❏Doctorate Degree ❏Other: _____
How many children do you have? (Biological; step; adopted)	○ Male or ○ Female Age____ Length of Marriage ____ ○ Male or ○ Female Age____ Length of Marriage ____ ○ Male or ○ Female Age____ Length of Marriage ____ ○ Male or ○ Female Age____ Length of Marriage ____

What is your annual income?	❏Less than $15,000 ❏$15,000 to $29,999 ❏$30,000 to $49,999 ❏$50,000 to $75,000 ❏$75,001