

“YES, THEY’RE OUT THERE”:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON
STRONG AFRICAN AMERICAN MARRIAGES

A Dissertation

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Abstract

Much of the research that exists on Black marriage is usually from a deficit perspective and focuses on the decline of marriages among Black Americans. Even so, many Black families *are* marriage based and it is unfortunate that little research exists that focuses on understanding these families from a strength-based approach. It is important that we learn what constitutes the characteristics of strong Black marriages and families and learn how Black U.S. families differ from and are similar to Euro U.S. families. This study looked at the hows, whys, and processes of enduring and sustaining marriages in Black families. Black couples were interviewed to examine strengths and characteristics that contribute to happy, strong, long-term marriage for Black Americans. A purposive sample of Black married (or remarried) couples were interviewed to identify factors and characteristics that contribute to a strong, long-term marriage. Participants in this study were 12 heterosexual Black couples (24 participants) that were married for at least 20 years. The average length of marriage for the couples was 33 years. Participants' ages ranged from 45 years to 75 years old. The findings revealed six salient themes discussed by participants. The first four themes were relational and marital in scope. They were: (a) the influence of children on marriage, (b) the influence of faith on marriage, (c) the sources of strength for marriage, and (d) the characteristics for a strong marriage. The final two themes were more societal in scope. They were: (e) the impact of Black community on marriage, and (f) the impact of racism on marriage. These findings highlight the strengths of strong, enduring Black marriages and families. This qualitative study provided insights and understandings from the participants' points of view, including findings that concentrated on experiences, processes, meaning and understandings of Black persons and families.

Introduction

From 1980 to 1990 only 17% of articles published in the Journal of Marriage and Family (JMF), the premier journal for family studies, included Black families (Demos, 1990). Of the articles appearing in JMF from 1939 to 1990, only 2% of the articles used data collected solely from Black subjects (Demos, 1990).

Since that time, the number of studies on Black families has increased substantially. Still, much of the research that examines Black families is limited to low-income or single-mother families (Clayton, Mincey & Blankenhorn, 2003; Taylor, Tucker, Chatters & Jayakody, 1997). Further, much of the research that exists on Black marriage is from a deficit perspective and focuses on the decline of marriages among Blacks (Cherlin, 1998; Nobles, 2007). Even so, many Black families *are* marriage based and it is unfortunate that little research exists that focuses on understanding these families from a strengths-based approach. Some scholars have called for researchers to notice strengths that have empowered Black families, instead of inspecting Black families from a pathology perspective (Allen & Conner, 1997; Royse & Turner, 1980). Daly and colleagues (1995) specifically call for “more research [on Blacks] from a non-deficit model” (p.246).

Many high-quality studies on Blacks have been done and will be discussed later in the literature review (e.g., Billingsley, 1992; Hill, 1972, 1999; McAdoo, 1997, 2007). Also, many high-quality studies have been done on marriage. These studies sometimes include a few marriage-based Black families in their sample, but detailed attention to the hows, whys, and processes of successful long-term marriages among Blacks is scarce (Marks, Nesteruk, Hopkins-Williams, Swanson & Davis, 2006). More specifically,

qualitative research looking at the processes and characteristics that make long-term Black marriages last is almost non-existent. In summary, much more work that recognizes and explains strengths within Black families generally, and in marriage-based Black families in particular, is needed.

Married couples with children are still quite prevalent among Black families; however, there has been a sharp decline in their numbers in the recent past. In 1968, the majority of Black Americans were self supporting and had stable marriages (Billingsley, 1968); 74% of Black families included two parents. Today, only 19% of Black families are married-couple families with children (2005 Census Bureau). The above figure accounts for Black two-parent families with birthed or adopted children. Although these percentages look bleak, dramatic changes in family structure over the last 30 to 50 years are not limited to Black families. Only 24% of all U.S. families were married couples with (birthed or adopted) children in 2000 (McClendon & Chadwick, 2005). Encouragingly, between 1995 and 2000, the proportion of Black children living in two-parent married coupled homes increased from 34.8% to 38.9% (Dupree & Primus, 2001). This figure accounts for Black two-parent families that are raising their biological children and children through informal and formal adoptions (i.e., non-biological children, family members, friends). This is especially important given that in Black families informal adoptions outweigh formal adoptions ten to one (Coles, 2006).

The literature on marriage and family frequently reflects two distinct categories of beliefs regarding family function and family structure. Conservatives have criticized the loss of traditional families and tend to promote the idea that the traditional “ideal” family is in decline (Popenoe, 1996; Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Wallerstein, 2000). They

attribute the decline of family to four factors: 1) rapid fertility decline, 2) the sexual revolution, 3) mothers entering the labor force, and 4) the divorce revolution (Popenoe, 1996). Conservatives hold the view that divorce threatens marriage-based families and creates fragile and unreliable families (Wallerstein, 2000). Family conservatives' greatest concern is the negative effect family decline has and will continue to have on children and society (Popenoe, 1996; Wallerstein, 2000).

Liberals tend to emphasize many of the changes in family as potentially positive. They hold the perspective that the family is not declining, just changing; they believe the effects of change in family are due to: 1) modernization of the family, 2) change in societal views on work, class, and gender relationships, and 3) a product of historical transformations (Hareven, 2000; Stacey, 1997). For them, family is an evolving and changing concept. Many liberals challenge the image that the married, heterosexual couple with children is superior to other family structures or forms (Stacey, 1996).

Unfortunately, neither group of scholars, conservative or liberal, has adequately addressed traditional, nuclear Black families. They have also overlooked strong Black marriages.

The proposed research is needed due to the minimal amount of research on Black families from a strengths-based approach. Much of the existing research on Black families has emphasized the dysfunction of the family, while the nuclear, traditional Black family has not been studied in terms of its strengths.

A need to develop an understanding of Black familial strengths is critical. Previous research done on Black families typically used quantitative data. However numbers are often not adequate to convey process, meaning, and understanding of family

function or family strengths. Qualitative research provides a basis for understanding from the participants' point of view and allows for the discovery of new ideas. Qualitative research concentrates on the processes, meanings, and understanding of families (Gilgun, Daly & Handel, 1992). It is important to know the strengths of Black families, because an orientation toward building on strengths can prove to be more important in the long term than repeatedly addressing problems as crises (Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993).

It is important that we learn what constitutes the characteristics of strong Black marriages and families and learn how Black families differ from and are similar to Euro U.S. families. It is likely, for example, that among Black Americans, marriage and family life are carried out in a context of greater contact with extended families than most Euro U.S. families. Black family function exists within the extended family and is shared by nuclear, extended and metaphorical kin (Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993).

As researchers, it is important that we do not portray a skewed perspective of Black families and their functioning. Research findings can serve as a means to intervention, education, and prevention. Cultural values and assumptions about Black families should be made explicit when evaluating family stability. It is important to move in the direction of theory construction for evaluating the functioning of Black family strengths (Schumm, 1985).

Review of Literature

In this review, ten topics will be addressed: 2.1) Decline in U.S. Marriages, 2.2) Factors Contributing to the Decline in Marriage, 2.3) Family Household Roles, 2.4) Decline in Black Marriages, 2.5) Change in Black Family roles, 2.6) Black Marriage and Families, 2.7) Strengths of Black Marriages and Families, 2.8) Long-term Strong Marriages, 2.9) Lack of Attention to Ethnicity in Strong Marriage Studies, and 2.10) Weaknesses of Current Long-term Marriages Studies. Key terms and definitions will also be presented.

2.1) Decline in U.S. Marriages

In the United States society, marriage is valued, and in many ways, serves as the basis of our society. Marriage is a socializing factor for both men and women (Palkovitz, 2002) and provides an environment to create family (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). The place of marriage in family life has changed over the past several decades (Cherlin, 1998; Coltrane, 1996). Since the 1960's, there has been a decline in the length of first marriages; rate of marriage has decreased (National Healthy Marriages Resource Center, 2004), rates of separation have increased; divorce rates have dropped after a peak in 1979, but remain high compared with the eras preceding the late 1960's; and cohabitation has become common-place (Cherlin, 1998; Coltrane, 1996). Total marriages showed a sharp drop in 1998 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). The divorce and marriage figures I have included may appear a bit dated; however they coincide with the strong marriage literature boom that ended in 1996 and will be discussed later in this chapter. The population of unmarried women will soon surpass the number of married women

(U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). This shows that the U.S. population is regarding the institution of marriage as less popular.

The decline of marriage is a concern to many because research data indicate that partners in marriage receive many benefits compared to non-married people (Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Heatherington, 2002; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Married people are healthier and live longer (Gottman & Notarius, 2000). Married people report being happier, wealthier, and having better sex lives (Heatherington, 2002; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Marriage also provides great stability and benefit to children: Children from marriage-based, never divorced families are socially and emotionally better developed (Popenoe, 1996; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Marriage also provides protection for children, leading to less deviant behavior (Wallerstein, 2000). Children with married parents are less likely to grow up in poverty (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

2.2) Factors Contributing to the Decline in Marriage

From a social exchange perspective, men and women only marry if the gains of marriage are positive (Ingoldsby, et al., 2004). Women have become more like men in their skills and abilities in the labor force market, therefore able to better provide for themselves (Coltrane, 1996). Many scholars view the availability of public assistance as a factor in the decline of marriage, because it guarantees financial compensation to single-parent families, thereby reducing the advantages of marriage.

Modernization is another factor hypothesized to contribute to the decline in marriage (Browning, 2003). Roles of the traditional family are no longer necessary to function in the 21st century society. Roles of husband as breadwinner, wife as caretaker

and nurturer, and children as non-deviant and obedient are no longer expected to be fulfilled.

The decline in marriage may have serious results for our society. The vast majority of United States Americans still marry. But marriages are undertaken at a later age and are more likely to result in divorce than at most times in history (Coltrane, 1998).

Non-marital Childbearing and Single Parenting. In 1955, the percent of out-of-wedlock births was 4.5%; fifty years later 35.6% of births are out of wedlock (Hamilton, 2005). The number of single-parent-headed households has tripled over the last four decades (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). In 1986, one out of five children were born into single parent households (Espenshade, 1986). In 2000, one out of three children were born into single parent households (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). For Black families, two out of three children are born into single parent households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

Fatherlessness. Fatherlessness creates economic hardships for many families. Families headed by women are living at the lowest levels of economic income compared with other family forms (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Less than half of all fathers pay child support after divorce (Secombe, 1999). Mothers are often forced to take on both roles of provider and nurturer (Gilligan, 1992). Children being raised in fatherless homes are being exposed to physical violence and sexual abuse at a much higher rate than children from married families (Waite & Gallagher, 2000, Wallerstein, 2000). Waite and Gallagher (2000) state that young girls growing up in fatherless homes are 27 times more likely to be subject to violent abuse from their mothers' boyfriends than children growing up in married couple families. For girls, fatherlessness is correlated with an increased risk of promiscuity (Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Wallerstein, 2000). In sum, "High divorce

rates, increase in out-of-wedlock births, and decline in marriage reflect and contribute to a perceived deterioration in values in post-industrial America” (Burbridge, 1995, p. 325).

Decline in Fatherhood. The decline in marriage in the U.S. corresponds with a decline in fatherhood. Men tend to view marriage and fatherhood as a package deal (Palkovitz, 2002). Factors including lack of education, economic adversity and racism are challenges for men who want to provide for their children but cannot (Allen & Conner, 1997). Some fathers provide financially for their children but are absent emotionally and socially (Horn, 2001). There is a lack of a father’s support of children emotionally, physically and financially (Palkovitz, 2002; Popenoe, 1996; Seccombe, 1999). A father’s absence can have harmful effects on children (Marsiglio, Day, Amato, & Lamb, 2000), but a growing number of men choose to be involved with the children they bring into the world (Popenoe, 1996). This leaves society with the question, “If adult manhood [is] no longer to be defined by marriage and fatherhood, what will the future American male do, aspire to and ultimately become?” (Marks & Palkovitz, 2004, p.123).

2.3) Family Household Roles

In general, married women do twice as much household work as married men (Coltrane, 1996). Among couples who both work full-time, the household labor gap is the smallest (Coltrane, 1996).

Coltrane (1996) argues that when men and women share household work, society may benefit. When fathers involve themselves in everyday tasks, it creates emotional and intellectual security and development in their children (Coltrane, 1996). When more fathers begin to share in routine housework and parenting, the gender-inequality balance will substantially decrease (Coltrane, 1996). There are distinct advantages to families

when fathers are actively involved in everyday routine house work and parenting (Coltrane, 1996). Women who are employed longer hours routinely spend less time on housework and men living with them do a greater share of the household labor (Demo & Acock, 1993; Greenstein, 1996; Heath & Bourne, 1995).

2.4) Decline in Black Marriages

In this section, factors that specifically influence the decline in Black marriage will be addressed. These include: a) Black non-marital childbearing, b) male employment and economic stress, c) mate availability, d) incarceration, and e) violence and death.

I will briefly highlight the little research that exists on Black marriages. In the 1980's, Epenshade (1986) compared Black marriages to white marriages, concluding that Black Americans stayed married for a shorter time, divorced more often, and had more out-of-wedlock births than whites.

In the 1990's Cherlin (1998) highlighted that the decline of marriage among Blacks was steeper than among Whites. Blacks had lower levels of marital quality compared to Whites (Bowman, 1993). Unmarried women headed 53% of Black families (Cherlin, 1998) and rates of separation and divorce were considerably higher for Black marriages. In 1995, the divorce rate for Black marriages was twice as high as the divorce rate for White marriages (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995).

Recent literature shows that marital quality differs across race. Black Americans characterize their spouses more negatively than Whites characterize their spouses (Broman, 2005). Blacks are more likely to feel their spouses waste money, hit or push them and have affairs (Broman, 2005). Pinderhughes noted that in 2000, only 16% of

Black males were married compared to 60% of White males; and 34% of Black females were married compared to 57% of White females (Pinderhughes, 2002).

There is still debate on the differences in Black and White marriages, whether Black marriages are deviant compared to White marriages. Emphasis on studying Black marriage and family is encouraged (McAdoo, 1988). The little research that exists on Black marriage is from a deficit perspective. Black marriages have been portrayed negatively as weak, deviant, and problem-ridden in previous and current literature (Cherlin, 1998; Noble, 2007). Although the centrality and prevalence of marriage in family life has declined in U.S. society as a whole, the decline has been greater for Black Americans (Chapman, 2007; Cherlin, 1998). The divorce rate for Blacks is 23 per 100 couples per year compared with 19 per 100 couples for whites (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

The factors influencing the steep decline among Black Americans concerning marriage according to Cherlin (1998) are unemployment, education and race. Although these factors do contribute, they cannot be held fully responsible for all of the decline (Cherlin, 1998).

Black non-marital Childbearing. For most Black Americans, marriage has become separate from childbearing (Cherlin, 1998). Seventy-four percent of first births among Black women are out of wedlock, roughly triple the rate of White women (Cherlin, 1998).

Keicolt and Fossett (1995) found that uneven ratios of males to females are predicted to result in lower rates of marriage for Black women. A higher proportion of children born to unmarried mothers and the greater percentage of female-headed

households are also linked to low sex ratios within the Black population (Kiecolt & Fossett, 1995). Their results found that sex ratio affects the likelihood that Black women have ever been married and that Black women who have been married are separated or divorced. “The effects of sex ratio on individual marital outcomes translates into dramatic consequences for Black family formation and family structure” (Kiecolt & Fossett, 1995, p.133). This is a challenge because the availability of potential mates affects not only premarital behavior, resulting in children born to unmarried mothers, but the propensity to marry, as well as willingness to maintain marriage (Guttentag & Seccord, 1983).

Male Employment and Economics. Unemployment is a significant factor in Black families (Broman, 1997). Testa and Krogh’s (1995) findings show that Black male employment is positively related to marriage rates. Black men in stable employment are twice as likely to marry as Black men who are not employed, in school, or in the military. A major factor in marital stress among Black Americans is the anxiety and discouragement felt by Black men related to financially providing for their families (Tucker & Mithcell-Kernan, 1995). Black males are less confident than White males about their ability to support a family (Chapman, 2007; Darity & Myers, 1987; Wilson, 1987). Some Black men have intense concerns about their roles as adequate providers, which is not the case for White men (Hatchett, Veroff & Douvan, 1995). Trying to assume traditional familial roles in Black families can be a challenge. They live in a society where traditionally and ideally men are supposed to have financial power and women are to be protected and provided for. Yet this has rarely been their reality. For many years, Black women have worked because it was easier for them to get a job than it was for Black men (Hatchett, Veroff & Douvan, 1995). Historically, Black women have

usually had more economic power in the home compared to White women. Economic power in the home is thus a very important issue for Black men and women (Hatchett, Veroff & Douvan, 1995). Still, in 2002, Black women had a median income of \$16, 282 and Black men had a median income of \$21, 466. These figures show that neither gender is faring very well in U.S. society (Chapman, 2007).

Declining male economic power and increasing female economic power may also play a role in family formation. Economic incentives to marry and stay married have shifted over time in the U.S. (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). A decline in marriage among Blacks has been perceived as a symptom and cause of economic hardship (Burbridge, 1995). Studies show that “employment plays a powerful role in the development and maintenance of Black families” (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995, p. 349). The unemployed also show lower levels of satisfaction with life (Broman, 1997). None the less, socioeconomic factors are not the sole contributor in the decline of Black marriages. Economics does not fully explain marital decline (Mare & Winship, 1991).

Research shows there are three trends that are associated with the decline in marriage: 1) employment and economic challenges, 2) mate availability, and 3) change in views of family roles. During the economic recession of 1990-1991, Black Americans were disproportionately laid off and suffered great job loss. This can be tremendously important because research shows that Black women (and men) weigh economic considerations more heavily preceding marriage than do white women and men (Cherlin, 1998). Wilson (1987) shows that the employment problems of Black men are an important factor in marriage. In sum, less employment for Black men means less Black marriage, although there are other factors to consider. In addition to employment and

economic challenges, researchers have focused on two other factors in the decline in Black marriages. They are: 1) mate availability, and 2) change in the view of family roles.

Mate Availability. Many researchers have argued that a shift in the availability of marriage partners affects family formation patterns (Darity & Myers, 1995; Guttentag & Seccord, 1983; Kiecolt & Fossett, 1995). There has been a gradual decline in the Black American sex ratio since the 1920s (Taylor, Tucker, Chatters & Jayakody, 1997). Some believe that sex ratio imbalance is a significant factor in Black marital decline (Guttentag & Seccord, 1983). Tucker and Mitchell-Krunan's (1995) study found that both Black men and women perceive a substantial shortage of men among the Black community. Seventy percent of Black women perceived a shortage of marriageable Black men. Black men supported this perception; 60 percent of them believed that there are more than enough women to marry. Where are the Black men? Many researchers hypothesize that the alarming figures of Black men incarcerated and murdered before the age of 45 shed some light on this situation.

Incarceration. Based on the US census rate in 2000, 12.2% of the population is Black, 68.1% is White, 12.5% is Hispanic, and 4.5% is of other minority groups. In 2002, prison census figures indicated that 47.5% of incarcerated persons were Black and 24.3% were white. The incarceration rate for Blacks is almost twice as high for whites and is not representative of the U.S. general population. Among males age 25 to 39, 12.6% of Blacks compared to 1.7% of whites are in jail (www.drugwarfacts.org/racepris.htm, 2005). Incarceration rates drop with age: males age 45 to 54 in prison was estimated at 4.5% for Black males, almost twice that of 1.7% of White males (McVay, 2004). In

2004, 17% of Black men in the U.S. had served time in prison (Keith Boykin Racial Index, 2004).

The incarceration rate for young Black men from the inner city is growing. In 1995, 16% of Black men in their 20s who did not attend college or work were in jail. In 2004, the percentage grew to 21%. In 2004, Black men who had dropped out of school and were jobless constituted an astonishing 72% of the prison population, compared to 34% of White males and 19% of Hispanics (Western, 2006). Sixty percent of Black men living in cities had spent time in prison (Eckholm, 2006). Thus for Black urban, inner city males, experiencing time in prison is almost a normative life event (Eckholm, 2006).

Violence and Death. Another factor that contributes to the availability of marriageable Black males is the continuing violence that affects the male Black community. Black males in the U.S. are dying at an alarming rate (David & Muhlhausen, 2000). While violent crime has decreased since the early 1990s, it is still higher than levels experienced before the 1960s. A 15-year-old Black male living in urban U.S.A. has anywhere from a 2.2% percent chance to a 8.5% chance of being murdered before his 45th birthday, depending on the level of violent activity in the city (Davis & Mulhausen, 2000). A Black male teenager is 7 times more likely than his white peers to be killed by a gun (Edelman, 2007). In another comparison, a Black man living in the U.S. has a 1 in 185 chance of being murdered before age 45, while a white man has a 1 in 345 chance of being murdered before the age of 45 (Davis & Mulhausen, 2000). In sum, Black men have twice the likelihood of white men to be murdered before the age of 45, regardless of where they live (Davis & Muhlhausen, 2000). “The continuing high mortality and incarceration rates of Black men are having a very profound impact on Black families”

(Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995, p. 347). “Black men are in short supply due to high rates of morality, incarceration in prison or mental hospitals, and drug addiction, as well as military service overseas and homosexuality. All these factors reduce the eligible pool, which means there are more women who desire partners at an age when fewer exist” (Chapman, 2007, p. 291).

2.5) Change in Black Family Roles

Currently there has been an increase in the number of cohabitating couples, out-of-wedlock childbirths, and acceptance of contraception use than in the past (Chapman, 2007; U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). The effects of these changes affect family formation, values, and the status of marriage as an institution (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

The Challenge of Kin Involvement in Black Marriages. Close kin involvement has been cited as a support to Black families (Taylor, Jackson & Chatters, 1997). However, it can also play a negative role in Black marriage. Close kin involvement can be problematic because it can hamper the development of the couple and their integration of individual networks (Hatchet, Veroff, & Douvan, 1995). The challenge of caring for family members across generations, including grandparents, parents, siblings, cousins, children, grandchildren, and “temporary” children can be difficult. An excerpt from the qualitative study by Marks et al., (2006) gives an example of how close kin involvement can place significant demands on a Black married couple:

Sheila and Rashaad had been married for several years but had been unable to have children. Sheila was asked by a pregnant cousin who had been struggling with substance abuse if Sheila would take her to the hospital. Following the delivery, Sheila’s cousin asked Sheila and Rashaad to take the baby home with her—the “temporary” child never left. Sheila and Rashaad eventually adopted the baby, as well as two other children from another extended family member who was abusing drugs and was an unsatisfactory parent. Sheila and Rashaad offered

an initial safehaven that became a long-term home for children of extended family or kin who were not prepared or willing to be responsible parents (p. 218).

In many Black families where similar circumstances occur, it seems that married life is comprised not only of a commitment to love and care for each other but also of commitments to care for children (biological, step-children, adopted, or “temporary”), other family members in need (often financial need), and aging parents. Such challenges are often met by relying heavily on a committed spouse. However, in many ways the complexity and strains of the demands outlined above are rooted in a relational connectedness that—although financially, physically, and emotionally taxing—supplies a meaning and purpose for these families that is bigger than themselves (Marks et al., 2006).

The Desire for Marriage Among Blacks. Despite the three challenges associated with decline in Black marriage (mate availability, employment and economic strains, and change in family roles and values), most Blacks still strongly desire to be married (Staples, 2007; Taylor, Jackson & Chatters, 1997). In the midst of all the obstacles faced, some Black men and women do establish long-term marriages (Allen & Connor, 1997; Cherlin, 1992). Black Americans, both men and women, married and not married, tend to hold a positive view of marriage (McAdoo, 1993). In 1987, Zollar and Williams found that Blacks who were married expressed greater life satisfaction than Blacks who were not married. Thomas’s (1990) results showed that 98% of his participants were somewhat happy or very happy with their marriages. This is remarkable given the stressors most Black couples face on a daily basis. McAdoo’s (1993) study on Black American’s marital satisfaction found that the overwhelming majority of Black husbands and wives showed that cooperation, mutual support, communication, mutual respect, and trust were key

positive aspects of their relationships. Only 6% of the couples reported being unhappy in their marriage. McAdoo (1993) further found that among Black families, cooperation is the most essential element in decision making for families.

2.6) Black Marriages and Families

Many researchers contend that families are the cornerstone that holds our nation together (Popenoe, 1996; Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Wallerstein & Kelly, 2004). With the focus of the available literature centering on the decline of Black families and marriages, I would like to investigate the Black marriages that are strong and remain strong. What is it about these marriages that allow them to be resilient? In the midst of concern over family values and decline, we must not forget to also ask, “Why do things sometimes go well?”

Andrew Billingsley highlights the strengths and weaknesses of Black families, focusing on the power that comes from strengths within Black families, in his book *Climbing Jacob's Ladder* (1992), a sequel to *Black Families in White America* (1968), where he discussed Black family life from a holistic approach reflecting the basic values and hopes of traditional Black families. Billingsley discusses in detail the functions of marriage in Black families and the traditional values of Black marriages. Billingsley also describes six major self-reported functions of coupled marriages among Black families. Marriage is considered very important for raising children, companionship, sustained love life (sex), safety (especially for women), help with the housework, and financial security. These findings came from his second analysis with the data from the national survey of Black Americans collected 1979 - 1980. For example, among Black families, egalitarian work values are more common than among white families. Men, women, and

children interchange roles and tasks within their family. Cooperation and collaboration are critical in Black families. Women in Black families play a much bigger role in economic provision and Black men play a greater role in sharing housework compared to White, married couple families (Billingsley, 1992). Marriage provides economic benefits of earned income and accrued wealth to the family, compared to other types of family relationships. Marriage and family still serve important functions and offer vitality to the Black community. Despite the many strains on marriage, it continues to hold its place in the Black community and society at large.

Black Life Satisfaction. Married men in America report higher levels of satisfaction with their life than non-married men and married women, as well as higher levels of self worth (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). This holds true for Blacks as well (Billingsley, 1992). Billingsley (1992) concludes that Black men show a higher level of satisfaction because marriage stands as a buffer between themselves and society. Black Americans make a distinction between how society sees them and how they view themselves. It requires balance and stability which married Black men seem to maintain better than non-married Black men. According to Billingsley, because married Black men may receive an extra level of support, acceptance, and honor in their marriage, they report higher levels of life satisfaction.

Role Performance in Black Marriages. Billingsley (1992) asked married Black adults to assess how they perform certain key roles, the housework, and who gets most out of the relationship. Having someone to share household duties was a function of marriage that was rated highly by both men and women. Both husband and wives reported that the wives do most of the cooking, cleaning, and laundry. Black husbands do

help with housework more than white husbands but the responsibility is varied depending on who is reporting the amount of shared housework (Broman, 1991; Padgett, 1997).

Employed Black women do fewer hours of housework than other employed women (Orbuch & Eyster, 1997) and employed Black men do more household work compared to employed White men (Shelton & John, 1993).

Who Wins in Marriage? Who gets more out of the marriage? Billingsley's (1992) finding shows that 62 percent of Black Americans state that both partners benefit equally from the relationship. Givers in the relationship reported that they give more emotionally to their partners, give more support financially, and offer more services to their spouses. Hill's (1999) work showed that Black families self report egalitarian values and patterns. When wives hold more egalitarian values of housework, the housework is more likely to be shared with husbands. Some studies also show that more egalitarian men share more housework and child care (Greenstein, 1995; Orbuch & Eyster, 1997). In general, most women still do more housework than men (Coltrane, 1999). Employed women feel that the division of labor is fairer and they enjoy higher levels of marital satisfaction when men perform more routine house work, such as cooking, cleaning and laundry (Coltrane, 1999).

Hill (1999) discusses the flexibility of family roles as a strength and value to Black families. In Black families, mothers perform some of the roles of fathers, fathers perform some of the tasks of mothers, and children perform some of the role of parents (Jarrett, 1994). This role adaptability has allowed Black families to remain secure and move forward in the face of challenges. Hatchett, Cochran and Jackson's (1991) findings showed that 88% of Black women and men agreed that they should share child care

responsibilities and 98% agreed that Blacks should spend more time raising their children. Seventy-five percent of Blacks felt that both men and women should have jobs to support the family (Hatchett et al., 1991).

The research of Hill and colleagues (1993) on married couple families showed that they are a strong feature of Black communities. These families are better able to resist the negative pressures of society compared to other family types. It is vital to note the great majority of Black families living outside of poverty are marriage-based.

Black Family Values. Billingsley (1992) discusses seven traditional Black family values. Love of learning is the first traditional value, followed by strong work orientation. A third value he highlights is politics and how it is interwoven throughout the lives of Black people. Political involvement has always been a way out and a way up for providing a sense of belonging to the whole. The fourth value is service to others. The fifth value, cooperation is working with others toward economic, political, and social goals. Sixth, pride in race, which comes through as a value rarely studied but inherent through generations. Lastly, economic independence through personally owned businesses and corporations are a value to the Black community because they provide an environment for strong Black families to thrive.

Hill's (1972, 1999) work mentions the values of spirituality, educational achievement, family ties, kin networks, and economic independence as being core to Black families. Other researchers note that Black Americans have historically had a strong achievement orientation. Blacks have made outstanding contributions in our society through their creativity. Most research on the academic orientation of youth highlights the cultural deficits and the low value placed on education by some parents.

Yet academic orientation of Black parents seem to be higher than that of White parents (Bachman, 1970; Coleman, 1966; Slaughter-Defoe, et al., 1990; Stevenson et al., 1990).

Why the disparity in achievement between Black students and White students if Black parents' academic orientation is higher than that of white parents? The work of Marks et al. (2006) offers one perspective and explanation.

In [his state of Louisiana], desegregation laws are skirted by private schools with costs that exclude most minorities. In most cases this is likely not intentional, but whether intentional or otherwise, the effects are the same. Namely, large portions of the middle- and upper-class voting contingency who are paying private school tuition have little incentive to offer supporting votes for public education tax bases. Subsequently, public education is often terribly underfunded as a result, and the likelihood of a child from the low- to middle-income bracket (which is disproportionately Black) receiving an education that will allow him or her to improve the standard of living for their rising African American generation is remote; in fact, many will not make it through high school. Rich struggles to find adequate textbooks for his students while predominantly (or exclusively) white classes in the private schools enjoy access to new computers and a much lower student-to-teacher ratio (Marks et al., 2006, p. 211).

Unfortunately this is common picture in most inner city schools, located in Black neighborhoods nationwide (Truscott & Truscott, 2005).

The phenomenon of racism is complex because it is evident in multiple areas of life, not just educational opportunities (Stewart, 2004). "Racism is a perennially piercing needle and thread in Black life that weaves the race together in a shared experience that sets these individuals and their families apart from those who have not experienced it" (Marks et al., 2006, p. 211).

It is imperative to note that despite the many adversities that Black people face daily, they still make it a priority to encourage their children to strive for excellence and to teach their children the importance and value of education. The "love of learning" as a Black cultural value is also shown in the presence of institutions like Historically Black

Colleges and Universities that reinforce the strong achievement orientation among Black people. Creating an institution that takes young Black men and women and produces doctors, lawyers, and scientists shows the importance education and achievement hold within the Black culture (Hill, 1999). Today, there are 103 Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

Royce and Turner (1980) found that Black families place high value on teaching their children self-respect, discipline, being happy, and cooperation with family. Gary and associates (1983) found that among strong Black families, the values they rely most upon to facilitate their achievement are the family, the church, the school, and the workplace. These findings agree with Hill's earlier findings of strong achievement orientation, strong family ties, strong religious practices and beliefs, and strong work orientation among Black families (Hill, 1999). When Gary et al. (1983) asked the participants to self-report the values they thought were most important, these results showed that within their own families, family unity, coping strategies, mutual support, and sharing responsibilities were of most value.

The second value Hill addresses is strong work orientation. Kaplan and Tausky's (1972) study reveals a strong work ethic among Blacks. Most low-income Blacks prefer to work over receiving welfare (Kaplan & Tausky, 1972). Goodwin (1983) and Rank's (1994) research also supports this finding. Kim's (1996) findings show that this choice is typical among many poor Black families in that they prefer to rely on self and have a disapproving attitude towards government assistance. Married-couple Black families benefit from economic stability because the wife typically works. In 1990, the income for

Black families with working wives was twice that of Black families with non-working wives (Hill, 1999).

Hill (1999) discusses strong family bonds as a value among the Black community. Aschenbrenner (1975) goes into more detail in describing specific values that make up strong kinship bonds: (a) “a high value placed on children, (b) the approval of a strong protective mother, (c) emphasis on strict discipline, (d) strength of family bonds, and (e) the ideal of the independent spirit. These values are reflected in social practices among African Americans” (Aschenbrenner 1975, p.137).

The last value of strong Black families that Hill (1999) discusses is strong religious orientation. According to the National Urban League (NUL) Black Pulse survey, Black Americans from middle-income were more likely to belong to and attend church regularly than low-income Black Americans (Hill, 1999). Taylor (1988) found that married Blacks’ participation in church was higher than that of never-married or formerly married Blacks. Indeed, religious beliefs, behaviors, and commitment are a valuable and fundamental part of the Black culture and community in general, but religious faith appears to be especially important to marriage-based Black families, a point we will return to later.

2.7) Strengths of Black Marriages and Families

Strengths of Black families are often ignored or overlooked (Cherlin, 1998). In the book *Black Families*, edited by Harriette McAdoo (1997), she highlights the enduring legacy of Black families and the importance of family. The book looks at the diversity within Black families, showing that all Black families are not alike. Although the book does address some of the poverty issues plaguing Black families, strengths such as

supportive kin networks are highlighted. The book provides a hopeful, yet realistic, view of the current state and future of Black families in America.

Kin networks and social support have always been a strength of Black families: cooperation and sharing among a large network (Cherlin, 1998). They have also been viewed as an important resource for family coping (Hatchett & Jackson, 1993). “The thread that kept the Black community together was a social exchange network embedded in a value system and belief system based upon the norm of reciprocity- a commitment to collective cooperation that permeated all the institutional structures within African American communities” (Hatchett & Jackson, 1993, p.110). Friends, church members, and community have all been critical in the survival and functioning of Black American families and marriages for centuries and social support networks in Black families have been studied for many years. Billingsley’s book (1968), *Black Families in White America*, Robert Hill’s (1972) *The Strength of Black Families*, and Carol Stacks’s *All Our Kin* (1974) paved the way for the current research on understanding the importance of support networks within Black families. In short, many Blacks feel high obligations to extended kin, aunts, uncles, and cousins (Cherlin 1998).

Taylor, Chatters and Jackson’s research (1997) showed that Black Americans use the extended family to pool resources, alleviate economic deprivation, and create a better financial living situation for the family. Kin systems among Black Americans are characterized by close living proximity, strong sense of family obligation, flexible boundaries within the household, frequent communication with relatives, frequent get-togethers with family, and availability of aid to help one another (Hatchett & Jackson, 1993).

Another strength of Black culture is fictive kin (Stack, 1974). “Fictive kin” is defined as “unrelated individuals who often provide more family support services than blood kin” (Hill, 1999, p.129). There are costs and benefits when depending on kin for support (Cherlin, 1998). Research shows that family members constitute a primary source of help during hard times. Neighbors and LaVeist’s (1989) study indicated that less than 46% of those experiencing economic hardships sought professional help, while 89% contacted members of their informal network. Black families and kin serve as a vital resource for the survival and progress of Blacks, but families that provide resources often can be strained if they are repeatedly asked for help (Hatchett, Cochran, & Jackson, 1991). Neighbors (1997) explains informal social support within Black families as a “double edged sword” (p. 293). The assistance these families provide can also be the source of challenges. As a colleague has stated: “The good news is that no one starves...the bad news is that no one gets ahead” (Marks et al., 2006).

Marks et al. (2006) describe that “when a dual-earner couple in a committed marriage has a large network of close family relationships—and a majority of those family members have lower income levels and no spouse to lean on in trying times (emotionally or financially)—the married, *wealthy poor* couple often become a primary source of assistance” (p. 216). Marks et al., further explains:

Knocks of need are an aspect of African American culture that can make it difficult for a married Black couple to “get ahead” (i.e., pre-pay loans, invest significant portions of income, save a nest egg, or plan for retirement) because the possibility of financial emergencies rests not only with immediate family but in their extended family and kin networks as well, thus transforming the “possibility” of financial emergency into a “probability.” Even so, Black families rarely explicitly complain or seem embittered by this challenge. It seems this is a sacrifice that has become an accepted part of life. The good news is that no one goes hungry...the bad news is that no one gets ahead. What those outside this culture often fail to see is that while one may educationally and financially “pull

themselves up by the bootstraps,” it is difficult (perhaps impossible) for a single marriage to “pull up” an entire extended family network” (p. 217).

Family members tend to support material needs, yet friends support emotional needs (Taylor & Chatters, 1986) and provide more companionship support (Taylor, Chatters & Jackson, 1997) among Black Americans. Gibson (1982) found that Blacks in middle age depend on friends for psychological support. In McAdoo’s work on support networks, 25% of Black mothers reported that friends provided more support than family (1980). Taylor and Chatters found that 80% of elder adults found support and assistance from friends (1986).

Role of Family. The most frequently written about aspect concerning the Black community is the role Black extended families play in the survival of Black families (Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, & Lewis, 1990; Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, & Jayakody, 1997). Black Americans keep in frequent contact with family members. More than 66% of participants report contacting relatives at least once a week (Hatchett & Jackson, 1993; Hatchett, Cochran & Jackson, 1991). Among Black families, more than half of them reported that their immediate family members live in the same city as themselves (Hatchett & Jackson, 1993; Hatchett, et al., 1991). More than 90 percent of respondents in this study reported that they are very close or fairly close to their family members (Hatchett & Jackson, 1993; Hatchett, Cochran, & Jackson, 1991). Also, closeness of family members predicted the frequency of interaction and aid received from family members (Hatchett & Jackson, 1993). Frequency of interaction with family and the family life cycle predicts aid received from family (Hatchett & Jackson, 1993). Results from Neighbors’ (1997) study show that family members were more likely to provide total support, for example “whatever I need” or instrumental assistance defined as

financial support, goods or services, and transportation (Taylor, Chatters, & Jackson, 1997).

Child Care. Findings show that 40% of working mothers depend on relatives for day care services, with most of the child care being provided by grandmothers (Jarret, 1985; Jayakody, Chatters, & Taylor, 1993). Black American respondents from the NUL Black Pulse Survey reported that 27% offered childcare services, 33% lent money to relatives, and 26% provided transportation to a family member (Hill, 1999). Because extended kin and fictive kin are so important in the Black community, inner cities have created programs such as Big Brother and Big Sister to provide this support and have developed surrogate extended families to service the needs of Black families (Hill, 1999).

Role of Religion. One of the greatest strengths among Black Americans is their strong commitment to religion (Hill, 1999). The church has been called to fulfill many roles and provide multiple services within the Black community (Frazier, 1974). A 1994 Gallup poll showed that 82 percent of Black Americans reported that religion was very important to them (Hill, 1999). An overwhelming majority of Blacks attend church regularly, according to the NUL Black Pulse survey (Hill, 1999). Indeed, religious involvement among Black Americans is not just common, it is typical (Ellison, 1997; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). Much research has been conducted on religious participation and the positive link it has with marital stability and duration (Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004). However, such studies have focused primarily on white families (Marks, Nesteruk, Swanson, Garrison, & Davis, 2005).

Due to the high level of religious participation and salience of religions for Black Americans, future research in this area needs to include religion when Black families are studied (Taylor & Chatters, 1991; Jarrett, 1995). Dollahite and Marks (2005) emphasize three dimensions of religion that should be considered- religious practices, religious beliefs, and faith communities.

Although more data are needed, available studies show that religious Blacks report a higher level of life satisfaction than non-religious Blacks (Ball, Armistead, & Austin, 2003). Ellison's (1997) results showed that Blacks who participated in religious activity or self-reported as highly religious had a higher quality of family life. This in turn is related to emotional, physical, and psychological well-being and functioning, therefore improving the likelihood of marital success (Dollahite & Marks, 2005; Marks, 2006). Taylor and Chatters' (1991) research showed that Blacks engage in religious activity on a regular basis, several times a month, 93 % pray, 82% listen or watch religious programs, and 74% read religious material. Personal devotional time may play a role in the positive perceptions of Black Americans' family life (Ellison, 1997).

On a social level, church members often serve as fictive kin as defined and described earlier. Strong emotional and spiritual ties with fellow church members make church a central source for fictive kin relationships to form and be sustained (Marks & Chaney, 2006). Sympathy, empathy, deep concern, and love are prevalent enough in many Black congregations that many refer to their faith community as "church" families (Marks et al., 2005; Marks & Chaney, 2006). Due to its personal, spiritual, social, and practical power, church is a primary coping resource, often second only to family (Marks & Chaney, 2006). Church members play a vital role in family support in the

form of advice and encouragement, and prayer and assistance to elderly Blacks (Taylor & Chatters, 1986). In sum, “Historically and currently, the Black church sustains the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual needs of its church and community members” (Marks & Chaney, 2006).

Black Marriage, Health and Longevity. Ross and colleagues (1990) conclude in their *Journal of Marriage and Family* literature review that “compared to married people, the non-married...have higher rates of mortality than the married: about 50% higher among women and 250% higher among men” (p. 1061). Hummer, Rogers, Nam, and Ellison (1999) demonstrated that high levels of religious attendance are a potent factor in longevity among the general population but that the influence of religious attendance is nearly twice as potent among the Black population. In fact, Hummer and colleagues (1999) found nearly a 14-year advantage in longevity for Blacks who attend worship services more than once a week compared with those who never attend.

A follow-up study by Marks and colleagues (2005) illuminates six reported reasons for this influence as explained by Blacks. These participants reported that particularly among Blacks: (a) non-religious persons are more likely to use unhealthy coping strategies, especially alcohol and drugs, (b) religious persons have quantitatively and qualitatively superior social support networks via their “church family,” and (c) prayer is a meaningful and valuable coping resource. Although previous research has identified these factors, this study’s depth offers some *explanations* of why and how these factors interface with Black life, especially in an inner-city context.

Marks et al. (2005) also offer three additional themes that are underdeveloped in the research on Blacks: (a) that active religious involvement during the advanced years

promotes longevity by offering respect, veneration, and meaning to the participant, (b) that drug and alcohol abuse (which religions generally oppose) not only involve direct health risks, but worsen danger through opening the door to the high-risk urban “street life,” and (c) that “giving up on faith” is virtually equated with “giving up on life” in faith-based Black culture. In sum, these experience-based “insider hypotheses” offer some important new considerations for religion-health-longevity researchers. Because research has shown a positive link between religious participation and marital stability and duration, the high levels of religious participation among Blacks should affect marriage in a positive way. Due to the many negative outside stressors specific to Black families, religion serves as a positive stressor in their lives.

Key Terms and Definitions. Before reviewing literature on strong marriages, we must outline and define strong marriages. Stinnett and Defrain’s (1985) study laid the foundation for conducting family research from a strengths-based approach. Stinnett and Defrain’s family-strengths model shows six major characteristics of strong marriages: Commitment, appreciation, communication, time, spiritual awareness, and coping ability. Their study included 130 families within and throughout the U.S. from different races, classes, ethnicities, and religious and educational backgrounds.

Olson and DeFrain (1994) list three overall dimensions of family strengths: cohesion, flexibility, and communication. Cohesion is defined as the degree of emotional bonding that family members have toward one another and the degree of individual autonomy they experience or the degree an individual was separated from or connected to his or her family system or “togetherness” (p. 72). Adaptability or flexibility is defined as “the ability of a marital or family system to change its power structure, role relationships

and relationship rules in response to situational and developmental stress” or the extent to which the family system was flexible and able to change (Olson & DeFrain, 1994, p. 75). Another characteristic of strong marriages is their connection to extended family and their willingness to seek help from extended family in time of need (Olson & DeFrain, 1994).

Many of the characteristics outlined by DeFrain and colleagues are included in the notion of family resiliency. Resiliency is defined by Walsh as the ability to “withstand and rebound from crisis and adversity” (1996, p. 261). In many ways, for these strong families, challenges define them (Marks, Nesteruk, Hopkins-Williams, Swanson & Davis, 2006). For purposes of this study, strong marriage is defined as heterosexual Black couples, in their first or second marriage, with or without children, who have been married for 20 years or longer, and both self-report their marriage as happy and strong.

2.8) Long-term Strong Marriages

An abundance of literature focuses on divorce and the consequences of divorce in our society. The future emphasis in producing satisfying marriages and strong families should be focused on strengthening relationships as much as preventing relationship breakdown (Markham, Halford, & Cordova, 1997; Olson & DeFrain, 1994). Only within the past few decades has the literature begun to focus on marriages that remain intact.

Strong Marriage Literature 1965-1996. Of the literature that focuses on enduring and long-term marriages, the majority of the research studies were conducted between 1986 and 1996 (Kaslow & Robinson 1996; Wallerstein & Blakeslee 1995; Klagsburn 1995; Levenson, Carstensen & Gottman, 1993). In 1965, Cuber and Haroff did a

qualitative study on long-term marriages with over 400 couples. Their findings divided marriages into two categories, instrumental marriage and intrinsic marriage.

Instrumental marriage regarded the benefits of marriage over being single. Intrinsic marriage celebrates the commitment to the individual not just the entity of marriage.

Weishaus and Field (1988) studied couples who had been married for 50 years or longer. Their results showed that acceptance and commitment were characteristics of a long-duration marriage. Lauer, Lauer, and Kerr did a qualitative study in 1990 to determine what factors explained a stable marriage from the participants' perspective. They gathered data from 100 couples who had been married at least forty-five years. Their findings showed that engaging in activities with someone they liked, being committed to the marriage, and humor were characteristics to a stable marriage. It was also important to agree on the same goals in life, such as friends, parenting, and decision making. The husband and wives' results were similar, showing that characteristics for a successful marriage did not vary greatly among the sexes (Lauer, Lauer & Kerr, 1990). Three-fourths of the couples had agreeing responses on the same items. The previous study was done in an attempt to gain more detailed information about long-term marriages and was designed after the first study done by Lauer and Lauer in 1986. This study included 351 couples who had a median length of marriage at 25.5 years. The respondents listed liking their spouse, being committed to their spouse, and seeing their spouse as a best friend as important factors to their successful marriage. Benefits of an enduring marriage were intimacy, happiness, and mental and physical health (Lauer & Lauer, 1986).

Kaslow and Hammerschmidt completed a quantitative study in 1992 with couples who had been married for at least 25 years. This study was a pilot test for a larger international, five-country study of long-term marriages. Kaslow and Hammerschmidt interviewed 20 American couples asking them open-ended questions to determine the satisfaction of the couples' marriage. Not all couples in the study were equally satisfied. The greatest consistency was within couples who scored highest on satisfaction levels.

Fennell (1993) investigated 147 couples who indicated through the dyadic adjustment scale measurement that they were satisfied in their marriage. The goal of this study was to determine the characteristics that contributed to the longevity of the marriage relationship by interviewing these couples who proved to be satisfied in their marriage by the dyadic adjustment scale (DAS). Fennell found that there was a high level of congruence among husbands and wives about the key characteristics that lead to a successful and stable marriage. This main finding is supported by Lauer, Lauer and Kerr's earlier (1990) work that congruence is a factor that contributes to satisfaction in marriage. The top five factors or characteristics that Fennell found to influence stable long-term marriages were lifetime commitment, loyalty to spouse, strong moral values, respect for spouse, and commitment to sexual fidelity. Desire to be a good parent, and faith in God and spiritual commitment followed.

Kaslow, Hansson, and Lundblad (1994) conducted a study in Sweden as the first phase of the international study on long-term marriages. They asked 95 couples who had been married or cohabitating for 20 years or longer to complete a questionnaire. Findings from the study showed that Swedish couples self-reported high levels of

marital satisfaction and high levels of coherence. These results were similar to Kaslow and Hammersmidt's (1992) earlier findings with studying long-term married couples in that Kaslow, Hansson, and Lundblad (1994) also found that men reported greater levels of marital satisfaction than women. Further, trust in one's partner was of most importance in enduring marriages.

Robinson and Blanton's (1993) study of 15 couples married 30 years or longer gave key qualities of enduring marriages. Each spouse was given a one-hour unstructured interview where they were encouraged to tell stories and discuss the qualities that helped sustain their marriage. The five key qualities that resulted were: (a) intimacy, balanced with autonomy. This quality was a central concept for the couple's marriage, (b) commitment, meaning that divorce was not an option for the couple, (c) communication: sharing thoughts and feelings with one another and discussing problems together, (d) congruence: the couples had similar perceptions of strengths of their relationship, and finally, (e) religious faith, the faith and belief of the couples and their involvement in their faith community. The researchers took these qualities and created a theoretical model to capture the relationship between the marital qualities (concepts) that helped sustain the marriage, shared from the participants' perspective.

Kaslow and Robinson's 1996 (a second-phase study of Robinson and Blanton's 1993 piece) showed that religion, children, and fidelity were key factors in successful long-term marriages. Couples were asked to fill out a questionnaire, the DAS, a problem rating list, and general demographic information. The respondents' results showed that the importance of commitment to the marriage and the spouses' commitment to one another was key to a satisfying long-term marriage. Good communication skills were

necessary for a healthy and satisfying marriage. Flexibility, cooperation, and good problem-solving skills helped the family to deal with intrafamilial difficulties. Shared values among couples was referred to as “the spiritual dimension” by many respondents. And finally “fun” was listed as an essential ingredient in marital satisfaction (Kaslow & Robinson, 1996).

Sharlin (1996) conducted a similar study on long-term married couples in Israel as part of a larger on-going international research project, of which the above Kaslow and Robinson (1996) study was a part. Findings showed that love was the primary key for couples staying together and enjoying their lifestyle together. Mutual trust, loyalty and fidelity, love, mutual support and mutual appreciation were listed as the top five characteristics for a successful and satisfying marriage. The women and men showed no significant differences in their reports of the most important characteristics to a satisfying marriage. In Israel, family life is highly valued, and the divorce rate is among the lowest in the world.

Levenson, Castenson, and Gottman (1993) questioned 156 couples who were both satisfied and dissatisfied in their marriage. The goal of their study was to compare older-aged married couples (60 to 70 years) to middle-aged married couples (40 to 50 years). Their finding showed that older-aged married couples reported less conflict, equal levels of mental and physical health, and fewer gender differences in their sources of pleasure as compared to middle-aged married couples. Their findings also showed that in dissatisfied marriages, wives reported more mental and physical health problems than their husbands.

Mackey and O'Brien's (1996) findings resulted in three characteristics of a long-term marriage: adaptability, resilience, and commitment. The study included 60 couples who had been married 20 years or more. In-depth interviews conducted over a four-year period revealed that couples were able to adapt to social and relational changes, and that commitment to one another was solid and would hold their marriage together. Commitment, love, friendship, and companionship were characteristics of these marriages. Their findings suggest that stable marriages involve perseverance through challenging times and developing marital skills. Marital skills were acquired through the years, not initially brought into the marriage (Mackey & O'Brien, 1996).

Wallerstein and Blakeslee's (1995) book *The Good Marriage* lists some key characteristics of a happy marriage: respect, integrity, friendship, and trust were key points. Wallerstein and Blakeslee conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 50 married couples whose average married length was 21 years. First, individual interviews were administered, followed by one joint interview. The concluding findings were that marriage is transformative. Flexibility and a willingness to reshape the marriage when needed is an important aspect to a successful marriage. Participants reported that creating their marriage has been their major commitment in life and their greatest achievement.

Strong Marriage Literature 1999-Present. In 1999, Gottman wrote a book discussing strengths of enduring and long-term marriages, titled *Seven Principles to Making Marriage Work*. This book was a review of existing literature on long-term marriage.

Parker (2000) found that commitment and companionship were the most strongly relayed characteristics of a strong and stable long term marriage. Responses elicited the concept of “coupleness,” doing things together, sharing, teamwork, and the concept of desired qualities of tolerance, support and communication. The one aspect of her study that was unique was the idea of “public marriage,” the symbolism and celebration of the marriage relationship. However, Gottman (1999) concluded from his review that the key to a lasting marriage is “mutual respect for and enjoyment of each other's company,” which allows positive thoughts about one's partner to outweigh negative thoughts.

Bachand and Caron's (2001) study used qualitative methods to gain further insight into happy long-term marriages. They studied 15 heterosexual couples in their first marriage who had been married for 35 years or longer and self-reported their marriage as happy. Their findings showed that love, friendship, and having similar backgrounds were the most beneficial factors to a happy, enduring marriage. Their study also showed congruence in the couple's responses, similar to findings in previous research (Fennel, 1993; Kaslow & Hammerschmidt, 1992; Lauer, Lauer & Kerr, 1990).

These researchers identified the following attributes of healthy couples: friendship and love, respect and feeling appreciated, trust and fidelity, good communication, good sexual relations, shared values, cooperation and mutual support, enjoyment of shared time, the ability to be flexible when confronted with change, and a sense of spirituality. A belief in the institution of marriage and “assumption of permanence” also characterizes long-lasting marriages.

Of the four most influential models of strong families, seven characteristics are shared by at least two of the models. These characteristics are: (a) Time and

involvement, planned activities, and time together to foster togetherness; (b) Decision-making and rules, every member of the family has a part in decision making. Flexibility and limits are well balanced; (c) Loyalty and unity, the family's members are committed to one another's well-being; (d) Values and religious orientation, moral values and goals are shared among family members as to what is important; and (e) Emotional closeness and support. Caring about one another and expressing appreciation for one another is essential. Affirmation, support, respect, and trust in one another are key in fostering closeness; (f) Communication, open communication is encouraged in strong families. Each member speaks for themselves and for their feelings without putting blame on others; (g) Coping and problem solving. Developed resources and skills allow for strong families to face and solve problems. (Curran, 1983; Olson & McCubbin, 1983; Otto, 1963; Stinnett & Defrain, 1985; Stinnett & Saucer, 1977). Other than Gottman's (1999) book and the Parker et al. (2000) study, little significant work on strong marriages has been done since 1996. What happened to the concern and focus on enduring marriage? Why has there been a shift in research concerning long-term marriages?

2.9) Lack of Attention to Ethnicity in Strong Marriages

Of the 12 studies I reviewed on long-term marriage, only two studies reported Black couples as participants. Lauer and Lauer (1986) reported that 6.5% of the couples in their study were minorities consisting of Blacks, Hispanics and Asians. Of those 6.5%, it was unclear if both spouses were of the same race. In Levenson et al.'s (1993) study of 156 married couples, only 2.6% were Black. Due to the absence of Black couples in studies of long-term marriage and the lack of prevalence of Black couples in family and marriage literature, additional research is needed that focuses specifically on

Black marriages. My study aimed to understand and highlight Black couples in long-term marriages from a strength-based approach looking at processes, coping strategies, strengths and challenges of marriage from the couples' perspective.

2.10) Weaknesses of Current Long-term Marriage Studies

The existing qualitative studies on long-term marriages typically include lists of characteristics of strong, enduring marriages. In the body of strong-marriage literature there is a need for more in-depth studies that examine the *hows*, *whys*, and *processes* of couples who have long-term marriages.

Studies on long term-marriage have been neglected over the past six to ten years. Researchers have failed to pass on the torch, or new researchers have failed to pick it up, or both. Investigation of long-term marriages and strong families ceased. A list of characteristics or keys is not enough to understand *how* or *why* strong enduring marriages succeed.

2.11) Conclusion

We know little about strong marriages in general, less about Black marriages, and even less about strong Black marriages. My purpose for conducting this study was to add strength-based research to the literature on Black marriages and families.

I did this by examining happy, strong long-term Black marriages. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe and capture the meaning of long-term marriage for Black couples. Further, I want to look at the *hows*, *whys*, and *processes* of enduring and sustaining marriages in Black families. I focus on the meaning of experiences of the couples and found their individual experiences central (Creswell, 1998; Shank, 2002). The purpose of this study is to examine strengths and characteristics

that contribute to strong, long-term marriage for Blacks. I discuss the methods of my study in the following chapter.

Methods

The research method for this study was qualitative. Qualitative research is typically based on collected data comprising of words instead of numbers (Gilligan, 1992). These data are conceptualized, collected, analyzed, and interpreted qualitatively (Gilgun, 1992).

Qualitative research typically includes four main distinctions. First, qualitative research seeks depth rather than breadth. Second, qualitative research tends to focus on how and why people think and behave the way they do, and how they make meaning of their lives and experiences (Ambert, Adler, Adler & Detzner, 1995). Distinction three is that qualitative research often examines multiple levels in the family (i.e., individual, marital, parental), as opposed to focusing on one level (Ambert et al., 1995). A final distinction of qualitative research is that it tends to be discovery-oriented rather than focusing on verification of pre-existing theories and ideas. Therefore, most qualitative research is not directed by theory-driven questions or hypotheses, at least not to the extent that most quantitative research is, because qualitative research is typically carried out from an inductive, theory-building perspective (Ambert et al., 1995; Becker & Geer, 1960; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

3.1) Qualitative Research with Families

Qualitative research may fit especially well in studying families because this approach can serve as a “window...through which we can observe patterns of interaction” between family members (Daly, 1992a, p. 4). In this study I used an in-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interview based on open-ended questions to examine strengths and characteristics that contribute to strong, long-term Black marriages. Interview-based,

qualitative approaches to studying families can “give us windows” (Daly, 1992a, p. 4) and “lift the veils” (Blumer, 1969, p. 32) to meanings, processes, and relationships that are difficult to obtain through other approaches (Gilgun, Daly, & Handel, 1992).

Qualitative research relies on the participants’ personal representations and constructions of their experiences and realities, which are compared and contrasted across individuals or families, thereby offering a rich view of life from multiple perspectives. This approach stands in contrast with quantitative research that tends to focus on averages, while trimming outliers, and minimizing the importance of the individual or family experience.

3.2) Validity and Reliability in Qualitative Research

Validity and reliability have important parallels in qualitative research but are obtained and expressed differently than they are in quantitative research (Marks & Dollahite, 2001). Four key qualitative standards are credibility, dependability, triangulation, and confirmability (Denzin, 1994). I will discuss each standard briefly, followed by a brief discussion of reflexivity and its relationship to the proposed project.

Credibility. Credibility refers to the fit between the intended meaning of the participant and the researcher’s interpretation of the participants’ statements and narratives. The central question is, “Am I accurately communicating what my participant is telling me?” (Gilgun, 1992). Credibility can be enhanced in several ways. To improve the credibility of the proposed study, I personally conducted all of the in-depth qualitative interviews. This effort provided at least two key advantages. First, I was able to (first hand) pick up on non-verbal cues and communications that are easily lost in transcription. Another advantage of meeting and interviewing the participants face-to-

face is that doing so provided me with the constant opportunity to ask participants to clarify the meanings of what they were saying, reporting, and relating in their interviews. After analysis of the data and creating themes, I “member checked” my themes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Specifically, I returned to the participants to ask them if the themes I found reflected the message they were trying to relay. In short, I asked them, “Do these themes make sense?” This allowed me another check to make sure that my data were credible. A final key to increasing credibility is that I personally transcribed all of the interviews, in an effort to insure maximum accuracy of the participants’ statements (Deinhart, 1998).

Dependability. Another key to enhancing reliability in qualitative research is dependability. Dependability involves the consistency, stability, and accuracy of the research instrument over time. The 15-question, semi-structured interview questionnaire served as a “dependable” base for the study. Although I had the flexibility to explore unique issues that arose, the carefully designed instrument insured that all participants addressed issues, topics, problems, and challenges that were central to the study.

Confirmability. Confirmability is where the researcher maintains objectivity and produces a study that is not idiosyncratic (Slife & Williams, 1995). In connection with the principle of confirmability, all data should be traceable to the original source. I was able to substantiate reported themes by referring back to the primary data interviews (cf. Marks & Dollahite, 2001) which I transcribed personally. I kept paper and audio copies of all the interviews so that any data presented in my dissertation will be confirmable. Relevant additional data not presented in my dissertation will be saved. Further, I kept paper copies of my open coding and analyses to document my step-by-step efforts. In

sum, I established a data audit trail that showed how I constructed each theme through coding and analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Triangulation. Multiple informants and multiple methods of data collection, also known as triangulation, provide a significant and noteworthy check for validity and reliability (Brewer & Hunter, 1989). In this study, three data points, the husband's report, the wife's report, and my observation(s) and field notes served as multiple informant sources: A demographic sheet and a short questionnaire was given to participants. In addition, open ended questions were asked by me, the interviewer. Using multiple methods of data collection in this way helped me check for congruence across persons and methods.

Handel (1996) argued that most "family research" is not truly family research because it focuses exclusively on one relationship (usually the mother-child or marital relationships). Handel further emphasizes, "No member of any family is a sufficient source of information for that family" (p. 346). Consistent with these views, I interviewed 12 wives and 12 husbands (n = 24 individuals; 12 married couples).

Reflexivity. Miles and Huberman (1994) discuss reflexivity in qualitative research as an alternative to objectivity in quantitative research. Reflexivity refers to carefully identifying and considering biases the researcher holds that might impact the collecting, interpreting, or reporting of the data. Biases are especially important to consider and disclose when the researcher is an insider of the group that is being studied (Daly, 1992). As a researcher, I question whether it is possible to be truly objective but believe that a suitable alternative is to be open, honest, and forthright with personal biases that may influence the study.

I was raised in a strong, marriage-based Black family (the selected focus of this study). Growing up, my family served as a rock for extended family members, close friends, and the community. Because of the strength of my family, we were able to meet many emotional, financial, and housing needs of those outside my nuclear family. At a young age, I was quite aware that my family experience was unique as a Black American. Because of my personal experiences throughout life, I chose to learn more about strong Black families, beginning with enduring marriages.

In sum, I am an insider and a member of the informant group. The strength of this approach is that it affords me advantages such as trust and access into the participants' world that other researchers might not be given. My goal was to provide a detailed and tangible insider's view rather than a more aloof, "objective" representation of the couples that were interviewed. The disadvantage to being an insider is that I may be better able to relate to and understand the participants' perspective or concern(s) without their clearly explaining themselves. This serves as a disadvantage to the larger population of "outsiders" who may need a thorough explanation to understand the meaning of the participants' viewpoints. I sought to address this weakness by being conscious of my audience and, when necessary, asking participants to answer the question as if I were an "outsider".

3.3) Qualitative Research...But What Kind?

There are over 40 approaches to qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). For the proposed study, I combined elements of two approaches, *phenomenology* and *grounded theory*. These two approaches are discussed next, respectively, followed by a brief discussion in the importance of narratives in my study.

Phenomenology. This study took a phenomenological approach to qualitative research. Phenomenology focuses on the lived experiences of people experiencing a certain phenomenon. The phenomenon studied was successful, long-term, Black American marriages.

In a phenomenological study, the researcher examines the meaning of experiences for the individuals who experienced the phenomenon. The core ideas of phenomenology are based on the premise that human experience makes sense to those who live it, prior to all outside interpretations and theorizing. Objective understanding is mediated by subjective experience (Dukes, 1984). Moustakas (1994) explains that phenomenology's task is "to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it" (p.13).

Ontology, or conceptualizations about the nature of reality, are important in qualitative research generally and phenomenology in particular. In phenomenology, "reality" is constructed by the participants involved in the research (Creswell, 1998). In the proposed study I examined the reality constructed by Black Americans as they considered their long-term marriages and personal and family lives.

Grounded Theory. A grounded theory approach to qualitative research allows for researchers to develop theory through analysis, observations, abstractions from the observations, previous research, and previous theory (Gilgun, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Theory is central to many qualitative research studies but the role of theory is different than it is in most quantitative research. Namely, many qualitative studies, including this one, are interested in the process of developing theory as opposed to

testing theory (Gilgun, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Phrased a little differently, the grounded theory approach is a hypothesis-generating research method versus a hypothesis-testing research method (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

The grounded theory method employs open-ended and semi-structured questioning and exploration (followed by analysis, open coding, axial coding, and identification of concepts) as opposed to close-ended surveys and scales (Trochim, 2000). The theory-building approach to collecting and analyzing data allows the researcher to develop and “ground” hypotheses in what the participants say, hence the term “grounded theory” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Having addressed both the phenomenological and grounded-theory-based approaches I integrated, I now turn to a brief discussion on the role of narratives in my study.

Narratives. People make sense of experience and communicate meaning through narration. Therefore, in-depth interviewers that are seeking meaning would do well to seek narratives (Chase, 1995). However, what makes for a good narrative? Josselson (1993) suggests that *breadth*, *coherence*, and *aesthetic appeal* are important characteristics for a researcher to consider in collecting and presenting a meaningful narrative. Breadth wrestles with the question of how much the reader needs to know about the interviewee for the reader to understand the interviewee. Coherence of the material relates to the different ways in which the story parts add up to create and complete a meaningful picture. Aesthetic appeal involves conveying meaning-making and is necessary for the narrative explanation to make sense while engaging the reader. The most difficult challenge of narrative analysis is to make narrative “scientific” to fit

into a logical positivistic framework. Good narrative analysis should make sense in intuitive and holistic ways (Josselson, 1993).

Despite the significance of narratives, most social researchers pay little attention to eliciting stories in the interview context (Chase, 1995). Mishler (1986) suggests that telling stories is such an integral part of human experience that interviewees are likely to tell stories if they are not discouraged. When this did not happen, I asked participants for a story, for example, “Tell me a specific story about how your children influenced your marriage?”

3.4) Sample

In this study, two complementary sampling approaches were used. First, a purposive sample was generated through networking. The method of finding participants was through the snowball or chain technique, which identified participants of interest from people who knew people, who knew what cases were information-rich (Shank, 2002). At the end of each interview, I asked for the name of one couple that: 1) had been married for at least 20 years, 2) self reported as happy, and 3) were Black. I then contacted the referred couple by phone explaining to them that they were recommended as a couple in a happy long-term marriage and asked them to participate in the study. If the couple was interested, I mailed each couple (in separate envelopes) demographic forms with a letter asking them to fill out the form and mail it back to me in the pre-stamped, self-addressed envelopes. The demographic forms included information regarding occupation, education, age, and income. When I received both forms from the couple, the husband and wife had to self-report as happy and as strong in their marriage to be interviewed for this study. An advantage to using the snowball/chain method was

that it reduces time and effort in the search to seek out couples who met the specific criteria of the study. The disadvantage of using the snowball or chain technique as a means to gather participants is that I may have ended up with a sample of participants that were too similar and the sample was not random. This was not the case for this study. This limitation brings us to the second sampling approach.

In addition to snowballing, the “gatekeeper approach” was used in sampling (cf. Dollahite & Marks, 2005). I chose a gatekeeper or two with large social networks in the city of Portland, Oregon, to provide references of couples who were different from one another. I then contacted these couples. Use of the “gatekeeper approach” helped reduce the problem of participant likeness in this study.

A purposive sample of Black married (or remarried) couples was interviewed to identify factors and characteristics that contribute to a strong, long-term marriage and to explore the phenomenon in other respects. More specifically, 50% of the participants were from Oregon, 16% from Louisiana, 16% from Florida, and 16% from Washington. Eight couples were from urban neighborhoods, three couples from suburban neighborhoods, and one couple was from a rural neighborhood. The advantage of having many states and settings represented is that it gave a broader, more complete representation of long-term marriages from different regions. A disadvantage is that the study was not generalizable. The participants ranged from low-middle to middle socioeconomic status (SES) and their educational levels varied from GED certification to Ph.D.-level degrees. Forty-two percent of the couples had at least one spouse that was an educator. Twenty-five percent of the couples were working class. Sixteen percent of the couples were ministers. Sixteen percent of the couples were in the military. Participants’

ages ranged from 45 years to 75 years old. The average age for men was 58. The average age for women was 56. The average length of marriage for the couples was 33 years. For a more complete summary of participants, see Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Summary of Participants

Participant's Pseudoname	Number of Years Married	Age at Marriage	Number of Children	Number of Children Before Marriage	Education Level ^a	Family Income ^b	Self-reported as Religious Y = Yes N = No
Charles and Diane	24	H = 21 W = 21	4	0	H = 18+ W = 18	70K+	H = Y W = Y
Larry and Gwen	34	H = 20 W = 19	5 +1grandchild	1	H = 18+ W = 16	50K-70K	H = N W = N
Frank and Lucy	26	H = 29 W = 25	3 1 adopted	0	H = 16 W = 16	50K-70K	H = Y W = Y
Ronald and Prescilla	30	H = 30 W = 29	6 4 adopted	0	H = 16 W = 12	70K+	H = Y W = Y
Steven and Adrienne	25	H = 23 W = 28	2	1	H = 16 W = 16	70K+	H = Y W = Y
Maurice and Ella	28	H = 27 W = 25	2	0	H = 12 W = 12	70K+	H = Y W = Y
Earl and Sherry	29	H = 23 W = 23	2	0	H = 18+ W = 16	-----	H = Y W = Y
Sean and Wilma	33	H = 20 W = 20	4 2 adopted +1 niece	0	H = 12 W = 12	50K-70K	H = Y W = Y
Harold and Eola	44	H = 31 W = 24	0	N/A	H = 12 W = 12	Retired	H = Y W = Y
Fred and Cheryl	38	H = 20 W = 19	2 1 stepchild	1	H = 12 W = 12	50K-70K	H = N W = Y
Kenneth and Pauline	38	H = 21 W = 19	2	----	H = 18+ W = 18	70K+	H = N W = Y
James and Michelle	50	H = 25 W = 20	5 1 stepchild	1	H = 12 W = 16	Retired 70K+	H = Y W = Y

^aEducation levels completed: 12 = High school, 16 = College, 18 = Masters Level.

^bK = Thousands, in U.S. Dollars.

Participants in this study were 12 heterosexual Black couples (24 participants) that were married for at least 20 years. Eleven of the participant couples were in their first marriage. Eleven of the participant couples had children. One couple did not have children.

3.5) Interview Procedures

After I obtained written informed consent, participants were asked 15 open-ended questions relating to themselves, their spouses, and their families, thereby providing three data points (wives' reports, husbands' reports, and my observations and field notes) consistent with Patton's (1996) call for increased "triangulation to correct for fallibilities" (p. xxii). A qualitative, narrative-based approach (e.g., Josselson & Lieblich, 1993) was used in hopes of uncovering richer information about experiences faced by participant couples. Interviews were conducted in the participants' homes and lasted about one and a half to two hours. The wives and husbands were interviewed together. Both participants had the opportunity to respond to each question, but the opportunity to respond first alternated with each question. While the approach of interviewing spouses together arguably has its costs, the benefits included spouses encouraging, reminding, and prompting each other to offer additional narratives, meanings, and explanations that may ultimately yield richer data (cf. Marks, 2004).

To restate, this study had multiple informants through interviewing both husband and wife *and* using the interviewer's observations. The study had multiple methods of data collection by using demographic surveys, qualitative interviews, and researcher's observations to collect data. These features of the study were significant because experts

say triangulation is valuable as a validity check for methods, sources, and instruments used in qualitative research studies (Brewer & Hunter, 1989; Patton, 1996).

3.6) Coding and Analysis

I performed open coding (identifying themes and concepts in the interview data) on an interview-by-interview basis, see Table 3.2 for a list of codes. I did line-by-line analysis, paying close attention to each phrase or word, also known as micro analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This was helpful because it allowed me to generate categories or themes. Data were broken down into discrete parts, called concepts, the concepts were named, and closely examined, then compared for similarities and differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I also performed numerical content analyses of the open coding for each interview on single note cards, allowing me to see how frequently certain concepts were mentioned. I tallied the number of times each code was mentioned in every interview until I had a summary of how frequently each concept was discussed by the participants.

At the conclusion of the coding, my numeric content analysis on a note card for each interview was collected and compared. Events, actions, interactions, or objects were grouped together under more abstract concepts into themes. Salient and recurring themes expressed in each of the interviews emerged, also known as axial coding (Creswell, 1989; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Central themes were chosen following final analysis. For a list of themes, see Table 3.3. Data (participant quotes) related to central themes were organized into a list for each theme.

Table 3.2

Initial List of Categories and Codes

Category	Code	Category	Code
Advice	ADV	Fellowship	FLS
Bachelor Mindset	BMS	Generational Relationship	GEN
Black Support	BS	Love	LVE
Challenges	CHA	Marriage as a Business	MB
Child(ren)	CHD	Parenting	PAR
Commitment	CMT	Prayer	PRY
Communication	COM	Processes	PRO
Community	CTY	Scripture	SCR
Coping	COP	Sources of Strength	SOS
Employment	EMP	Spousal Support	SPST
Extended Family	EXF	Strengths of Spouse	SSP
Faith	FTH	Strong Marriage Definition	SMD
Faith Community	FC	Values and Beliefs	VB

Table 3.3

Central Themes

The Influence of Children on Marriage	Expressions of Love
The Influence of Faith on Marriage	Marital Advice to other Black Couples
Sources of Strength for Marriage	Household Roles in Marriage
Characteristics of a Strong Marriage	The Bachelor Mindset in Marriage
The Impact of the Black Community on Marriage	Knocks of Kneel in Relation to the Marriage
The Processes of Personal Change throughout Marriage	The Influence of Employment on Marriage
Challenges of Marriage	The Generational Influence on Marriage
The Impact of Racism on Marriage	Strengths of Spouse

After analysis of the data and creating central themes, I returned to the participants to ask them if the themes I found reflected the message they were trying to relay. In short, I asked them, “Do these themes make sense?” This allowed me another check to make sure that my data were credible and reliable. Then, I created and assigned pseudonyms to the participants to keep them anonymous.

Data were reassembled through statements, also known as “hypotheses,” which gave light to the relationships among themes. The themes were then linked to form explanations (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and produced major themes. I did this by choosing the central themes most related to my research topic on strong marriage. All the central themes that emerged were important, but the themes most tightly focused on strong marriage were named major themes and discussed in this paper.

I presented major themes by integrating major themes, participant statements and narratives, to present a model that creates meaning from the narratives for the reader. I then created a “hit list”, a list of data (participant quotes) organized by codes for each major theme. The major themes presented in the findings chapter were the most salient and frequently mentioned concepts by the participant couples. The data was substantiated by the numeric content analyses (frequencies) and the saliency of the themes. From my “hit list of quotes”, I chose data (quotes) that were clear and representative to include in the findings chapter. Each major theme is supported by data from multiple participants confirming the verifiability of the data. My aim was to provide a detailed description of the participants’ experience to the reader(s).

Findings

4.1) Introduction

The couples I interviewed discussed many topics. The topics that were most frequently recurring were categorized into themes. The six themes are: (a) The influence of children on marriage, (b) The influence of faith on marriage, (c) Sources of strength for marriage, (d) Characteristics of a strong marriage, (e) The impact of the Black community on marriage, and (f) The impact of racism on marriage. These themes are constant influences in the couples' marital relationships. This section is outlined below with themes and sub-themes:

The influence of children on marriage

Sub-theme 1, Children as a “staying” force

Sub-theme 2, Children provide stability in the marriage relationship

Sub-theme 3, Children serve as a changing agent for married men

Sub-theme 4, Children as a source of stress

The influence of religion on marriage

Sub-theme 1, The influence of beliefs and values on the marital relationship

Sub-theme 2, The influence of prayer on the marital relationship

Sub-theme 3, The influence of the religious community on the marital relationship

Sub-theme 4, Religious faith as a challenge for couples in their marital relationship

Sources of strength for marriage

Sub-theme 1, Faith in God

Sub-theme 2, Commitment to spouse

Characteristics of a strong marriage

Sub-theme 1, Communication

Sub-theme 2, Commitment

The impact of the Black community on marriage

Sub-theme 1, Negative perceptions of Black families

Sub-theme 2, The importance of Black families staying together and being supportive of one another

The impact of racism on marriage

Sub-theme 1, Racism experienced as a daily event

Sub-theme 2, The difference in communication styles between the sexes

Sub-theme 3, Being an agent for change

4.2) Theme 1: The Influence of Children on Marriage

The first theme I will discuss is the influence of children on the marital relationship. Eleven of the twelve couples I talked with had children. Children reportedly influenced these parents, as well as the marital relationship between them. Children not only influenced the marriages, but also served as an enduring factor that helped the parents to stay in the marriage relationship. Children provided couples with a reason to stay married.

Sub-theme 1, Children as a “Staying” Force. Diane explains the staying force that children provide:

I think that sometimes the children, during the tough seasons, were the reason to think about remaining some more. I think without them we would have still been together. But I think there would have been separation, opportunities for separation.

Lucy similarly adds:

Honestly, if we had no children we wouldn't be together. Because it is such a struggle. I think we would be what I consider a somewhat arrogant couple [if we had not had children].

The fathers also shared how they think children serve as a staying force. Steven gives a broad overview of how children can help their parents stay together:

If you think about it, your kids help you stay together. They help you form a bond; you always have the kids together.

Frank, a father of four, shares a more personal experience describing how his children influenced him to stay in his marriage relationship:

My children influence my marriage every day. One Christmas [my wife and I] were separated, I was living somewhere else at the time...so I came over, dropped my pride a little bit and came over. My daughters still got me something for Christmas. I felt really awkward, good, but awkward. Well, [the whole experience] made me want to come back. It had that kind of influence [on me]. When I realized what I was messing up here in terms of the marriage. [I thought] maybe everything I have and need is right here. I knew that I had to get back here somehow.

As we see from these parents' excerpts, children sometimes play an important role in influencing the parents' decisions to stay in their marriage relationship. When times became difficult, the children prompted couples to think about their decisions in greater depth.

Sub-theme 2, Children Provide Stability in the Marriage Relationship. Having children changes the family dynamic. It can provide stability to the family unit. The wives in this study discuss how having children created stability in their marriage that was not present before children. Adrienne said:

I think [without kids our marriage] would have been less stable because we would have been less inclined to stay in one place as long as we have. The decision[s] we made, we made because of the kids, from where we lived and the school we sent them to and all that. [Our children] influenced the way we lived.

Wilma, another mother with four children shares:

Our focus changed from individual to a family unit. Because if we didn't have kids then we'd probably be going off somewhere, flying here, flying there, visiting here, visiting there and the lifestyle that we have would be more haphazard.

For Wilma and others having children helps the family to form “roots” and keeps them grounded. This allows for members of the family to build strong ties and relationships with others outside their immediate family and become involved in their community. This change in the family unit is important for the couple but just as important for the community. The couples' unchanging, solid, and steady presence serves as a model and security to their extended family and community members. I will discuss this concept in more detail later in the paper.

Prescilla, a wife and mother of five, states:

A lot of your relationship is centered around kids in school, kids out of school, kids with extracurricular activities, helping them to see about good sportsmanship and things like that... I think there would be a real void not having kids. I've always wanted them.

The above quote also shows how children bring routine schedules to your life as parents.

Steven similarly discusses how having children “nails you down”:

[Without children] it would have been hard to set down good church roots. Adopting probably would have happened, I think. I just think a kid would have come into the picture. But yeah, [having children] probably strengthened [the marriage]. Because it nails you down and forces you to stay tight knit.

Like Steve, many of the parents discuss their desire to have children, even if they were unable to have biological children. Not having children was never an option for many of the couples in this study. I think it is important here to note that for many Black families, they define family bonds through relationship more than through genetics. This

concept reflects the “community” or “village upbringing” that is very present within the Black culture. Many of the couples in this study alluded to adopting, caring for, or raising children that were not biologically theirs. This is a positive strength that should be recognized more often in Black family literature. Frank discusses the richness his children brought to his marriage:

I don't think [our marriage] would have been as rich or as lively because a lot of the things that we discuss involved the kids. Whether it was something we agreed on or something we disagreed on. It was “we want this for the family; we want that house for the family”. We started out [with] different rules, with family meeting times, and adjusting all kind of stuff. So even the cars we drove were geared around our kids.

Earl shares how having children influenced the marital commitment level between him and his wife:

I think that having [kids] just deepened the commitment that we made to each other through getting married. And it was a responsibility that I feel we both took very seriously.

Children can create stability and they also serve as a constant reminder of the commitment the couple made to one another. I have already discussed how children influence their parents by serving as a staying factor in the marriage. Having children also provides stability in the marriage union. Children influence their parents on many levels. In this study, the fathers expressed more about the influence their children had on their marriage than the mothers. This could be for two reasons: 1) fathers, especially Black fathers, are rarely asked about their parenting roles from a strengths-based perspective. Many fathers interviewed in this study seemed to enjoy the rare opportunity to share in detail about their experience and joys of fathering. Mothers, however, might have more opportunities and outlets to discuss their parenting role on a consistent basis. Another reason may be that for men, marriage and parenting go hand in hand. Popenoe

(1996) has stated, “For men, more than for women, marriage and parenthood are strongly interlinked. Men need cultural pressure to stay engaged with their children and that cultural pressure has long been called marriage” (p. 198). Because of this, men naturally discuss children and parenting when discussing marriage, while women tend to discuss parenting and marriage as two separate concepts. Palkovitz (2002) states that men tend to view marriage and fatherhood as a package deal.

Sub-theme 3, Children Serving as a Changing Agent for Married Men. Many fathers discuss the joy parenting brings them. Earl, a devoted father and husband, shares:

My kids influenced my marriage in so many ways. I just couldn't see anybody else raising them. I thank God for my kids and I thank God for my family. They've been my strength, they've been my joy. They've been my happiness. And they've been my life. I'm just really happy that I have them.

Ronald explains his excitement in becoming a father for the first time:

I wanted a little girl first [to] just kind of hang out with. But why I wanted a girl first [is] beyond [my] imagination. Well Kamiya and I, we would go to the grocery store and I got her all wrapped up and people thought I was a single parent. I just decided we would go out shopping. There was no place that I could go that she couldn't go with me. So I just took her along different places. It was fun. I had a party matter [of] fact. Here's the most interesting story, when Kamiya had her 6 week check up, I took her in. And the doctor said “What are you doing?” I said, “What do you mean what am I doing here?” I said, “She's my baby”. He said, “Well, normally, the mothers tell me all...” I said, “There's nothing you can ask me about this child [that] I won't know. So go ahead, ask me”.

For men, having children often serves as a social factor to mature them and allow them to be less selfish. The stories below provide examples of why and how having children has influenced them to change and grow. Children can serve as a changing agent for parents both personally and in their marital relationship. Below, fathers express how having children changed them personally. Maurice reflects on how he thinks his marriage would be different if he and his wife did not have children:

Our marriage would be different because I would be different. I experienced a lot of change as a result of being a parent that I don't think I would have experienced had we not agreed to have children. It allowed me to grow because as I look back on it I would have become my father, very easily. Selfish, me the center of the universe type of thing. She would have had to take care of me and make sure that all my little selfish needs were taken care of and I would have never been allowed to grow. I'm sure God had his hand in that. You have to adapt, you have to become something for someone else who's not an adult and that's a whole new dynamic. It changes everything. I'm blessed in the fact that I'm a parent and I took pride in not being a cookie cutter dad. I wanted to make sure my kids had all those things that we didn't have coming up. It was a source of a tremendous amount of growth on my part because I just know, looking back on it now, those areas would be so undeveloped in me, had it not been for the children.

Frank gratefully adds how becoming a father served as a changing agent for him. He concludes if he didn't have children:

I'd probably be more selfish. I wouldn't be as mature. I wouldn't be as understanding of other people either. You work with the public and people have issues. You have to have experience what sacrifice is, what people are going through. People tell me they're sleepy. I know why. [I tell them], "You don't have to explain, you have kids. You don't have to tell me. You're sleepy all day!"... I would not be happier [without children]. I'd just have more money to spend and waste. It's why you are a man. You get married so you can work and provide for your family.

As we see from Ronald, Maurice and Frank, having children and becoming fathers matured them. We also see how deeply intertwined their masculinity, marriage, and fatherhood are.

Sub-theme 4, Children as a Source of Stress. Earlier, in sub-theme 3, I shared excerpts from the husbands explaining how becoming fathers brought them unspeakable joy. Children can be a source of happiness, but they can also be a source of stress. Larry discusses a stressful parenting time with raising his oldest daughter:

Just the phase that I was going through and the phase that [my daughter] was going through caused us stress because of what she was communicating to [my wife] and what she was communicating to me. Tanesha brings the most vivid stress, then [my son] would probably be second. The other side of that coin [is] there have been things that they've done that [have] made [us] gleeful and happy

and [we've] felt like we did a good job with this. It made [us] feel closer too [as a couple], so it goes both ways.

He continues to add:

You know, [kids] do things sometimes, [like] when they play both sides of the parents, they know you and they push your buttons and play off [of us]... I think kids can impact marriage positively or negatively, just depending on what they have going on in their own lives. Then sometimes [a child] brings out the dysfunction, if there are any holes in the relationship between the parents. So I think kids can definitely impact a marriage.

Larry, who is also a grandfather, continues to discuss the stress that comes when raising children and grandchildren:

I think the test of a marriage and whether you got a lot in common or whether there's really a love bond there, [that] comes when you don't have kids. Because things get camouflaged when you have children. And so I wonder what it would be like if we didn't have children cause we've never been in that spot. Now we have children, grandchildren, and other children who are not biologically connected. Our daughters and sons are all a blessing, but [I] wonder how we would coexist (without children) when that time comes. Some people are married 35 and 40 [years], the kids [leave], then they split up. You put so much energy into doing things for them, you never find that balance to do things for the relationship or for you and by the time all the kids are gone, you've lost it. So it's a blessing on one hand, we'll find out if it was a curse on the other.

Adrienne, a wife and mother of two, describes some of the stresses of parenting children in terms of the marriage relationships as: "The dichotomy. They divide you [and] they bring you together."

Regardless of the stress levels that having children introduces, the couples loved being parents. Having children brought something to the couples and provided a richness to the marriage that may not have otherwise been without children. Cheryl, a wife and mother of two sons shares:

Without the children it wouldn't have been as fun. And to me that's the key part of being married is to have children. Because I felt like I reproduced [my husband]. I just feel like if you're married the children are just your pride and joy, that just put the icing on the cake.

Ella expresses her love for being a mother in this way:

I absolutely love being a mother. It has been the most fun thing for me to be their mother and we have the best children in the world. My favorite saying is “those poor other mothers, they didn’t get you. I know they’re sad”.

Lucy remembers and shares a wonderful time in her life when raising her children:

The happiest times I remember, we were not doing very well financially. I remember this guy calling talking about something he wanted [my husband] to get into. I think Gabby was two and Jonelle was a baby. I told him “This is the happiest I’ve ever been in my life, we don’t eat well, we don’t eat out but I am a stay-at-home mom and I’ve got these little girls, and it is wonderful”.

I conclude this theme with a joyous quote from a dedicated and loving father Frank who describes his role as father as the best job he’s ever had:

It’s another job. It’s a great job. It’s a job I’ve always wanted to have. Without kids it wouldn’t be as much fun for me. I like the idea of being a father. I think it’s the best thing a man can do. I think it’s the best job, more important than your friends. There is no greater ego trip than [to] walk in the door and [see] three little young girls. Even if you’re poor. You don’t have to be rich. That makes you rich.

In review, the first theme I discussed was how children influence the marriage relationship. Children influence the marital relationship by serving as a staying force for the couples. Children provide stability in the marital relationship. Children also serve as a changing agent for parents, particularly for married men. In spite of these three positive elements, children can also provide a lot of stress to the marital relationship. These couples expressed the stresses and joys of parenting and the influence parenting plays in relation to their marriage. Moving to the next recurring theme, I will discuss faith and how faith influences the marital relationship.

4.3) Theme 2: The Influence of Religion on Marriage.

For these couples, religious faith had a substantial influence on their marital relationships. The participants used the word “faith” throughout the interviews. The word

“faith” was introduced by these couples before I asked any questions regarding religion. In some instances, couples used the word faith to describe formal, organized, and structured religion, for example, faith community. In other instances, couples used the word “faith” to refer to their personal relationship with God which I’ve called “spirituality”. In this study I use the word religion to discuss institutionalized, formal religion. Not all participating couples self reported as highly religious, but all couples did express elements of “spirituality.” Faith in terms of spirituality will be discussed in a later theme. The religion theme includes four sub-themes, 1) the influence of beliefs and values on the marital relationship, 2) the influence of religious practices, specifically prayer, 3) the influence of the religious community and 4) challenges to the marriage relationship as a result of religion.

Sub-theme 1, The influence of Beliefs and Values on the Marital Relationship.

Couples share how their personal religious beliefs and values affect their marital relationship. Steven, a devoted loving husband of 25 years, describes his beliefs, values, and relationship with the Lord as a compass.

The Lord is pretty much like a compass, He kind of keeps you straight if you [are] going. I don’t know, maybe it’s almost like you understand right from wrong and you kind of know which way to go ‘cause if your daily walk is a certain way [and] the Lord is with you, it’s hard for you to get off the path. We’ve been pretty much in church together ever since we’ve been married, even a little before [that], so that’s been pretty much a compass for me.

Having a strong value system helps show Steven how to navigate through tough life decisions. His faith in the Lord provides an anchor for him to rely on. Adrienne, a devoted wife of 25 years, also shares how her beliefs and values provide a source of strength she can depend on.

There are certain things that your spouse can't help you with. I think that's the problem with a lot of marriages. People depend on the other person too much, and they don't depend on God for their needs. We have another source to go to, a higher power, then we don't have to look outside the marriage for [other things].

Earl, a husband and father of two boys, recently incorporated religion back into his life as an important part of his marriage and family life. He describes his beliefs and values as the foundation for his marriage and family.

I'd say a strong marriage is built upon a religious foundation, your faith in God and your shared values with your mate. And having similar goals in life, similar aspirations and understanding each other's temperament and emotional idiosyncrasies and love.

Earl continues to add that his beliefs and values provide an outline for his role as husband and father.

My religious faith has really increased and enlarged in the last years. So, the more that I study about my creator it really kind of outlines my role as the head of the family, and what my responsibilities are. Because this world tries to pull people apart, but through my religious faith I'm able to hold my family and the people I love together. In my own power I couldn't, I didn't have the strength. But I know that I have a creator that gives me strength once I pray to Him and let Him know what help I need. And He provides that for me.

These persons describe their belief and value system as a guide to help them live their life with strength, love, and security. Their strong commitment to their beliefs and values is expressed through their religious involvement and practices. The next sub-theme to be discussed is prayer. Prayer was the most salient religious practice discussed by these couples.

Sub-theme 2, The Influence of Prayer on the Marital Relationship. Couples discussed prayer as sustaining, as a habit. They also mentioned the need to pray out of conviction, and viewed prayer as so necessary they compared it to breathing. Couples in this study referred to prayer as a part of every day life. Sean, a committed husband, explains how prayer serves as a daily ritual for him and his wife.

We start off most every day praying in the morning before our day starts [about] the decisions we [have to make] daily [and] the things that we have to do. [It] helps in decision making [and] things that you are facing through the day. Starting the day off with prayer makes it a lot more easier.

Diane talks specifically about the influence prayer has on her marriage.

Early in our marriage the Lord taught me to pray out of conviction and not out of crisis. One of the things I would do is to put up prayers for situations that weren't happening yet, not necessarily call a situation to me, "oh we gone argue so"... it was just so I knew that with us coming from two different backgrounds, and two different lifestyles and being two separate people, and in order to come to agreement we have to figure out where we were not agreeing [on]... But the great thing was when I prayed, I never looked at that situation being bigger than God. Ever. I think that I have become more of a praying woman because of this man.... I was watching my husband and observing my husband in prayer and he could spend so much time with God and I would watch him and it wasn't just, "I'm praying before God" it was more like "I'm so excited to be with you God, I get to be with God!" That's what it looked like and I wanted that and I actually remember going before God and [saying]. "I want that", that hunger he has in prayer, "I want that".

Two mothers, both describe prayer as essential in their life. Pauline shares:

Prayer sustains me. It's [that] those valleys are easier to handle and those peaks are just glorious because of prayer in the marriage.

Ella states:

My mother-in-law, she used to laugh at me and say, "You know why God answers your prayers?" [It's] just so He can have a moment of silence, because you pray about everything." So for me prayer is, it's breathing. You can't stop doing it for long, otherwise you'll die. You know, it is like breath.

Prayer, by far, was the most discussed religious practice that reportedly influenced the marital relationship for couples. Another common practice discussed among couples was the influence of their involvement in their religious community in their personal lives and in their marriage.

Sub-theme 3, The Influence of the Religious Community on the Marital Relationship. The influence of the religious community differed substantially for men and

women. Both men and women were influenced through involvement and interaction with members in their religious community. But men benefited in their marriage and family much more than the women. For men, the religious community served as a source of accountability and provided a sense of structure and support for the husbands and fathers. Charles shares how his involvement in a couples' Bible study group provided a comfortable and safe place for him to grow spiritually.

We had a Bible study group some years ago with my wife. This was a real strength for me. It was a men's and women's bible study group and it was married couples only. The women met on one night of the week and then the men met on one night of the week. It was very healthy for me, I really enjoyed it. I felt like I got a lot out of it, growing spiritually, especially as a married man, since it was a directive toward married men. Growing spiritually as a married man was always one of those [hard] things. To find men who understand [and] that can sit where I sit. So that was a real strength for me.

Steven explains how certain members of his religious community whom he's accountable to encourage him to make right choices and decisions.

[Our pastor] has been like a rock and he's been good and he's been in our life a lot and he's always told us "I've been praying for y'all about this". Sometimes we may go through some tough times with different things and [pastor] is going to be there praying for us. I go down to Georgia and there's an evangelist down there and whenever I'm down there I see him and I talk with him. His dad is very good for me; he's been very good for me. He's been more like a friend cause we're about the same age and sometime[s] when you have certain people in your life if you think you might do wrong, you think about those people, [they] come to mind and you say "Well, I can't do [that]". I just think about those people that have been rocks in [my] life and [I] just say "Naah, I can't do this. I can't do that."

Being involved in their religious community and building relationships with others of like faith provides a higher standard for these men in raising their children and loving their wife. Earl, a loving husband and committed father of two sons, expresses:

[My faith community] reinforces that I have a greater role and responsibility than I ever thought. There is a higher standard; there is a much higher standard I've learned about. And what that standard means is that [in] this life I must give my life for my family. And then to instill [those] values in my sons. Question them on

things. Demonstrate things to them. Hope that they become better men as a result of the high standards I've placed upon myself, or that God my creator has placed upon me. [I try to be] an example, by being not afraid to show them love rather than always trying to be the tough guy. It's only through God that I would even understand how to express that kind of love. Because the world tries to define me totally different. So I thank the Lord for His light that He shined on me.

Frank discusses the importance and value of spending quality time with men of like faith and similar moral values. He says:

One thing I've found that's good [is a] support group of men who are in like terms, [like] faith. You can't hang around with your boy running the street[s]. You need men who are mature [that] see beyond that...maybe they made mistakes in the past. But you need a group of men who are, I don't know how many, but you need that backing. I think that's vital. Other men give you strength, other men. All [my] life [I] grew up with guys hanging out and you know [those] numbers make strength. So faith, male bonding [can bring strength].

Men express involvement with their religious community as positive, as an opportunity to build solid relationships with other men who hold their same beliefs and values. The relationships they create and time they spend serves as a support, comfort, a strength, and opportunity to grow spiritually.

The expressions from women about their involvement in their religious communities are mixed. Women share the benefits and challenges of being involved in relationship with other women in their religious community. Existing research states that the bonds Black women form with other women in their religious community may be as primary and salient as relationships with their biological family (Marks & Chaney, 2006). For many Black women, being involved in their religious community provides spiritual, social, and personal benefits. The women in this study benefited, in terms of marriage, through involvement and interaction in their religious community. Yet, the women reported far more challenges with being involved in their religious community than the men. They discussed challenges in general such as being overcommitted and challenges

that specifically affected their marriage and family, such as “messy” fellowship. Ella, a self-reported highly religious Christian woman, shares the benefit of meeting with women in her faith community.

It changes once you verbalize it, once somebody hears you and says, “I know what you mean girl.” It changes for women, automatically. I don’t think it changes as much for men. But for us it changes, things change the minute you have that ability. So when women go to Bible studies [and] women go to retreats with other women, suddenly what you have at home is not so odd. To me, that is one thing that women need to do because there is a tendency because of gossip that they don’t talk to each other. And in the church it happens more than I would like to even know about. Women’s Bible study and women’s retreats are just one of the best things I think women can do for each other.

As Ella discusses, the tendency to gossip when gathering due to the interconnection of the Black community and the religious community often stops women from interacting in their religious community with the intimacy they would like. Their “messy” fellowship as Charles named it and will discuss below affects couples’ marriages and their involvement within their religious community. “Messy” fellowship creates a sense of competition among women and couples instead of creating a safe and secure place for believers to fellowship. Charles shares in an effort to explain and elaborate on his wife Diane’s statement about fellowship between women:

Because of the convolutedness of gathering with people who like to be “messy”, it destroys the relationships, big time. And gossiping. It’s not healthy fellowship. And when we didn’t see healthy fellowship, it just wasn’t where our hearts were turned. So we turned our hearts a different direction and we got labeled, looked [at] and labeled differently. It was never that our hearts did not want the fellowship. We didn’t want the messy fellowship. So you stay out of those circles. When church ends you go home. You take the two or the three that want to go home with you and you take them with you. The rest you let do what they want to do. And you keep your marriage intact. You don’t get yourself connected with these people whose marriages are (I use the word) fragile or weak (or you know he aint about much because you already heard his story from last week what he did against his wife). What I’m trying to suggest is that we had to be real careful and we didn’t allow that seed [of “messy” fellowship] to get inside of us.

This convolutedness of relationships within the religious community may be due to the large historical overlap of the Black community with the religious community. The challenge for these couples is to keep religious fellowship positive and gossip free. They must work towards this goal on a constant basis. For these couples, involvement in their religious community brings multiple challenges. Couples discuss additional challenges that religion might bring.

Sub-theme 4, Religious Faith as a Challenge for Couples in their Marital Relationship. The final sub-theme is religious faith as a challenge in marital relationships. The recurring challenge discussed by couples was having a partner with a different religious belief than your own. Ronald, a husband and father of five, sums up this challenge by saying:

I think it would be a challenge if you have one [person] that is a stated believer and one who's not...those are the kind of things you have to look at from the standpoint that those are huge obstacles to overcome.

Kenneth, a husband and father of two, agrees with the previous statement by saying:

[Religion] can be a challenge in two ways. [It is a challenge when] one of one partner's has a belief that the other partner doesn't have. Or if one partner tries to get [the] other partner to go their way. I think you have to be accepting if there's a difference in commitment you have to be accepting of that difference. As long as that difference is not so drastic that it influences your values.

Another way religion could be damaging is mentioned by Adrienne who discusses how too much commitment and involvement in your faith can be a challenge in your marriage. She says:

I think when one person gets too involved outside of marriage it can be a huge issue. So I try to temper my involvement at church because my relationship with Steven is so important to me that I just wouldn't do that to him. [I don't want to] be so involved in church that I'm never here for him.

Lastly, religious faith can be a challenge to both husband and wife personally. As a person of faith, the high moral standards to follow can cause an internal struggle and challenge for some. The challenge of living life righteously can be difficult. Frank, a husband and father, shares from his personal experiences:

Well, it's a challenge because [religion] goes against the grain. Most religions go against the grain of society. That means giving up what we talked about before. Giving up a lot of things. You can't go both ways and do what they are telling you to do outside of these doors. It just doesn't work, [society] is not the same[as faith]...So how do you balance the two? It's not easy. It's a challenge every single day when you wake up in the morning it's a challenge. Religion goes counter to everything I've grown up thinking guys should be able to do.

To summarize theme 2, these couples place a high value on their religious belief system. Their belief system served as the foundation for their marriage. This holds true for most highly religious couples and with less religious couples as well. The couples discussed the importance of prayer in their personal lives and marital relationship. They discussed the importance of receiving encouragement from their religious community to build them up and hold them accountable. The influence religion had on these married couples was mostly positive, but not always. The couples share examples of how religion can be a challenge and possibly destroy a marriage. In conclusion, similar/shared religious values between spouses typically served as a source of strength for the couples. Next we will discuss theme 3, sources of strength in the marriage.

4.4) Theme 3: Sources of Strength for Marriage.

The resounding two sub-themes both equally important to couples were 1) faith in God and 2) commitment to spouse. Commitment is defined by Robinson and Blanton (1993) as “the ability to renegotiate the relationship as changes occur” (p.43). A majority of these couples discuss these two sub-themes as a necessary source of strength in their

marriage. The couples typically express their sources of strength in a vertical order: faith in God is mentioned first, then commitment to spouse and support from their spouse.

Sub-theme 1, Faith in God. Here I discuss the sub-theme faith in God differently than the previous addressed theme of more formal, organized religion. Faith in God describes the very personal relationship these participants have with their God as opposed to an organized religious community. For clarification I like to think of this sub-theme as spirituality. This sub-theme serves as a reflection of the relationship that is most important to them.

Frank, a husband and father, expresses the importance of faith as a source of strength:

Your faith is important, it helps develop a strength in your relationship. I learned that faith is important. Learning to really live the faith rather than say that you are participating. [Faith] bonds everything. It helps you to control all outside influences that are going to attack [your marriage]. Without that, your marriage can't work, I'm totally convinced.

Diane shares why she believes faith in God is the most important source of strength:

I think faith in God is the most important thing to make a strong marriage. Because the covenant isn't between you and your husband necessarily, it's between you and God.

Adrienne discusses how her relationship with God and her relationship with her husband are connected. She describes her faith in God and commitment to her spouse with this analogy.

God is foremost in my life. I heard an example once of seeing marriage like a triangle, with God at the top and the closer you get to Him the closer you get to each other. I think that once you start to drift away from God you start to drift away from each other.

These couples all relay a similar message, their faith in God is most important in having a strong marriage. As I explained earlier, the husbands were very clear about the

order of sources of strength, God as a source first, and their wife as a source to them secondly. Two husbands share below. Maurice, a father and husband, shares:

[My source of strength is] centrally God. Secondly, the church. [The church] would be in parentheses I guess. Learning over the course of many years how God looks at marriage and how God looks at manhood and the union that we are involved in as a couple just gives me strength. Even in my ignorance of what true marriage was about, I knew [marriage] was right because of my relationship with God. Secondly, of course, would be my wife, she makes [marriage] easy, because of her love for me and her love for God.

Charles, a husband and father of four, similarly shares:

For my marriage, our faith in God is no doubt a clear source and that's a given. My wife has [also] been a source of strength for me. I had a grand mal seizure and it came out of nowhere and I think it was the true test of commitment and true test of strength for her to step up to the plate. We had four children at the time in our lives and for a mother who was going to school and [me] having been hospitalized, on life support for 16 hours and hanging in the balance between life and deathShe withstood all that and nursed me back to health. If it wasn't for her stepping in to keep us together- she could have abandoned me in that moment, but she didn't. She trusted God and I'm sitting here today [because of] her commitment to walk through that [situation] with me.

Ella expresses her most important source of strength:

Everything is centered around God so that would be my first [source]. My second is family and I have a strong commitment to family. My husband *is* my family.

Gwen adds:

Work was a sore thing for me the last 7 years. I'd come home, complain and complain and I knew [my husband] would get tired of it. But then I had to realize there had to be a reason why [this] was happening. So this spiritual something inside, something deeper, and knowing that [I] can trust and count on [my] mate [is a source of strength for me].

The wives express their sources of strength as God first and their husbands second. The order of the sources is important to note because not all of the couples self reported as highly religious. For the couples who did not, they still expressed their sources of strength in this order. Let's now discuss sub-theme 2, commitment to spouse.

Sub-theme 2, Commitment to One Another. Many of the couples gave narratives of how their spouses provided a source of strength through support. Providing and receiving support and love from their spouse is central among these couples. Following are two excerpts from the couple's interviews: Larry shares the importance of support from his wife in their marriage:

A source of strength [for] me would be [the love] coming from [my] spouse. When things are tough or maybe you are ill or something, you see the love coming from [them] internally. It just jumps out at you. That feels really good. To know that someone is deeply concerned because of their love for you, that's a source of strength to me. Also a source of strength that's important to me is character. Character and integrity in a marriage is everything and that has to be the most important source of strength. If you don't have that, you don't really have a relationship. When you have character and integrity in a relationship, then you're trustworthy. Then your spouse has no worries, no hang-ups about where you're at, what you're doing, why you're doing that. If you have impeccable character and integrity then you're usually going to be a person that can be trusted.

Diane shares the importance of support from her husband in their marriage:

[I have appreciated my husband] allowing me to be me and to grow with me as our marriage has grown. [Him] not expecting me to be the woman he married originally... but being where I am each time that I grow. I really appreciate that. When we first got married I was very independent and didn't need to rely on him to support me, but after we had children my heart began to change because I wanted to be home with the [kids] and I had to shift from being that [independent] woman, which I think he appreciated, to totally relying on him financially.

Finally, Wilma sums up the importance of supporting your mate in marriage.

Being able to come beside your mate and encouraging them and giving them due honor [is vital]. It takes knowledge and wisdom to know how to be able to do that, [to] build your mate up instead of tear them down.

For majority of these couples, their partner's support was very important to them.

Showing and giving support was a critical part of their commitment to one another.

Support was a characteristic used to show the deep level of commitment the spouses had for one another.

These couples were very clear about what sources their strength came from. They run to these sources when encountering difficulties or challenges throughout their marriage. I discussed the two main sources of strength for these couples as: 1) faith in God, also defined as a personal relationship with God, and 2) commitment to spouse. Not only did these two sources matter, they mattered most to these couples. With these sources of strength explained, I will next discuss important shared characteristics in the couples' everyday lives that build and maintain a strong marriage.

4.5) Theme 4: Characteristics of a Strong Marriage.

There were two salient sub-themes in regard to the characteristics of a strong enduring marriage, communication and commitment. These concepts recurred in answers from multiple questions, regardless of the topic being discussed. Couples referred to these characteristics as most important in building and maintaining a strong marriage.

Sub-theme 1, Communication. Ronald, a husband of 30 years and a father of five, shares:

I think the most important thing that makes a strong marriage is communication. [The] communication factor is important, because it doesn't matter what a person [is], [or how] economically advantaged, shall I say. Communication is key in making a strong marriage.

Prescilla, Ronald's wife, discusses her personal experience with communication.

I also think that communication is very, very important. And as for my husband, [he] know[s] about the scrambler that women have, 'cause I expressed this to him,... the filter that women have. We hear through past experiences, how we grew up, things like that. So when [men] say something to us it goes through the scrambler and we get a readout and sometimes the readout is jaded. So he has learned to say "What did you hear me say?" which helps to communicate.

The above quotes explain the importance of effectively communicating with your spouse in marriage. The following excerpts relay the importance of communication to the overall

functioning of a healthy and strong marriage. Frank, a husband married for 26 years, gives his advice for making a marriage strong:

Learn to listen and communicate openly all the time. Talk to [your wife] all the time about your feelings, what you need. Communicate, communicate, communicate, all the time. Let her talk. [It is important to have a] free flow of information all the time.

Eola, a wife of 44 years, simply states the importance of communication in marriage:

Staying in contact with each other, that's the most important [thing in] marriage. Staying in contact with each other.

Finally, Larry a husband of 34 years, discusses the importance of communicating with his spouse, even when it is uncomfortable.

I just think the willingness to discuss things that are uncomfortable will make the marriage stronger. Sometimes you avoid the things that may be uncomfortable [but] you have to communicate about the things that are uncomfortable.

Communication between spouses is necessary. Couples shared that in order to keep a marriage strong they had to be willing to communicate intensively to understand one another and constantly to keep the communication lines open.

Sub-theme 2, Commitment. While communication was the most frequently discussed characteristic of a strong marriage, commitment was a recurring characteristic as well. Other couples agreed that commitment was the characteristic that contributed to the longevity of the marriage. Being committed to your spouse provides staying power in the marriage. A few of the couples share their meaningful thoughts about the value of commitment. Commitment to God, commitment to spouse, and personal commitment were all talked about by the couples. Maurice, a devoted husband and father of two, shares:

I think foundationally [having a strong marriage is] just a matter of commitment. Just being committed to the institution of marriage and the whole ideal of

marriage gives a marriage staying power, if you believe that [marriage is] the right thing to do and a good thing. Of course, trust and the fidelity [are necessary]. I just think that being sold out to the concept of one mate makes marriage happen. I believe compatibility has a lot to do with a strong marriage. The idea that “it can’t get any better than this” gives you staying power and being friends and just feeling that you’ve made the right choice makes for a strong marriage.

Maurice describes his commitment to his spouse in many ways: being compatible, being friends, and feeling he made the right decision. Maurice also highlights being committed to the institution of marriage. Charles shares a similar description of commitment and expresses it as following through with your vows.

The strength of a marriage is based not only [on] a covenant between yourself and God but also a commitment between yourself and your spouse. [The covenant] centers around the fact that nothing is going to separate you from the person you are committed to. Nothing is going to come between you and that person. From the gate, you are committed to follow through with what you said you were going to do as far as your vows.

Thus far, commitment to God and commitment to the institution of marriage have been discussed. Many couples also expressed the importance of commitment to each other.

Sean believes:

A strong marriage consists [of] trust, commitment, work, and loyalty to each other... never allowing anything to come in between (you) because of the strong faith that [you both] have in God. [You have] trust in God and belief in each other.

Wilma adds her beliefs on the importance of spousal commitment in marriage:

First of all, [strong marriage] is a commitment to each another and holding that [other] person [in] high esteem.

Being committed to your spouse in a marriage is key. Personal commitment to stay married is also important. Steven discusses his personal commitment to marriage in this way:

When I decided to get married I [said], “Okay, I’m going to give this the best shot I can and if it don’t work, it don’t work.” So that’s the way I approached it. There was always a solid commitment.

Steven carries an all-or-nothing approach to marriage. Some may view this as approach as haphazard, but it shows his true deep personal commitment to marriage and to his spouse. In effect he is saying that he is going to try everything in his power to have a successful marriage, he will give it his all. And in the event that his marriage fails, he has given it his all. Fortunately for him, his all-or-nothing approach has worked.

There are many reasons couples choose to be committed and stay married. The couples relay that above all else that commitment is the key. Ella’s statement sums up the main reasons couples commit:

In order to have a good marriage, a strong marriage, and a true marriage, I think that you have to be willing to be yourself totally. Strong marriages are built on a commitment to God, or a commitment to one another, or a commitment to your children that you are going to stay together.

Although this study did not explore the difference in commitment types, the excerpts from the couples suggest that *strong* commitment is needed to build a strong marriage. For many couples, the commitment they choose makes for a strong marriage, but not necessarily happy marriage. It is important to say that the couples in this study self-reported as happy and strong in their marriage, unfortunately this is not always the case. Still, commitment proved to be a key characteristic in creating a strong marriage. Other characteristics were discussed by the couples, but communication and commitment were by far the two most salient characteristics the couples discussed relating to building and keeping a strong marriage.

Making communication a priority is important to these couples. Open and constant communication are attributes that these couples continually work toward.

Commitment to one another and a personal commitment to making the marriage relationship successful were meaningful to these couples. These characteristics provide a foundation to building a strong marriage. The next theme discusses important societal concepts and their impact on marriage and family. This theme is entitled the impact of the Black Community on marriage.

4.6) Theme 5: The Impact of the Black Community on Marriage.

Throughout my conversations with these 12 couples from different geographical regions in the United States, the importance and value of Black couples staying together, working together as a team, supporting one another, and building up the community were repeatedly addressed. For the purposes of this dissertation I've grouped these ideas together into one theme and refer to these forces as "Black Community." It was important to include this theme because it was discussed by multiple participants with passion, seriousness, and focus. It is necessary to note there was no questionnaire item that specifically addressed the theme "Black Community," yet the concepts recurred throughout the interviews.

Most of the themes I have discussed in this paper thus far focus on the marital aspect or personal aspect of these couples' relationships. The next two themes I will discuss are broader in scope. They focus on marriage from a societal perspective. These societal factors are important to include as impact factors on marriages. Societal factors are often as important as personal and marital factors, and relevant to strong, enduring Black marriages.

There are several themes I could have included in this paper, yet I felt compelled to include this one because the information shared by these couples provides some

explanation on how the Black community impacts strong, enduring Black marriages. I believe it is of utmost importance to include the comments shared and expressed by these couples, specifically from the husbands and fathers. They felt it was necessary and important to express their deepest feelings and concerns about their Black community with me. Below I will share their advice and stories.

Sub-theme 1, Negative Perceptions of Black Families. Charles, a father of four, discusses the media's negative image of Black families:

We live in a white [neighborhood] and we're an African American family and I'm sure they know the media like we do. And the first impression is "all Black families do is have divorces. Their children all grow up in single parent families." But they don't see that across the street when they peer over here. They see a Black couple who has children and it sends another message back to them that not all Black families are separated, not all Black couples want divorces. Not all Black couples are living apart and [the father is] visiting. I'm not just a visiting father here, I live here.

Charles shares the important difference his life makes as a devoted husband and father as opposed to the media's portrayal of Black families. It is important to him to make sure he sets a "better" example of what a Black man and father should look like. He feels it is his duty and responsibility to present his life, marriage, and family positively to his friends, colleagues and neighbors. Charles continues to explain that because his family lives in a predominately white neighborhood, he is somewhat distanced from the Black neighborhood and community. He shares:

[I] guess partly because we've been geographically away from our [neighborhood] for nearly 25 years, we've been accused at times of being different or being kind of isolated. We don't do this intentionally, isolate ourselves from [our neighborhood]. [People say], we must think we are better than they are. [No], we want to [be involved]. We just want better for ourselves and we want to put our children in a different environment and raise them in a different environment. Some of the stuff, granted, we don't want to be a part of. There's no health and there's no strength in [those environments] as a married couple. To be truthful, part of the reason we are here today [is] because we didn't

hang out with some of [those people] back in the 80's and 90's. Some may argue, "It has nothing to do with the community". We have these opportunities, we have these places, these venues, and you've just never taken advantage of it. Maybe that's the truth. And maybe it is where I am spiritually [and] I don't gain anything, so I don't go. It's not because I don't want the fellowship, [but] I don't need it. That sounds kind of harsh. But I don't need that fellowship anymore.

Charles gave an explanation as to why he and his wife tend not to interact with the Black community like they are expected. It is a fine line, you are to interact with the community without getting into other's business. Few couples are able to find that balance. The balance of investing in other people's lives within the Black community, while protecting your family from over-identification with the Black community is used to maximize safety. For example, if the family is too involved in the community, family members may begin to associate with some negative behaviors and risk factors involved in the Black community, such as abuse of alcohol, drugs, or "street life" behavior. If the family is too independent of the Black community, the family sends a message of superiority to the Black community as to say they don't need the communities support or protection, when in actuality they may. Both of these scenarios are associated with the family's safety and reputation (cf. Brodsky, 1996).

Couples deal with finding a balance in a multitude of ways. They learn to deal with the negativity and destructive elements of the Black community and participate anyway, or they remove themselves completely from the Black community, or involve themselves in the Black community and allow their family to be persecuted for the sake of involvement. Some families participate minimally and get stereotyped as a sell-out, flaky or uninvolved. Many families follow a pattern of feeling a need to isolate themselves from the Black community in order to strive toward success.

It can be difficult for families to fight negative community influences. Many times, families feel pressured to remain independent of the community because their reliance on others (in the community) forms relationships. And in order to maintain these community relationships, families may compromise their values, jeopardizing their family's future. The families in this study, as many families living in Black neighborhoods and communities, are more focused on creating successful outcomes for their children than being an involved member of their community, as Charles expressed in his previous quote.

As a father, Charles wants to provide a different environment for his kids; he wants to keep his marriage strong. The negative influences he may have faced living in the Black neighborhood and community could have threatened both his marriage and his family. Survival of family for him is critical. He continues to share:

The important things that come to mind are, one, recognizing there is a need to stay together for the sake of the community and for the sake of the family. For the family is the community and its wholeness. We have a responsibility to our children; we have a responsibility to our community to remain together. We have to be an example to our children. We have to show them there are parents out there who don't give up. When we go to the activities of our children, we see single parents; we don't know all the reasons behind it. But I feel good when me and my wife walk in there [together]. It just kind of brings a sense of wholeness for me when we can come in together. And we can represent as a couple as a married couple to our children.

Charles and others discuss that staying together is critical for the children. It is important for the children to see their parents together and just as important for the media to see strong happy Black couples together.

Sub-theme 2, The Importance of Black Families Staying Together and Being Supportive of One Another. Ronald shares some related thoughts about the importance of Black couples working together in marriage to stay together.

I want to specialize this; I think the advice would be learn how to work together as a team. Because basically that's one of the things that unfortunately we as African American people do not do well. We are very competitive. I mean especially with people that are young and upwardly mobile, you know, she has a good job, he has a good job, she has a good education, he has a good education, they find themselves competing with each other rather than working together. You should be her number one fan and he should be your number one fan and that's one of the things my wife learned. I'm her number one supporter; she's my number one supporter. Another piece of advice is never, ever say anything negatively about your spouse to anyone else.

Sean ends by agreeing with the above statement that Black couples and families need to be more supportive of one another. He shares:

[What] we need to do is be more supportive of each other and we need to go back to the basics. Go back to where we depend on ourselves more as a family. Go back to the values[of] teaching [kids] what is right and wrong to survive, encouraging them to grow. It doesn't take a lot to live; you don't need a whole bunch of [unnecessary] things to live. We need to have more unity, more time together. Sunday dinner has dissolved. We need to encourage [kids]; [our] house should be open. Those are the basics I'm talking about. Those are the things that will get you through anytime. Depending on [one] another, being there for each other, [showing] courtesy and being polite.

The underlying message is that within the Black community, the fathers and husbands believe that Black couples need to make it a priority to stay together, to be committed to work together for the future of their children and community. These Black couples believe they have a responsibility not only to their children but to the larger Black community. It is a responsibility and priority to provide a better image of positive Black family life in every community in the United States, to be an example, a symbol to show that Black families are not all pathological. It begins with each committed couple supporting each other and working together as families.

In summarizing this theme, it is important to note that this specific theme was discussed mostly by the husbands and fathers. This is important to observe because their expressions seem to reach to the core of their vision for their community, to create a more

functional, healthy, Black community. Their quotes expressed their desire to be faithful husbands, loving fathers, and involved leaders- a very different picture than what we see in the media. These husbands and fathers expressed their vulnerability and frustration in working so hard and being unappreciated, in not being respected and not encouraged for the positive choices they've made. Through these interviews, they opened themselves to share the heartache they feel when they often see their fathers, sons, brothers, cousins, and friends in the community working against one another. It is these husbands' and fathers' request that readers understand the importance of unity, collectivity, and functionality for our Black families, our Black community, and our nation.

After the brief but significant peek into the Black community highlighting positive strengths and strong leaders within the Black community, it is important to note that there are still many barriers to overcome in our community and nation. One is racism, which is the last theme we will discuss. Couples share their frustrations with experiencing racism and how it impacts their daily lives, their marriages and their families.

4.7) Theme 6: The Impact of Racism on Marriage.

Racism is the final theme I will discuss in my results section. Racism appeared throughout the conversations of couples while discussing their relationship with God, their marriage, and their family. Racism for Black Americans living in the United States is evident in every area of their life. Yet, racism did not have a substantial influence on these couples' marital relationship. One father, Larry, sums it up nicely by saying:

Oh, we talk about [racism]. It doesn't affect us negatively 'cause we know. When you know who you are inside, spiritually, then no external forces, no crap is going to make you sudden[ly] disenfranchise emotionally.

But racism did impact other areas of the couples' lives. Couples described experiencing racism as an everyday event. While analyzing the data, it was difficult at times to tease out the theme of racism, while at other times it was blatant, mirroring the couples' descriptions of how they encounter racism in their daily lives. I thought it was necessary and important to share the couples' experiences in their own words, experiences that express their struggles and their strengths. In the following passages I will use their words to explain the impact racism has on their marriage and family.

Sub-theme 1, Racism Experienced as a Daily Event. The first sub-theme, racism is experienced as a daily event, refers to the fact that racism was described by the couples as common. Larry shares his opinions about experiencing racism.

Well, I've experienced it so much and so often over time, me and my friends used to talk about it all the time. I fight that now, I talk to the kids [and say], "Don't you ever take no back seat to nobody. God created one yellow flower better than the red one? He created them all equal." I can say that I encounter [racism] daily in some form or fashion.

Larry discusses his impulse to fight against racism, because deep inside, he knows it is wrong. Diane shares her daily experiences with racism:

There have been several times, daily times in my relationships, where I've experienced racism. My response to that rejection was to learn to reject the rejection. I had to study racism and institutional oppression and systemic oppression as a whole and I had to really delve into it and for me [it helped] learning exactly what racism is. And with any system the "ist" for the "ism" are the ones who benefit from [the "ism's"] being in place. And I know that I'm not racist because I don't benefit.

Diane's experiences with racism, coupled with her educational background in understanding the definition of racism, provides her with an ability to cope with the negativity that racism brings by depersonalizing it. Wilma shares:

Because I've dealt with racism all my life, I don't let it bother me. I feel like it is their problem and they need to deal with it. [At work] I would just do the best that

I could and do my job the best that I could and through that, [I] became a very excellent dental assistant. So, [racism] challenged me to do beyond what everybody else would do because I wanted to be successful and I wanted them to see that I could do it and that I was just as good [as the next assistant]. We don't really talk a lot about that kind of stuff because we know what we have to do. We just talk about what may have happened, then realize that it is not our problem, it's theirs and we're going to have to give it up and praise God anyway and just pray about it and encourage each other to do our best, and just take those things to the Lord.

Like Diane, many couples alluded to allowing God to deal with the people who are racist in their actions and behaviors. For these couples it was a way of coping with the daily reality of racism. Religion served as a coping resource for dealing with racism. Still, couples expressed that because humans are imperfect there are times when racism and faith collide. Understanding that religious communities are made up of imperfect people and racism will be experienced in the church is difficult to accept. This is usually the case when Black families attend a congregation that is not predominately Black. Couples specifically allude to their frustration with experiencing racism in the church. Primarily because church members are like family members to many of these couples (Marks & Chaney, 2006). For highly religious Blacks, religious community members may be as important as biological family members (Marks & Chaney, 2006). When the couples' religious community fails them, it is disappointing and many times more hurtful than experiencing failure from a non-religious community (Marks & Dollahite, 2001). Charles shares his discontent with experiencing racism in the church:

In the churches we've been in, that's been the hardest community to experience racism. And to know that your white pastor didn't get it. Then to have to see the consequences of it, which could have led you up to another dispensation or opportunity. To know that [the opportunity is] shut off, that racism evolved and it also shut off that opportunity because they use that systemic power to do that. [Church] is a very hard place to have those discussions. But we've done well; we've always done well.

Ronald, a pastor, shares his experiences with racism in the church:

Some people are racist and don't even know it. These are usually white people, [they ask me], 'Um, do you, I don't know how to ask this but, do you have any Caucasian people in your church?' I say, "Yes, we do, and matter of fact we have quite a few of them. The majority of our church is people like you. But we are praying that God will have the affirmative action going and we are hoping that God will bring more color into [the church]". I make them feel like fools. So I'll work [them]. I have a lot of fun with it, quite frankly.

I was grateful for the honesty and candor the participants used in sharing their experience with racism in the church. This is a subject that often times does not get discussed, let alone researched. But is a reality for many Black Americans. From the excerpts above you can see that the participants in this study coped with experiencing racism in the church. These experiences can be especially disappointing when your church or faith community is, at times, your source of strength and support and at times your source of frustration. It would be an interesting study to investigate how coping strategies differ for Black Americans experiencing racism in the church compared to experience racism outside of the church.

Sub-theme 2, The Difference in Communication Styles Between the Sexes.

Because racism was described by couples as an everyday and often mundane event, it did not impact the marriage significantly. However it did reveal a lot about communication styles of the spouses. Women and men expressed their emotion and frustration with their spouses differently. The second sub-theme addresses difference in communication styles between sexes. Women seemed to be more expressive in their discussions of difficult events. They "unloaded their rage and frustration" with their spouse. A few women discuss how they dealt with it. Diane, a wife and mother, explains:

I've always talked to him about things. The advantage is he understands it. I think if I was married to a white man he would really have to "get" systemic

oppression. I think that the advantage of having an African American husband is that when I come home and say it, I don't have to explain what it is or what it looked like. I don't have to get into that detail. [Instead] it is how am I going to get to day number two and how is he going to help me get there? That's the advantage of my spouse experiencing [racism] as well.

Lucy shares how she deals with racism in a passionate style:

We used to be militant and belligerent in college. We are both more laid back now, so we won't blow up. Unless it has to do with my children or my mother. But we do talk about [racism] a lot, we process it and we have a lot of "those" discussions (discussions about racism). I tend to be more passionate in my style, so he'll talk me down.

The two quotes above are examples of how many of the women in this study express their frustration with racism to their spouses. They need to unload their frustration and be secure that they have a listening ear, preferably someone who can relate to them and understand. This may pose a challenge for Black women married to men who have never experienced racist behavior. However, I'd suggest that if the woman has an integral support circle, the challenge may be lessened. Although all the couples in this study were Black Americans, it would be interesting to explore the phenomenon of marriage where one spouse experiences racism daily and the other one never has.

Prescilla was very honest with her frustrations in experiencing racism and how she deals with it.

How I dealt with it when I got home was I unloaded it on him as to express just what had happened. I have to realize that they're the ones with the problem. I can't become bitter about it or anything.

Cheryl describes her response to racism like this:

I'm very, very strong towards racism and I'm very outspoken about it. I'm outspoken to the ones that offend me. I don't curse and do all that but I do let them know that I don't appreciate things. Not [in] this day and time.

Ella shares:

[My husband] doesn't see racism as easy as I see it...and so he doesn't see it as much or perceive it or want to get in someone's face about it. You know, he doesn't feel it like I feel it.

She goes on to add:

It's something that we (Black people) have to talk about and have to encourage each other to get through. I think it's more focused toward men. They have the tendency to be a little [less] overt when it comes to women. Or they'll allow women to do more things than they would men.

Ella's above statement sheds light into the intuitive nature of many women. In difficult situations like experiencing racism, women may often times pick up on the negative behavior and or actions easier and faster than their husbands. Especially in regions and cultures where Black Americans experience indirect racism, women may perceive racism when their husbands do not. Indirect or covert racism can be even harder to cope with because of the surreptitious behavior displayed. When husbands do experience racism, they cope with the difficult or stressful events in a more intrinsic manner. Charles describes his frustration with racism in this way:

I probably don't share it openly. She probably saw it in my isolation or my lack of conversation. [My wife] probably understood it in my expression in my face [that] something happened at work.

Earl shares his viewpoint on experiencing racism and the way in which he chooses to handle it:

Well, you know, being a Black man I can always recognize racism in full panoramic view. You get angry. You come home, and if I were to allow the world to tell me how I was supposed to act then I would have come home, I would have kicked the dog. I would have argued with my wife, I would have pulled out my belt and beat my kids. But I wasn't going to let society dictate how I was going to respond to situations. Because so often that's what society tries to [do], write a script which certain racist behavior is supposed to trigger. And that's where I hold on to God because I know God gives me peace. And through God's peace and through God's love I am able to pray for that person who tries to make me

unhappy because they're more unhappy than I am. Directly, yes, racism has always [played] a part in my life. How [do] I respond to it? I don't bring it home to my wife. I'll tell my wife, "You know what this fool did today?" I'm not going to come home and let some idiot out there cause me to be unhappy here. So [there's] racism every day. It's not what they do to you; it's how you respond to it. I try to set the example not to respond to it. You can't go there. I can't go there.

Fred sums it up by stating life is too short to allow racism to impact your life negatively:

I try not to let it bother me. I kind of roll along with the flow because if you get [angry] every time, before you know it [you've] left here (this earth).

Most men discussed handling racism and dealing with it in an effective manner. A few discussed how through experiencing racism they took on the additional challenge of becoming an agent for change.

Sub-theme 3, Being an agent for change. Steven shares:

I'm pretty good dealing with anything that might happen with race. I used to just [say] "Yea, let me tell her what happened today". But I never got bitter. I accepted that [this] is the way it is and I just had to keep going on. As long as I could come through that's all I cared about. And I felt [that if] I could [excel in my position], I could help Black people or help someone else's opinion about Black people.

Sean shares how he was encouraged like Steven to inspire a change in people:

When I came home, I had to talk to my wife about it and I felt like I had been singled out... You want to make a stand you want to be able to change [racist behavior]. So being able to come home and speak to my wife about it, to have [her] encouragement saying, "This may be a moment where you can change people." It is a challenge. It's a hard challenge. It's not easy. We have those challenges every day of our life. We are going to have to step up and meet those challenges every day of our life, because it's there. We are not going to be able to come from around it.

The men share that ultimately racism is outside of their control. They are responsible to control their own actions but they are also responsible to give it to God and let God deal with it.

Harold, a senior man married for 44 years, sums the racism frustration up well. He states:

I was just raised up that way. I can't forget it. But I'm not mad at the white man

or anything like that. The Bible says, “Vengeance is mine. I will repay,” says the Lord. He’ll take care of all that.

The phenomenon of racism is complex because it is evident in multiple areas of life (Stewart, 2004). As a Black American, I offer the explanation that in some respects, the phenomenon of racism is similar to the phenomenon of love in that a person who has experienced love, has felt it, and sensed it, knows love exists, and holds it to be real. Yet the phenomenon of love is difficult to explain to someone who has never experienced it. Although this comparison may be arguable, in that racism and love are on opposite sides of the spectrum, they are similar in that experiencing either phenomenon affects every area of a person’s life. Similarly, racism is a perennially piercing needle and thread in Black life that weaves the race together in a shared experience that sets these individuals and their families apart from those who have not experienced it.

In conclusion, although these couples coped with racism well, marriages are impacted by societal factors such as racism. Racism can be a source of ongoing stress and a contributor to problems, serving as a destructive factor for some marriages. But for these strong marriages, experiencing life-long racism has not torn their families apart. They make it through these challenges together. The wives unload on their husbands, while the husbands tend to deal with the racism by keeping it in, but both feel understood. Ultimately, they deal with the challenges by creating opportunities to grow closer together as a couple and family. It is a challenge they have worn both well and nobly. This theme highlights the couples’ strength and endurance.

The couples try not to let racism dictate the way they interact with their families, even though the majority of them experience racism on a consistent basis. They struggle to control the manner in which they respond to racism in order to set positive examples

for their children. In some respects, the burden of racism may be felt more heavily by men. They feel a responsibility to protect and support their wife when she experiences racism, to set a good example for their children in how to respond to racism, and to combat stereotypes associated with their community. They feel a responsibility to be a changing agent for their colleagues at work through patient example and by progressing professionally. The men I interviewed are men of integrity, courage, and persistence in wanting to create a better nation. Too few times do they have the opportunity to share their everyday stories and experiences that shape them into the strong fathers and husbands that they are. I feel honored that I was given the opportunity to hear and share their stories.

4.8) Summary

In summary, six themes were discussed. The first four themes were relational and marital in scope. They were: (a) the influence of children on marriage, (b) the influence of faith on marriage, (c) the sources of strength for marriage, and (d) the characteristics for a strong marriage. The final two themes were more societal in scope. They were: (e) the impact of Black community on marriage, and (f) the impact of racism on marriage. These findings highlight the strengths of strong, enduring Black marriages and families.

One might ask, “In the midst of concern over family decline, why do things sometimes go well?” These couples shed light on why and how some Black families remain strong in the midst of challenges. Their faith and commitment to their family values and to one another keeps them strong against challenges such as stress, community responsibilities, and societal racism. We should look to these couples as examples when

asking the question, “What does a strong marriage look like?” The families involved in this study provide insight into a piece of the overall picture of a strong marriage model.

Conclusion

Existing research has shown that both Black men and women tend to hold a positive view of marriage (McAdoo, 1993). Despite the many challenges associated with the decline in Black marriages, most Black Americans still strongly desire to be married (Taylor & Chatters, 1997). Unfortunately little research on strong enduring Black marriages exists (Cherlin, 1998). This dissertation adds a strength-based study to the existing research on Black families and marriages. The findings from this study give an encouraging, positive view of strong, enduring Black marriages and family life.

Many high quality studies on Black Americans have been done. (Billingsley, 1992; Hill, 1972; McAdoo, 1997, 2007). Still, much of the research that examines Black families is limited to low-income or single-mother families (Taylor, Tucker, Chatters & Jayakody, 1997). There exist many marriage-based Black families but there is little research that focuses on understanding these families from a strength-based approach.

It was with this in mind that I planned a dissertation project to focus on the strengths of Black families. The findings from this study supported existing strengths found in Black family literature such as the importance of faith to Black Americans (Ellison, 1997; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004) and the involvement of extended family and kin involvement as a support to Black families (Taylor, Jackson & Chatters, 1997). The present study added to the existing literature by recognizing and explaining the strengths in more detail.

I was able to look at how and why faith is of such importance to Black Americans, and specifically to marriage. Research shows that Blacks who participate in religious activity or self-report as highly religious tend to have a higher quality of family

life (Ellison, 1997), emotionally, physically and psychologically, therefore improving the likelihood of marital success (Dollahite & Marks, 2005). This study's findings showed that faith was an important source of strength for these couples in their marriages because faith provides a positive outlet and coping resource for the couples to turn to. Faith served as a compass to guide the couples in the right direction. Faith also clearly defined the husbands' and wives' roles and gave them strength to fulfill their roles successfully, especially for men, with same-gendered marriage support.

The couples in this study listed their personal relationship with God (spirituality) as a source of strength as well. Their personal relationship with their creator helped them to control outside forces that might destroy their marriages. These outside forces may be categorized as addictions, infidelity, or "street life". Many of the couples explained that their personal commitment to God helped make their marriage successful.

Though most of the discussion about faith was positive, many of the couples explained that faith can be a challenge in marriage as well. Still, overall, faith positively influenced the marriage relationship, supporting previous literature on the importance of faith and religion in the lives of Black Americans (Ellison, 1997; Hill, 1999; Taylor, 1998; Taylor, Chatters & Levin, 2004)

The findings from my study continued to highlight strengths of Black marriages and families that have not been adequately explored in the existing literature. The existing literature focuses on true, but "morbid" rates of Black men being unemployed, incarcerated, or dead. The Black men in my study demonstrated and expressed the importance of being a positive example for their families, children, and community-representing themselves and their family as healthy and strong. The findings from this

study portrayed Black men who are responsible fathers and parents. This is a very different picture than that painted by much of the existing literature that suggests that Black fathers are not present (for discussion, see Connor & White, 2006).

Scholars have called for researchers to notice strengths and empower Black families (Daly et al., 1995). Strengths of Black families often do not get recognized in literature. The Black husbands and fathers in this study expressed a strong desire for Black couples to stay together and work together for the betterment of the community. By painting a picture of Black men as leaders in their families and community, this study offers hope to many and gives researchers permission to study Black men from a positive strengths-based perspective. It also serves as a reminder that Black families are not monolithic.

Married life among Black Americans not only consists of commitment to love and care for one another but also of commitment to children; biological, step-children, adopted, or “temporary” (Marks et al., 2006). The couples shared their desire to have children from the beginning of their marriage and how full their lives have been because of having children. The husbands discussed the process of change they experienced when becoming fathers. Both parents discussed the unspeakable joy parenthood brought them. In many instances, they also discussed caring for non-biological children whom they raised or helped to raise. I name this concept “village upbringing.” It has been adequately discussed in existing research (Marks et al., 2006) and is in close relationship with the strength of strong kin networks among Black families (Cherlin, 1998; Taylor, Jackson & Chatters, 1997). It is a concept that reaches back into the history of Black culture and is still a very present concept and practice in the lives of Black families today.

A central question behind my study was, “What keeps these couples’ marriages strong and lasting?” The findings from this study provide answers by looking at detailed attention to the hows, whys, and processes of successful, long-term Black marriages.

In this study, the characteristics that make long-term Black marriages successful were also investigated. Existing research on long-term marriage shows that commitment is a key characteristic in successful marriages (Fennel, 1993; Lauer, Lauer & Kerr, 1990; Mackey & O’Brien, 1996; Parker 2000; Robinson & Blanton, 1993; Weishauss & Field, 1988). The couples in this study supported the existing research in acknowledging that commitment was a necessary and important characteristic in the longevity of marriage. The couples discussed the various reasons for their commitment, their feelings about commitment, and the importance of commitment in their marriage. The couples explained that their commitment to God, their commitment to their spouse, and their personal commitment work together to make a strong marriage.

The other recurring characteristic for a strong marriage discussed by couples was communication. The couples encouraged communication and discussed the need to constantly keep communication lines open. Communication was not a salient and pervasive characteristic in the existing research on strong marriage, but it was present in some of the studies (Kaslow & Robinson, 1996; Parker, 2000). Couples in this study may have stressed the importance of communication because it served as an important coping mechanism for them to make it through difficult and challenging times. For example, the importance of communication arose just as often in the discussion on racism as in the discussion on strong marriage.

This study is qualitative and allows for the discovery of new ideas from the participants' perspective. Previous research on Black families has typically used quantitative data. However, numbers are not adequate to convey processes and meaning to help in understanding the function of family strengths. Therefore, the qualitative approach makes this study unique and offers insight into the comparison and contrasting of Black families with other U.S. Families. Of the six themes generated, I found two themes to be similar with existing literature, composed of studies with mostly white samples.

As discussed above, the Black couples in this study discussed commitment and communication as the two most important characteristics of a strong marriage. These findings resonate with the majority of studies in the existing literature on long-term enduring marriage that list commitment as a key characteristic. Similarly, many of the strong family models listed communication as an important factor.

The other similarity my study addresses is that having children influences the marriage relationship. Existing research, with mostly white samples shows that children influence the marriage relationship (Cowan & Cowan, 2000). Research shows that for most Black Americans, marriage has become separate from childbearing (Cherlin, 1998). While this is true for the majority of Blacks, it is not true for all of them. The couples in this study gave a different representation of family that powerfully connects marriage and child rearing together. More specifically, the husbands and fathers in this study provided a positive view of engaged, involved fatherhood. For the men in this study, marriage and parenthood were strongly linked. This is supported by previous work done by Popenoe (1996) stating that men need cultural pressure, often times called marriage, to stay

engaged with their children. Although marriageable Black men might be in short supply due to other factors, such as unemployment, incarceration, and death, Black men who *are* committed to their wives and children do exist (Marks, Hopkins & Chaney, in press).

With many similarities between Black couples and White couples concerning strong enduring marriages noted, there were some important differences as well. The two latter themes from this study, the impact of the Black community on marriage and the impact of racism on marriage indicate some of this variation. These themes are specific to Black marriages and families.

This study offers a unique richness, meaning, depth and explanation of how the Black community impacts strong, enduring Black marriages. The new information provided by these couples is especially important because it is shared from their perspective and literally, in their words. The majority of the discussion on Black community came from the fathers and husbands, therefore offering a new angle. Typically, we hear insiders' perspectives from Black wives and mothers about social networks, kin networks, and the responsibility they feel to their community (Stack, 1974). Rarely do we hear the voice of Black men (Connor & White, 2006). By presenting stories of these women and men, this study begins to address the hows, whys, and processes involved in strong, marriage based families from a more holistic and multidimensional perspective than most previous studies.

Turning to the racism theme, Cherlin (1998) suggests race as a factor influencing the steep decline in Black marriage. He continues to add that even though race is a contributing factor, it cannot be held fully responsible for the decline of marriage (Cherlin, 1998). The couples in my study agree that racism has a societal impact on Black

marriages, but does not influence their marriages in a profoundly negative way because they have learned how to cope with it. The couples discuss experiencing racism as an everyday event. Although their discussions about racism and how it personally affects their marriage and family is shared inclusively with their daily familial challenges, their stories provide detailed insight into how and why racism impacts marriage and family life for Blacks. Through the couples' descriptive and engaging stories, we are able to feel the challenges and frustrations they face on a consistent basis and to see how they deal with these challenges. This study gives light to the reality of how societal racism impacts Black marriages by clearly stating the case. "Racism is a perennially piercing needle and thread in Black life that weaves the race together in a shared experience that sets these individuals and their families apart from those who have not experienced it" (Marks et al., 2006, p. 211).

Implications

We know much about failure as it pertains to Black marriage, but we need to know more about success. The implications for future research below are suggestions to increase the amount and depth of strength-based Black research. The bottom line is that positive research on Black marriages and families is very much needed.

Research has shown a positive link between religious participation and marital stability and duration (Dollahite, Marks & Goodman, 2004). However, the previous studies were conducted with all or mostly white samples. Consequently, a study should be conducted looking at the relationship between religious participation and marital stability and duration composed of an all Black sample. This study is a qualitative step in that direction.

Given the findings from this study, a more detailed qualitative study looking specifically at the role and impact Black community has on Black marriages would be of interest. This type of study would offer richness and depth into the body of scant existing literature focusing on positive perceptions of Black men. Research should focus on Black fathers' expression of their communities from an optimistic perspective.

Finally, the couples in this study brought to light many overlaps between their faith community and the Black community. Perhaps an investigation into how both of these communities impact and influence Black marriage and families in positive and negative ways would be of interest. Researchers should aim to explore possible relationships between Black community and faith community (for example, experiencing racism in the church, or "messy" fellowship). We know little about either of these themes and a study specifically highlighting them both together would be of great value to the field of Black family studies.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to add strength-based research on Black marriages to the existing literature on marriage. The study offers some answers regarding what makes enduring Black marriages so resilient. This qualitative study provided insights and understandings from the participants' points of view, including findings that concentrated on experiences, processes, meanings and understandings of Black persons and families. These findings help to fill the goal of this paper, to empower Black families and to aid in a more complete understanding of them.

Three to four years ago I took a graduate-level contemporary families class which included reading a 400-page volume on Black families. After reading the book, I posed

the question, “Why is there no literature that addresses families like mine a strong, marriage-based family?” That is the hole I have chosen to fill through my dissertation project. That is the gap that this study addresses a qualitative look into strong, long-term Black marriages. I conclude my graduate study and Ph.D. program with the satisfaction of knowing that the next student who raises that same question, “Where is the literature on strong, long-term Black marriages?” will receive a different response. Although the existing literature on strong Black marriages is scarce, there will be one paper that addresses that question by demonstrating: “Yes, they’re out there!”

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Appendix A
Demographic Form

Name:

Address:

How many years have you been married:

Age:

Please circle the highest education level you have attained.

8 12 16 18 18+

Please circle the category your annual income falls into.

Below \$20,000 \$20,000 to \$30,000 \$30,000 to \$40,000
\$40,000 to \$50,000 \$50,000 to \$70,000 Above \$70,000

On a scale of 1 to 5, how happy are you in your marriage?

1	2	3	4	5
Very Unhappy	Moderately Unhappy	Neutral	Moderately Happy	Very Happy

On a scale of 1 to 5, how strong would you define your marriage?

1	2	3	4	5
Very fragile	Moderately fragile	Neutral	Moderately Strong	Very Strong

Appendix B

Consent Form

Part 4: Consent Form for Participants

Study Title: A qualitative evaluation of strong, long-term African American marriages.

Performance Sites: Homes of participants

Contacts:	Loren Marks, Ph.D.	Phone: 225-578-2405
	Pam Monroe, Ph.D.	Phone: 225-578-1351
	Katrina Hopkins-Williams	Phone: 503-288-1952
	Graduate Student	

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to gain more knowledge on the characteristics and process, the “hows” and “whys” of a strong, enduring marriage among African Americans couples.

Subjects: The participants will include married heterosexual African American couples, married 20 years or longer.

Study Procedures: The researcher will conduct semi-structured interviews with each participant couple.

Benefits: The researcher will have a greater understanding of long-term African American marriages.

Risks/Discomforts: There are no known risks.

Measures taken to reduce risk: A trained researcher will conduct interviews on a consistent basis. All participation is voluntary and the information the participants share will be anonymous.

I understand that participation in this research is completely voluntary and that I may refuse to participate in or may withdraw from this study at any time without being penalized in any way.

I understand that my name and the name of any other participants nor any information identifying me will not be used under any circumstances.

I understand that this form does not authorize the release of any identifying information to any party under any circumstances. I agree that this information may be used by the researchers with the stipulation that my name not be attached to this information.

I understand that the results of this research may be published or otherwise disseminated but that these results will not contain any identifying information.

The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have any questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Chairman, LSU Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the researchers' obligations to provide me with a copy of this consent form if signed by me.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix C

Sample Questionnaire

Semi-structured Interview Questionnaire

1. Can you describe to me what makes a strong marriage? Tell me a story about someone you know that illustrates a strong marriage.
2. What sources of strength are important for your marriage? Give me an example.
3. Have your religious beliefs and values influenced the strength and life of your marriage? If so, tell me how.
4. Have your religious practices influenced the strength and life of your marriage? If so, tell me how?
5. Has your religious faith community influenced the strength and life of your marriage? Tell me a story.
6. How might the issue of religion or faith be a challenge in marriage?
7. My parents provided me with an excellent example of a strong marriage. On the contrary there are members of my family that didn't provide good examples of a strong marriage. How did the example of your parent's relationship affect your marriage?
8. How would your marriage be different if you had no children?
9. Tell me a specific story about how your children influenced your marriage?
10. What changes have you seen in your spouse across time throughout your marriage? What about in terms of how much they give or contribute to the marriage?

11. What changes have you made from your perspective?

12. Think to a time when you have experienced racism. When you came home, how did you express it, specifically with your family?

13. Think back to a difficult time in your marriage where your spouse helped you get through it? Can you share with me about that.

14. What are some of the strengths of your spouse? Tell me a story that illustrates those strengths?

15. What advice would you give to other (younger) African American couples about marriage?

VITA

Katrina Denise Hopkins was born and raised in Portland, Oregon. She received her Bachelor of Science from Oregon State University in the spring of 2000 from the College of Home Economics majoring in family, child and consumer science. She graduated from Louisiana State University August of 2003 with her Master of Science degree in the field of human ecology with a focus on family literacy. In the fall of 2003, she entered the doctoral program in the School of Human Ecology to continue her studies with a focus on strong Black American families. During her doctoral studies, she was awarded two outstanding fellowships, the Huel D. Perkins Doctoral Fellowship and The Southern Regional Education Board Doctoral Scholars Award. Upon graduation, Katrina will be moving to the Los Angeles, California, area.