THE SOCIOHISTORICAL INFLUENCES ON COUPLING: THE BARRIERS TO DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING A HEALTHY AND REWARDING ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN HETEROSEXUAL COUPLES

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ABSTRACT

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African American individuals, when compared with other ethnic/racial groups, have higher divorce rates and lower marriage rates. Considering that marriage is the foundation for family life, cause for greater exploration into this phenomenon is evident. To gain a more in-depth understanding of the process by which African American heterosexual couples develop and maintain healthy, rewarding romantic relationships, this dissertation includes two studies that shed light on the unique experiences of African American individuals and couples and the implications of these experiences on coupling and relationship maintenance. Thirty-one African American married or divorced individuals participated in the overall study. Study one describes the lived experiences of African American individuals, their childhood relationships, and the influences of these relationships on adult relationships. Study two discusses the process of developing a romantic relationship for African American couples, juxtaposing currently married couples with divorced couples. Qualitative data analysis was implemented to answer the research questions. Interviews were conducted with each participant for an average of 1.25 hours. In study one; grounded theory was used to generate a theory to explain childhood influences on coupling for African Americans. In study two, interpretive phenomenology was used to learn of the process for developing healthy, rewarding relationships for this African American couples. The transcribed interviews were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding procedures to

support theory generation. Each study highlights themes related to African American couples along with research and clinical implications.

To my parents—the best examples of a loving marital relationship. From you I had a model relationship to mimic; driving my passion for engaging in research to provide prevention and intervention programs for couples who have yet to learn the skills you maintain. This passion derives from knowing the power of love, and the benefit of having two loving parents in the home who are affectionate, committed and faithful to God and one another. I dedicate my degree to that LOVE. To my nieces, nephews, my daughter, Kaiden, and the future trajectory of the Tichenor Family—May you see possibility, reach higher than humanly possible, become the best version of yourself, captivate and change the world. #WEALLGONEAT. To my elementary Vice Principal, Virgil Madden. Thank you for seeing potential in me and for giving me the opportunity to be a leader at such a young age (i.e. candy store manager, MLK speeches, plays, and intellectual dialog). Your investment produced fruit. And finally, to my recently departed cousin, Allene Manning—may you rest in peace in the arms of OUR Heavenly Father. Your pain is now ended; your new life has begun.

Now unto Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph 3:20-21)

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To God: "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." (John 10:10)..."I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). To my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, all things are for You, all things are by You, and all things are because of You. I thank You for Your favor, Your love, and for Your blessings in my life. I hope that You are proud of Your son, for I aim to please you always. Thank You for direction in my life and access to the Divine resource which allows me to live this life. My life and work is a ministry unto You.

To my dear wife and friend, Stephanie: you are a strong, kind, genuine, and caring person from whom I have learned how to enjoy the moments of life that are often overlooked. You adjust yourself for those around you because you wish happiness for everyone who interacts with you. I appreciate the mother you are, the wife you are, and the supporting spirit that you have. You have sacrificed your time and my presence in the home to allow me to finish this project without complaint, only support. You exercised patience, created calm, and eased my burden in many ways. I am glad you are my life partner and I cannot wait to continue building our lives together. I love you dearly and appreciate you very much. May I be the husband you wish me to be and may we become the couple that ministers to the relationships of others by example.

To my parents, Kevin and Tanya: Creating a strong foundation of work ethic and commitment, sacrificing a second mortgage, driving me to my first day of college and moving me in, visiting regularly, crying every time you departed, loving me always. These are my memories and examples of the depth of love that you two, my parents, have always shown me. 'We all gon eat' is a phrase I have used throughout this process and the motivation for this phrase

stems from your example. You have always sacrificed for those whom you love, especially your children. You two are my angels, my motivation, and my biggest supporters. I appreciate and love you deeply. You are the embodiment of love. I thank you for who you are to me. I left home as a boy and I am hopefully returning as a man of whom you are proud. Thank you forever. We did it! I am now the first African American male to complete a doctoral degree in the Couple and Family Therapy program at Michigan State University and the first on both sides of the family to complete this illustrious degree. I will not be the last.

To my siblings, Kenya, Kevin, Kenny, and Kellie: Each of you plays a special part in my life and I value our relationships immensely. To my sisters: Kenya, you are a deeply caring individual who has always demonstrated a commitment to making things easier for others in your life. You are an amazing mother, a courageous spirit, and a great *little* big sister. I value and love you very much. Mostly, I appreciated your smile. It comes from this pure place and withstands the test of time and circumstance. Your strength carries you and speaks of your character and amazing faith. You are truly a bright spot in my life. Kellie, you are an amazing person. I see so much in you that has always made me proud, while also hoping and wishing that you saw the same. Your love for others, your desire to make others happy and pleased, and your shyness--though you pretend it isn't there, are just a few beautiful qualities you have. You are amazing with kids and they respond very well to you. During Stephanie's cancer year in 2013, you willingly and graciously helped out with Kaiden to make sure she was taken care of, taught, and nurtured on the days when we were otherwise occupied. You are also great with people. I have watched how you have grown these last few years and how you continue to develop as a young lady. My prayer always is that you see yourself through God's eyes. And if you can't get so far as to see yourself from His perspective, I will remind you of what I see.

To my brothers: We have always been close as brothers—fighting for our place in the sibling system, while finding ways to support each other in our own ways. It's funny how the last few years have brought us closer, culminating into our first trip together to Chicago for Kenny's 30th birthday. Believe it or not, these are the moments I cherish. For there is no greater bond than that of brothers and I am grateful to have each of you, uniquely yourself. Kevin, what a great man you are. Your belief in social justice and helping others, both in your work and in the community, says to me just how much character you have. You are committed to learning, to family, and to God. I could not have a better example of what balance looks like. Thank you for being you. Kenny, better known as "Tweez": You find ways to smile and you are amazingly gifted. Your ability to captivate audiences through lyrics and your playful demeanor, drawing people in subtly is one of your greatest attributes. You are an awesome person. That is the biggest gift you provide to me--you always have a joking spirit, which I try to diagnose at times, but generally appreciate about you (smile). I love that you are confident and believe in yourself--this encourages my own belief in myself. I thank you both for the closeness we have developed and maintained and I look forward to continuing that depth. You two are my dudes.

To my brother and friend, Curtis Lewis: You are an inspiration and support. You inspired me and were my personal foundation for surviving graduate school, while supporting me in several ways. From helping me continue to be linked to MSU after the summer of 2008, to reviewing graduate school applications, to giving me a place to stay after undergraduate school for little to no money until I was able to help out. You modeled hard work and work ethic, while sacrificing for others throughout. I remember you coming home from working more jobs than I had, although I had two, and saying to me "you're lazy". I was reactive at that time, but over time

realized what you were saying--"it's going to take more for you to become what you want to me". For your support, love, and who you are, I am forever grateful.

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To my daughter, Kaiden Marie; nieces, Chiya and Chilynn; nephews, Christian, Kevin Jr, Kaleb; and our future babies in the family, you are the reason this goal began and why it was accomplished. My hope is that from this, you see no obstacle too difficult to overcome, no place to which you do not belong, no opportunity that cannot be seized, and no depth that cannot be conquered. May you play *dress up* in our regalia with the realistic belief that one day you will also adorn yourself with accomplishment and change the world for the better, in Jesus name. I love each of you uniquely and deeply. I thank you for being amazing people. I cannot wait to see you grow. #soproud #sograteful #beinspired.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO STUDY

Research shows the institution of marriage as a strong resource for individuals (Waite & Lehrer, 2003; Ribar, 2004). The numerous benefits and protective factors include higher sexual satisfaction, psychological adjustment, physical health, greater overall happiness, economic viability and a better quality of life (Frech & Williams, 2007; Phillips, Wilmoth, Marks, 2012). Healthy married individuals have the capacity to ward off and overcome daily challenges that emerge (e.g. economic stressors, increased job responsibilities, parenting issues) and tend to fare better overall than non-married individuals (Frech & Williams, 2007; Fuller, 2010). Prior to 2000, single men and women reported lower levels of physical and mental health when compared with individuals who were married (Amato, 2000). One reason for this difference in health outcomes for married individuals in comparison to non-married is that married individuals are able to use their partners as a resource to cope with the dynamic demands of everyday life whereas un-married individuals have to seek support from ancillary relationships that are less intimate, in most cases.

The partnership within marriage, when healthy and non-volatile, is viewed as a healthy form of coping and has a significant positive impact on the social and emotional well-being of individuals and their families. Unfortunately, some couples are unable to successfully use marriage as a protective factor because of strains and conflicts in the relationship, which may stem from various influences, including childhood experiences. Many of these relationships, consequently, often end in dissolution.

Foundational studies on marital dissolution identify specific influences with the potential to lead to divorce for couples including: financial problems (better defined as economic stress), parenting style differences, cultural practices, infidelity, or different goals for marriage

(Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). Current literature supports these findings, while adding variables such as woman's independence—allowing them more agency to leave poor relationships; marrying too early; poor intellectual, educational and social skills for marriage; liberal divorce laws; sexual factors leading to incompatibility; role conflicts; alcoholism and substance abuse; religious factors; and attitudes towards divorce (Leiblum, 2007; Lowenstein, 2005). Studies also show several perceived causes for divorce that are considered normative, including interpersonal interaction, basic unhappiness, communication problems, abuse (emotional, alcohol, physical, drug - spouse), infidelity, religious differences, mental illness, and in-laws (Balenstrino, Ciardi, & Mammini, 2013; Guminski Cleek & Pearson, 1985). Married couples who divorce have difficulty working through these hurdles and finding a way to compromise to develop a shared vision for their relational future.

Illustratively, marriage has a positive impact on individuals regardless of race and position in the family. For African Americans as well, marriage has been proven to benefit both men and woman economically, socially, and psychologically (Phillips, Wilmoth, & Marks, 2012). The same is true for children of African American married individuals. Marriage benefits for children include positive social adjustment and academic achievement (Malone-Colon, 2005). However, some African Americans are unable to transcend their relationships into marriage and others are unable to maintain marital relationships long-term, contrasting with other racial groups. In particular, Whites are found to be able to transcend their relationships into marriage more effectively in comparison (Furman & Wehner, 1994, 1997).

Moreover, natural challenges in marital relationships are further confounded by cultural histories and contextual experiences for African American populations (Boyd-Franklin, 2006; Pinderhughes, 2002), yet most research studies on the topic fail to account for cultural

differences and are therefore unable to be generalized across ethnic groups (Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). A number of studies report causes for divorce and relationship dissolution for African American heterosexual couples uniquely. Causes include economic strain and educational differences, perceived experiences of discrimination, racial and prejudicial bias, power discrepancy between partners, and gender ratios (Franklin, Boyd-Franklin, & Kelly, 2006; Kelly & Floyd, 2006b; LaTaillade, 2006; Lawrence-Webb et al., 2004; Pinderhughes, 2002).

Prevalence of Marital Dissolution for African Americans

Statistics show a remarkable difference in marital trends for African Americans. In 1967, the US Census reported a 31.4% divorce rate for African Americans in their first marriages compared to 16.7% for white Americans. In 1975, the US Census found white adults to be more likely than African American adults to have married once. Sixty-four percent of white men compared to 53% of African American men born between 1900 and 1959 were married once, while woman were 68% to 58%, respectively (NHMRC, 2011). According to the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC), in 1890, 80% of African American households were headed by two married parents, but by 1990, only 40% of African American households were headed by two-parents (CDC 2010; NHMRC, 2011). In 2001, according to the US Census, a significant number of African American men and woman (43.3% to 41.0%, respectively) had never been married in comparison to 27.4% and 20.7% for white men and woman. The 2010 Census found the number of married households in the white community and the Black community was 51% versus 28%, respectively. In the same year for African Americans, 46.8% were never married, 10.9% were divorced, and 4.1% were separated from a spouse (Black Demographics, 2013).

Just two years following, according to the 2012 Census, the statistics remained steady with 46% of African Americans reporting as never married and 28% married, respectively. Given the importance of marriage for well-being and the illustrated disparity in marriage and divorced rates for African Americans, research considering the questions: "What are the causes of divorce/separation for African Americans?" and "What are reasons for low rates of marriage for African Americans?" is increasingly imperative to discourse in marital health for this population, especially considering the negative effects of divorce and separation on African American individuals and families.

Adverse Outcomes of Divorce/Separation on Men and Women

Studies on men and women following divorce have shown negative consequences for individuals regardless of gender. These findings remain substantiated as studies since continue to support the negative effects of divorce on individuals. These individuals report more symptoms and instances of depression and anxiety, health problems, substance abuse, and increased mortality rates (see Amato, 2010). Divorce can, therefore, resultantly be conceptualized as a chronic strain or crisis as identified by the continual obstacles created as a result of divorce—single-parenting for mothers or fathers, maintenance of parent-child relationships, fewer financial resources, limited access for fathers, and an overall decline in psychological well-being (Amato, 2010; Canady & Broman, 2003; Shapiro & Lambert, 1999). One might expect that for African Americans, these adverse outcomes are more severe and considerable given the ever-present contextual factors that negatively affect African Americans such as racial discrimination, prejudice, and social disparity and inequity.

Adverse Outcomes of Divorce on Children

Research illustrates children of divorce are more likely to experience hardships, including academic functioning, conduct problems, high social-emotional needs, low social competency, and low relationship stability (Amato, 2000; Allen & Baucom, 2004; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007). Outcomes include higher rates of drop-out, school and community-based behavioral problems, lesser likelihood to develop a long-term committed relationship, and challenges with emotional regulation (Gahan, 2004; Herman, Lambert, Lalongo, & Ostrander, 2007; Strazdins, Clements, Korda, Broom, D'Souza, 2006). It may not be the event of divorce itself that is most problematic, but other related variables, for instance, a lack of routine and predictability, ongoing conflict between parents, and fewer resources available to live in neighborhoods that promote success. As such, family instability is shown to have considerable negative effects on children (Osborne & McLanahan, 2007) as children become receptacles of the relational and environmental problems surrounding them, absorbing negative messages and narratives.

Research is also consistent in showing that children who are caught up in the middle of parental conflict sometimes suffer the most (Manning & Brown, 2006). Separation or divorce between parents can challenge children's perceptions about relationships with others, especially romantic, and also disrupt their self-regulation skills. Even parents who choose to divorce to spare the children from these negative arguments and verbal exchanges scar the children—as some children tend to blame themselves for divorce and are affected by the transitions and family instability (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007).

Minority children from single parent households were found to engage in the highest rates of problem behaviors. Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2000) found that negative effects were less in cases of high SES for achievement, while low SES and residential instability were related to an

increase in behavioral and emotional outcomes. For minority children living in urban environments without two parents in the home, unsupervised time was associated with more smoking for girls, while more parental monitoring and togetherness was associated with less delinquency overall and less drinking in boys. Also, the absence of family meals together were associated with increased delinquency for minority children. Finally, researchers found that low socioeconomic status limits the ability of single-parents, more commonly, to provide daily routines such as adequate supervision and family meals together due to inflexible work schedules and long hours of work to compensate for a lack of two incomes (Botvin, Scheier, Diaz, & Miller, 2000). Although the studies illustrate these outcomes as temporary, for African Americans, these affects are long-lasting due to added stressors such as marginalization and an increasing disproportionality in social disparities.

Summary of Adverse Outcomes of Divorce

The adverse outcomes discussed in the previous section shed light on the potential negative effects of divorce on men, woman, and children. In particular, it is clear that divorce can result in significantly negative outcomes for all parties involved. This is especially true for African Americans who exist with preexisting social conditions that can be exacerbated by divorce. It is important, however, to note that these negative outcomes are not absolute as divorce does benefit some individuals (Amato, 2000). Many individuals who divorce are able to respond positively to the choice through the use of buffers such as education, employment, family connectedness; spirituality, extended kinships, and divorce appraisal (see Amato, 2000). Nevertheless, for African American couples, a need to promote marital wellness and longevity is significant due to the increasing rates of family dissolution in this community, in spite of the cultural significance of family connectedness and cohesion (Boyd-Franklin, 2006). The promotion of marital wellness

cannot be accomplished until further research is done to better understand the barriers to relationship longevity and the socio-historical influences on relationship dissolution for this population.

Barriers to Relationship Longevity

Research shows several barriers to relationship maintenance for African Americans—gender ratio differences, economic stability, family of origin issues, and ineffective coping strategies (Kelly & Floyd, 2001; Kelly & Floyd, 2006a, 2006b; Pinderhughes, 2002). Other research has shown indirect effects of other variables on African American coupling. For example, the disproportionately high morbidity, health disparities, trauma exposure and its consequences (i.e. PTSD), and other adverse health outcomes have been shown to contribute to challenges in relationships (Kelly & Floyd, 2006).

Economic and Education Strain

Economic strain and the ability to maintain a level of security financially, is known to be associated with the choice to marry. For African American couples, financial strain has the opposite effect and produces an avoidance of marriage, in spite of a positive outlook toward marriage for those who have yet to marry. Oftentimes, African American couples who ideally prefer to marry and believe in the institution, make the choice to cohabitate rather than marry until financial stability is achieved (Furstenberg, 2007). For married couples, financial strain exacerbates preexisting stressors, making the romantic relationship untenable (Addo & Saddler, 2010).

Perceived Experiences of Discrimination

For African Americans, feelings of discrimination and prejudice have significant negative effects on emotional, psychological, and physical functioning (Carter, 2007; Utsey, Ponterotto, &

Reynolds, 2000). African Americans report the highest levels of discrimination in comparison to other ethnic groups and appraise discrimination as more stressful than other groups (Ladrine & Klonoff, 1996; LaTaillade, 2006). In a longitudinal study on racial identity and racial discrimination on African American adolescents, Seaton, Yip, and Sellers (2009) found that perceived racial discrimination was connected to pessimistic outlooks that general society had toward African Americans. This stress can heighten reactivity in interpersonal relationships due to increased sensitivity and higher demands for partner support. Ineffectual responsiveness can lead to relational conflict and unresolved issues. Furthermore, prejudice and racism have produced relational challenges between members of African American families, further exacerbating the effects of historical trauma (Franklin, Boyd-Franklin, & Kelly, 2006; Furstenberg, 2007). Accordingly, some African American couples tend to transfer the stressors of everyday life into their relationships, often manifested through verbal, emotional, and physical aggression in both couple and familial relationships (Boyd-Franklin, 2006; Brooks, 2007; Brown, 1995; Dixon, 2009). This transference of stress can create dysfunctional families where unhealthy reactions lead to unhealthy relationships, paternal absenteeism, divorce, and fear of long-term commitments such as marriage and emotional distance.

Power Discrepancy between Partners

Power differences between partners can create significant disconnect and conflict between African American men and woman. Research reports a strong connection between perceived power differences and marital conflict, supporting the notion that egalitarian role diffusion is more beneficial for African Americans (Birditt, Brown, Orbuch, & McIlvane, 2010; Kamo & Cohen, 1998; Stanik, McHale, & Crouter, 2013) in comparison to their white counterparts.

African American couples who are unable to establish these role expectations, have higher levels of marital conflict.

Gender Ratio Imbalance

Gender ratio imbalance in the African American population has been well-researched showing that woman in African American communities outnumber men leaving fewer options to marry. Researchers have posited several reasons for the disparity between marriageable African American men versus woman. Provided reasons include a disproportionately high mortality rate, substance abuse, and incarceration rates (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011; Pinderhughes, 2002). Low rates of marriageable men may cause African American woman to settle for what is available—leading to marital conflict and eventual dissolution due to not having the most suitable partner.

Socio-historical Causes of Marital Dissolution for African Americans

Many of the previously identified causes of divorce and separation for this population are based on sociological factors and influences. Studies show African Americans tend to have a positive outlook on marriage (Cherlin, 1998; Rashard Perry, 2013), yet are among the highest in the never-married and divorce rate statistics in the United States.

Researchers have alluded to the potential effects of historical occurrences (e.g. slavery) on the lived experiences of African Americans to date. Parra-Cardona and colleagues (2008) contend the historical experiences of ethnic/racial minorities (i.e. colonization, slavery, civil rights movement, and so on) continue to be better understood through continual research studies in the area of social disparities and their connection to culture and race. Parra-Cardona et al. (2008) state "scholars have indicated the need to continue identifying the long-term effects of the European colonization" (p. 349). Other researchers have connected historically traumatic experiences to health disparities such as high rates of morbidity, high blood pressure, and

diabetes and psychological functioning, including depression and PTSD within African American populations post-slavery (Poussaint, 2002; Reid, Mims, & Higgenbottom, 2004). In particular, Poussaint (2002) conceptualizes historically traumatic experiences as impacting health disparities for African American individuals, particularly with regard to psychological effects such as PTSD, trauma, substance abuse, heart disease, anxiety, depression, and other negative symptomology.

Historical Trauma

Stolorow and Atwood (1992) define trauma as the experience of intolerable distress occurring in an undesirable environment or context. Trauma is the result of a deliberate intent to create or produce a sense of alienation and isolation with diminished hope for future outcomes. Consequently, the concept of a just and orderly world is severely tarnished, only to change the paradigmatic perception of reality (Sotero, 2006). Historical trauma is defined as a tragic and egregious act, occurring in history, against a culture based on race and ethnicity, which permeates the cultural history of the population (Heart, 2003).

Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma

Individuals experience their lives in conjunction with external factors and contextual influences such as family of origin, racism, and historical trauma. An individual presents their history of experience and responds to the world around them based on their view of the world resulting from lived experiences. Beliefs and worldviews are inter-generationally passed down (Big Foot & Braden, 2007). The intergenerational transmission of trauma (ITT) involves the diffusion of traumatic cultural experiences and coping strategies affecting subsequent generations. According to Brown-Rice (2013), "trauma suffered during previous generations creates a pathway that results in the current generation being at an increased risk of experiencing

mental and physical distress" (p. 123), citing Big Foot & Braden, 2007). The experience of trauma is further exacerbated by personal responses to traumatic experiences (i.e. trauma response) and perpetuated through family messages about opposite genders. For example, boys only desire one thing and girls should protect themselves from male predators. African American couples experience their relationship through intergenerational expectations, internalized racism and prejudice, the psychological impact of racism and prejudice on self-esteem and feelings about self and views of a partner, in addition to the normal challenges in a relationship.

A wide body of research shows how long-lasting traumatic experiences affect the overall health and wellness and mental health of African Americans (Bartmanski, 2007; Bowen-Reid & Harrell, 2002; Furstenberg, 2007; LaTaillade, 2006; Packer-Williams, 2009; Poussaint, 2002). Research, however, has yet to consider the impact of historically traumatic experiences on individuals interpersonally and relationally. More specifically, research to date is limited in connecting socio-historical experiences to romantic relationships for African Americans. Particularly, research has yet to successfully demonstrate a significant link between historically traumatic experiences, the transmission of trauma generationally, and the negative impact of this transmission on African American relationships.

Ostensibly, there appears to be a strong connection between the socio-historical experiences of African Americans and the trans-generational processes of relational stability in romantic relationships. These experiences appear to be exacerbated by social impediments due to racial difference. Nonetheless, research does not adequately highlight the specific racial and trans-generational challenges these couples experience while married, and how some couples are able to successfully transcend these challenges while others are not.

Due to increased negative influences on African American individuals and socio-historical experiences, coping strategies used to maintain relationships are sometimes more negative. Some coping strategies include antisocial behavior, substance abuse, or mental instability (McFayden Jr., 2009; Nagayama Hall, 2001; Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, & Williamson, 2004). Research contends this is a result of stressor pileup (Murry, Harrell, Brody, Chen, Simons, Black, & Gibbons, 2008), including racialization. Research suggests some of the unhealthy forms of coping are a consequence of intergenerational transmissions of historical trauma, perpetrated through childrearing, message sharing, and trauma response (Pinderhughes, 2002; Poussaint, 2002; Reid, Mims, & Higgenbottom, 2004).

Guiding Questions

The following questions set the foundation for the purpose of this investigation:

Table 1.1: *Investigative Questions for the Study*

Study One	Study Two
1. What are the messages families passed down to one another concerning long-term commitment and marriage?	2. How do historically traumatic experiences, perpetrated against African Americans, manifest themselves in heterosexual romantic relationships?
3. How do childhood messages about relationships influence relationship expectations?	4. What are the specific challenges of maintaining marriage for African American couples?
	5. What strategies do struggling/successful couples use to navigate relationship challenges?

The answers to these important questions remain unsubstantiated in the literature despite well-documented research in the area of African American coupling and marriage.

Purpose of the Study

Researchers suggest that relevant studies on African American heterosexual couples in general remain scarce (Blow & Hartnett, 2005), limiting the development of new knowledge promoting relational wellness and health within this population. As such, there is a great need to learn more about the precursors to never marrying or the choice to divorce or separate long-term for African American heterosexual couples. Further investigation is essential to support the development of clinical treatments and therapeutic interventions to minimize the frequency of divorce or the absence of marriage, and its effect on African American families. Increasing the knowledge base in this area through qualitative methodology and theory building provides additional resources to African American couples as they develop commitments toward marriage. This research also provides practical guidance to clinical professionals whom work with these individuals and couples, as study findings provide specific intervention techniques and considerations for prevention and intervention with African American individuals and couples.

This study aims to better understand how African American previously and currently married individuals develop and maintain healthy, rewarding romantic relationships. As well, the study intends to better understand the childhood experiences influencing perceptions on relationships and the coping strategies and resilience of successful couples who are able to navigate and positively adjust to the socio-historical influences to create enduring relationships. The findings for this study will be used for the purpose of replicating these skills in other couples in clinical settings. To investigate this idea, this research study implements two distinct studies to learn more about the childhood experiences of African American married/divorced individuals and the process and development of their romantic, long-term relationships. Using this study, I aim to

create a culturally relevant therapeutic prevention and intervention for marriage-seeking (premarital) and struggling (divorcing) couples.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Four theories guide this study. Given the complexity of the historical, cultural, and contextual factors surrounding African American couples, theory is necessary to provide a framework for understanding the population's experience. The use of these guiding theories provide an infrastructure for organizing concepts toward developing a theory and illuminating narrative that thoroughly discusses the socio-historical influences on coupling for African Americans and the strategies used by successful couples to transcend challenges.

The study aims to understand how experiences are viewed and conceptualized, and how meaning is organized and negotiated. The study takes an inductive approach to theory generation by exploring and highlighting the perspectives of African American individuals regarding childhood experiences. And, the study privileges narrative and lived experiences to better understand relationship development and maintenance, partners and the perspectives of partners, and how they relate to long-term commitment and marriage. These connections were made using specific theories to guide interpretations (Creswell, 2013). Critical race theory, historical trauma theory, ecological systems theory, and risk and resilience theory were used to organize interpretations. Historical trauma theory operates as a conceptual framework, while ecological theory is used to organize the contextual impacts on heterosexual African American couples, including individual influences, family of origin, historical trauma, and relational dynamics. Risk and resilience organizes the threats associated with individuals and coupling, and resilience theory highlights protective factors that individuals and couples use to endure and sustain romantic relationships in spite of stressful contextual factors. Critical race theory is used as the

lens by which to understand the impact of sociological influences on marginalized communities, particularly African Americans. Historical trauma is organized as a risk factor and ecological influence on the meso and microsystem operating throughout all systems.

These well-established theoretical and conceptual frameworks combined provide a comprehensive illustration of the complex influences and risks surrounding African American coupling and long-term commitment [marriage], as well as the responses and coping strategies couples use leading to both successful and unsuccessful navigation. The guiding theories will briefly be discussed here. A more detailed description of each theory will be provided in Chapter Two.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) is useful as it provides a scope for viewing and understanding the world from a particular paradigm, with particular assumptions and guiding principles about the world and systems therein. CRT was developed in the 1980s out of legal scholarship and practice to challenge political and racial justice issues stemming from colorblindness stemming from civil rights scholars. Its utility is evident in its guiding principles and assumptions. Critical race theory is used as the guiding framework for framing and understanding the macro nature of racialization, marginalization, and the oppression of African Americans to underscore contemporary ethnic and racial social disparities as a form of re-traumatization for African American couples.

Historical Trauma Theory

Historical trauma theory (HTR) is useful to allow the reader an understanding of the pervasive and insidious effect of historically traumatic experiences on this population and how these experiences are passed down generationally. HTR is a newly established theory addressing

the unique and time specific experiences of cultural groups (Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Heart, 2003). The concept organizes contextual moments of egregious acts toward a community to explain the contemporarily ever-present social disparities specific to these cultural groups (Sotero, 2006). Historical trauma theory is used as a guiding framework and comparative guide to set the foundation for understanding the cultural experience of African Americans contextually and the effects of these experiences on coupling today.

Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological theory is useful to organize the various influences on individuals within the couple dyad and the couple itself. Ecological theory identifies the microsystem, macrosystem, mesosystem, and exosystem as affecting the individual. The microsystem involves institutions and groups directly interacting with coupling development (e.g. family, school, religious affiliation, neighborhood, and peers. The mesosystem entails the interconnections and interactions between and within the microsystem (i.e. relationships). The exosystem includes the links between social settings in which a couple does not have an active role and the individual or couple's context. The macrosystem contains the culture in which individuals within the dyad and the couple lives (i.e. SES, poverty, ethnicity and racialization, marginalization, gender ratios. Finally, the chronosystem is comprised of patterning of the environmental events and transitions over the life course and socio-historical circumstances (i.e. historically traumatic experiences such as enslavement). Ecological theory organizes systems as influences on the individual or identified target or recipient (the couple in the case of this study). Ecological theory was used as the third guiding framework for this study.

Risk and Resilience Theory

Risk and Resilience theory is useful to establish the dynamic barriers that mitigate the development and maintenance of healthy, rewarding relationships for couples, and the identification of strategies to overcome those barriers, otherwise known as resiliency factors. Risk and resilience theory was developed as a strength-based approach to knowledge around the negative contextual barriers and protective factors used by individuals to overcome and endure challenges. This guiding framework is used to highlight the contextual factors surrounding African American couples, particularly focusing on systemic impediments such a race/ethnicity, economic viability, social factors, normative relationship challenges, and historically traumatic experiences. As well, protective factors used by successful couples were identified and conceptualized for the purpose of replicating the successful protective factors to increase mental health services for struggling couples.

Daniel, Wassell, and Gilligan (2010) developed an assessment model to conceptualize the effect of risks on the well-being of children to strategize and implement a plan to address emerging issues. The midpoints of the intersections represent the focal point or identified client and the external markers (four quadrants) indicate factors that may reduce and/or increase potential risks. The four quadrants or variables included in the model are: adversity, vulnerability, resilience, and protective factors. The Resilience and Vulnerability matrix provides a useful framework for laying the foundation for understanding how African American couples, as the identified intersection of points, and the risks associated with these couples may reduce and/or increase potential risks for divorce, separation, or never marrying. For the purposes of this study, all four quadrants were used, however only the quadrants representing high concern/low strength and low concern/high strength are illuminated and discussed.

By integrating the four theories discussed this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the complexity involved in the development and maintenance of long-term marital relationships for African American individuals, paying particular attention to the socio-historical experiences unique to this population.

Study One describes the lived experiences of childhood for African American married and divorced individuals and the messages received about relationship connections, both overt and covert. The study discusses descriptions of childhood (challenges and successes) and the following relationships: 1) parents' romance, 2) home environment, 3) sibling, and 4) adult-child as influential factors and discusses the implications for long-term views of relationships. In this study, I seek to understand the various messages that individuals receive, both consciously and unconsciously, and how these messages may influence expectations and behaviors in long-term romantic relationships. The study uses grounded theory to illustrate the process by which individuals learn about relationships. Thirty-one individuals were interviewed for the study. In each interview, I inquired about childhood experiences, types of relationships with siblings, between parents, within parent-child relationships, family challenges and successes, parental romantic relationships, and the home environment. These questions were developed specifically to understand the ways in which African American individuals (currently or previously married) describe their family life, environment, and experiences with relationships, and the implications of these descriptions on long-term romantic relationships. Ecological systems theory is used to organize the messages and their impact on the individual's beliefs about romantic relationships. In this investigation, I use a critical race theory lens as a framework by which to understand and interrogate existing systems and historical experiences within this population.

Study Two examines factors related to couple resilience, and their relationship to one another, and the differences between how some couples survive and other couples are unable to survive. This study uses interpretive phenomenology to describe the process by which individuals develop romantic relationships, enduring the difficulties of relationship development and maintenance. Particularly, the study discusses the strategies used by successful couples, in comparison to unsuccessful couples, to develop and maintain healthy relationships long-term. Ten married couple dyads (20 individuals) and five divorced couple dyads (10 individuals), representing fifteen families, were interviewed for the study. In each interview, I investigated questions of how individuals describe their courtship, how they define the primary role of a romantic partner, what they identify as reoccurring challenges in the relationship, and how they describe the impact of childhood and racial experiences on their beliefs and expectations in marriage. Finally, individuals are asked to discuss whether or not African American couples have different challenges than other ethnic groups, and if so, the degree to which this is the case. These questions were asked in this study to better understand experiences in courtship, relationship experiences and challenges, strategies implemented and their success, and beliefs about divorce and their implications on developing clinical interventions for supporting couples who are considering marriage and/or contemplating divorce.

Research Question

The primary research question that guides this dissertation study is: 1) what specific factors influence the development and maintenance of a healthy and rewarding romantic relationship for African American couples? Tables 1.1-1.3 illustrate the general conceptualization of this study. In particular, it depicts the process of identifying the research questions using the theoretical

frameworks as the foundation for the investigative inquiry from broad to a more specific and defined focus.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

There are numerous benefits of marriage for African American women, men, and children, including psychological, emotional, and economic (Phillips, Wilmoth, & Marks, 2012). However, according to recent literature (Blackmon, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colon, & Roberts, 2005; Dixon, 2009; LaTaillade, 2006), declining rates of marriage and marital instability are areas of great concern for African American couples. Recent data illustrates a significant difference in the likelihood of African American's entering into marriage than their racial counterparts (see Cherlin, 1992; 1998; 2004), directly affecting family stability and overall familial health. The 2012 Census reports 46% of African Americans as never married, 11% divorced, and 4% separated. These statistics indicate a decline in rates of marriage for these families. Marital dissolution rates are also high. Cherlin (1998) reports that approximately 47% of African American women separate from their husbands after 10-15 years of marriage in comparison to 28% of white women. Cherlin (1992) shows a 34% difference in remarriage rates as 66% of white women remarry compared to just 32% for African Americans.

The importance of marriage and marital stability on individual psychological and emotional well-being and family cohesiveness (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007) is well established in the literature (see Allen & Olson, 2001; Amato, 2000; Frech & Williams, 2007; Phillips, Wilmoth, Marks, 2012). Many African Americans report having these intentions to marry and beliefs that marriage is important and desirable (see Banks, 2011; Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2007). In spite of these values about marriage, statistics illustrate a level of dissonance between belief systems and decisions to marry and/or remain married for African Americans (Brown, 1995; Burton & Belinda-Tucker, 2010; Chambers & Kravitz, 2011). Research has investigated these issues to understand and conceptualize the reasons and causes for this growing trend (Blackmon et al.,

2005). In comparison to non-Hispanic whites, African Americans are less likely to marry, tend to marry later in life when marriage does occur, spend less time married, and are more likely to divorce (Dixon, 2009).

This chapter provides an in-depth review of the literature related to heterosexual African American couples and marriage, taking into account variables affecting African American couples' ability to develop and maintain healthy and rewarding romantic relationships. The multi-systemic effect of the variables influencing African American couples' ability to develop and maintain healthy romantic relationships will be organized using an ecological theory framework with a critical race theory lens. In addition, I consider additional theories including risk and resilience and historical trauma theory.

Critical Race Theory: The Lens

A Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens highlights the central component of race and its interaction with social systems. For African Americans, race and its effect are always a part of any experience (Delgado, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; 2012) and a critical race lens lends itself to the following consideration:

> [Critical Race Theory involves a way of thinking about and assessing social systems and groups that incorporate recognition of three principles: 1) race is a central component of social organizations and systems, including families; 2) racism is institutionalized—it is an ingrained feature of racialized social systems; and 3) everyone within racialized social systems may contribute to the reproduction of these systems through social practices, racial and ethnic identities (Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew, & Freeman, 2010, p. 442)

As a movement CRT is positioned based on two common themes, it: 1) proposes that white supremacy and racial power are maintained over time, and in particular, that the law may play a role in this process, and 2) investigates the possibility of transforming the relationship between law and racial power, and more broadly, pursues a project of achieving racial emancipation and anti-subordination. CRT focuses major attention to the roles of racialized systems (i.e. institutional promotions of inequality via racial discrimination) and the way family structures, processes, and life chances are shaped. CRT responds to the social construction of race and differences in treatment based on this social construction (Delgado &, Stefancic, 2012).

Systemic privileges are dictated through rules, practices and assignments of prestige and power. CRT engages the current social structure through critical analysis and criticism to institute a more equitable establishment that provides each ethnic and racial group equal access to the same resources. This ongoing dialogue teases apart systemically insidious practices that privilege the self-interests of the dominant group over more marginalized groups. CRT is used as the lens in this study to highlight the structural impediments mitigating relationship development, indirectly and directly leading to the outcome of marital dissolution.

Risk and Resilience Theory

The theory of risk and resilience was developed to conceptualize the processing of individuals in the face of stress along with the adaptive qualities of individuals or groups of people who are able to survive in spite of extreme uncertainty and sociological difficulty. The theory operates from the basic premise that endurance through hardship emerges from both innate and learned personal characteristics of individuals or groups of people which provide the internal fortitude to overcome obstacles (Killian, 2004; McCubbin & McCubbin, 1996; McCubbin, McCubbin, & Thompson, 1993).

There are natural risks associated with an environment, social location, ethnic/racial demographic, or geographical areas in which an individual resides. These natural risks are often exacerbated by individual hardships such as health and wellness, mental health challenges, and other environmental and individual impediments. Risks act as barriers to survival and overall health and can lead to extreme hopelessness and loss. For some specific groups, including chronically ill patients, psychosocially disrupted individuals, victims of sexual, physical, emotional or psychological abuse, and victims and recipients of historical trauma, these risks are increasingly tumultuous and ostensibly impermeable.

In spite of these socio-historical barriers experienced, many are able to overcome due to an inborn or learned adaptive coping strategy to move through and endure hardship. Researchers have worked to conceptualize this endurance, labeling it risk and resilience. Historically, the concept of risk has been associated with a negative view and connotation, often taking a deficit view. More recently, researchers have worked to adjust the scope to become strength-based, highlighting the unique skills and natural abilities of enduring individuals to move through impediments and overcome obstacles. Conceptualizing this process of coping through a strength-based lens supports the replication of skills and strategies that can be taught and developed within others who are facing similar challenges (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1996).

The concept of resilience has a basic definition: "the process of, or capacity for, successful adaptation despite challenging or even extremely threatening circumstances" (pg. 42). Researchers have worked to specify the particular areas of the definition that are most important (i.e. outcome, skill, process, or person/environmental variables) to further understand exactly how the process of survival and endurance occurs.

Killian (2004) discussed three distinct models of resilience: 1) resilience as the opposite of risk; 2) universal strengths model; and 3) protective capacities or processes (Baylis, 2002; Grotberg, 1995; Killian, 2004; Rutter, 1987). Resilience as the opposite of risk is a basic concept that illustrates both risk and resilience on two opposing sides of the same spectrum, juxtaposed to one another. For example, the model suggests that having a poor illustration of a positive relationship would be a risk, and having a strong romantic relationship illustration in one's parents as a child would be a form of resilience. According to Kilian (2004), the universal strengths model views resilience as a "universal human capacity that enables a person, group or community to deal with adversity by preventing, facing, minimizing, overcoming and even being strengthened or transformed by adversity" (pg. 44). The third model contains a strong emphasis on experience developing skills in coping better with trials associated with life. These skills are developed into mechanisms to receive information, process, and strategize to overcome and endure those obstacles. Protective processes include: internal personal strengths (i.e. observant, good listeners, emotionally expressive, and positive self-esteem), interpersonal resources or skills (i.e. secure attachments, strong communication skills, social support, and faith), and external supports (i.e. positive climate of support and emotional health, and a sense of belonging) (Killian, 2004).

Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological theory was developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in an effort to organize the dynamic and multi-systemic effects and influences on a specific target (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1988; 1989). The primary premise behind this theory is that human development occurs in a context and conceptualizations of development should occur with the consideration of context and its impact, both positive and negative, on the identified person(s). Context includes the

individual, the immediate surrounding influences, the environmental influences, and the sociological and societal influences. Each aspect of influence interacts with one another directly and indirectly and is transactional in nature—bidirectional and unilateral effect of every decision.

The concepts within the theory organized in a layered illustration to show the effect of one system on a target and how that target is embedded and influenced by other systems. The theory hinges on the premise that external environments have significant influence on human development and family processes. The external systems affecting the family are characterized as chrono, macro, exo, meso, and microsystems. Each component of the system has embedded characteristics and subsystems that interrelate within and between the other to influence other parts of the larger system. The ecological theory framework provides a comprehensive lens for understanding the multi-systemic influences impacting the process of African American coupling and long-term relationship maintenance.

The microsystem refers to the most immediate systems and institutions directly impacting the individual's development. Aspects of the microsystem include immediate family, childrearing and childhood development, school, peers, religious affiliations, social groups, and job or career. The mesosystem involves the interaction between the microsystems and their collective influence on the individual. For example, an individual's family may attend church together, experience childrearing together and be a part of the same community. The interrelationships between the systems are the mesosystem in effect. The exosystem contains the direct linkage between social settings wherein the individual lacks an active or direct role, while involving the individual's immediate context. For instance, the individual's parents may interact with society with frustration, confusion, and uncertainty. The individual is not directly linked to these experiences, but may be a direct beneficiary of the emotional result. The macrosystem

includes the culture wherein the individual lives. Cultural contexts include ethnicity or race, socioeconomic status, history of poverty, racialized oppression and prejudice, and generational cultural traditions. The macrosystem is not limited to time and can be transmitted generationally and intergenerationally to offspring consciously and unconsciously. Finally, the chronosystem is comprised of patterns of environmental occurrences, events, and transitions over the life course, including socio-historical circumstances (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2010; Vander Zanden, Crandell, Crandell, 2007).

For African American couples, influences from an ecological perspective are specific and unique to the socio-historical experiences of this ethnic group. Following is a review of literature organized using ecological systems principles conceptualized as risk factors negatively impacting relational development and health.

The Chronosystem: Socio-historical Circumstances

Risk Factor—Historical Trauma Theory

Research contends the effects of colonization have yet to be fully realized and suggests a need to continue investigating and identifying its long-term effects (Parra-Cardona, Córdova, Holtrop, Escobar-Chew & Horsford, 2008). Scholars argue connections between slavery and psychological and psychosocial difficulties (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Massey & Denton, 1993; Poussaint, 2002; Poussaint & Alexander, 2000; Reid, Mims, & Higgenbtoom, 2004; Selden, 1999; Sellers & Shelton, 2003; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin & L'Heureux Lewis, 2006), and these legacies continue to have negative effects on the well-being of African Americans (McAdoo, 1990; McFayden Jr., 2009; Murry, Brown, Brody, Cutrona & Simons, 2001; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & L'Heureux Lewis, 2006). Research purports chronic effects of

intergenerational and generational trauma[1] on African Americans' lives (McAdoo, 1990; Lawrence-Webb, Littlefield, Okundaye, 2004; Leary, 2005; Murry, Harrell, Brody, Chen, Simons, Black, & Gibbons, 2008). These effects are imbedded into family functioning, including childrearing and parenting approaches (Benson, Larson, Wilson, & Demo, 1993), cultural practices and traditions (Billingsley & Billingsley, 1968), and family-life cycle traditions (Banks, 2011; Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Brown, 1995; Boyd-Franklin, 2006).

The theory of historical trauma (Heart, 2003; Heart & DeBruyn, 1998) conceptualizes culture-specific negative experiences due to transgressions against an ethnic group has long-term chronic effects, and this thinking was developed to respond to the unique traumatic occurrences, specifically in Native American communities (Americans, 1998; BigFoot & Braden, 2007; Brown-Rice, 2013). It is a newly established theory addressing the unique and time specific experiences of cultural groups (Heart, 2003; Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). The concept organizes contextual moments of egregious acts toward a community to explain the contemporarily ever-present social disparities specific to these cultural groups (Sotero, 2006). The theory operates from the premise that historically traumatic experiences (i.e. enslavement, war, genocide) create long-term, chronic responses, which are passed down inter-generationally and generationally to offspring, permeating an entire ethnic group (Sotero, 2006). For African Americans, the process of enslavement continues to inform family life and interactions therein.

According to Sotero (2006), four assumptions underpin the historical trauma:

> "1) mass trauma is deliberately and systematically inflicted upon a target population by a subjugating, dominant population; 2) trauma is not limited to a single catastrophic event, but continues over an extended period of time; 3) traumatic events

[1] Trauma is an experience of intolerable distress occurring in an undesirable environment or context. The result of a deliberate intent to create or produce a sense of alienation and isolation with diminished hope for future outcomes (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992)

reverberate throughout the population, creating a universal experience of trauma; and 4) the magnitude of the trauma experience derails the population from its natural, projected historical course resulting in a legacy of physical, psychological, social and economic disparities that persists across generations" (p. 94-94).

Sotero adds further that the three basic constructs of the theory are: 1) the historical trauma experience (OR historical losses (Brown-Rice (2013)), 2) the historical trauma response (OR historical loss symptoms (Brown-Rice, 2013)), and 3) the intergenerational transmission of historical trauma (OR cross-generational trauma transmission; Brown-Rice, 2013). Sotero notes an important feature of historical trauma theory is the psychological and emotional consequences of trauma are generationally transmitted within and between subsequent generations by way of physiological, environmental, and social pathways creating an intergenerational cycle of trauma.

Historical Trauma Experience[2]. In the last few decades, American Indians have been the primary focus of research in the area of historical trauma theory. The significant loss experienced by this cultural group has been well documented (see Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). Native Americans were colonized by Europeans and stripped of their land, resources, cultural heritage, family structure and lives. Through various forms of oppression and ethnic genocide, Natives were relegated to the margins of society, restricted and condemned to reservations. What once was a bountiful and plentiful source of life and spiritual connection became a source of pain and anguish. In recanting the realities of American Indians, Americans (1998) acknowledge the development and expansion of the United States was an ongoing disenfranchisement of the cultural daily practices and the meaning making for American Indian life. He contends this

[2] An historical trauma experience is represented by an egregious social action that disrupts the cultural practices, beliefs, traditions, and overall quality of life. Trauma experience is identified on a mass level toward an ethnic/racial group with an emphasis on racial/ethnic disenfranchisement or eradication (Duran & Duran, 1995; Heart & DeBruyn, 1998).

disintegration or disenfranchisement is at the root of current social and health problems for this population.

Given that American Indian history includes colonization, cultural genocide, and the soul wound (spiritual injury or injury to the psyche—belief that the environment is hostile and unfriendly), a correlation between cultural symptoms and negative historical experiences is considerable. Thus, positioning these present challenges in a socio-cultural context provides an explanation for intergenerational symptoms (Americans, 1998).

Many African Americans also view and conceptualize their problems in contemporary life in reference to traumatic events of the past, making sense of the world in relation to historically significant occurrences unique to the cultural context when considering social disparities currently present in society. However, there is an absence of theoretical consideration for applying the historical trauma theory framework to African Americans and current theories are inadequate to address the uniqueness of this cultural group (Boyd-Franklin, 2006). Several researchers assert the historical backdrop of slavery has significant effects on the general mental health of African Americans (Allen, 1995; Alvidrez, Snowden, & Kaiser, 2008; Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Boyd-Franklin, 2006; Selden, 1999; Smedley & Smedley, 2005; Seller, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & L'Heureux Lewis, 2006). As well, numerous studies discuss the role of social disparities (Kelly & Floyd, 2001; Kelly & Floyd, 2006; Pinderhughes, 2002) and interpersonal and relational challenges (Kamo & Cohen, 1998; Kelly & Floyd, 2006b; Taylor & Zhang, 1990; Stanik & Bryant, 2012) between heterosexual African Americans to explain the increasing divorce and cohabitation rates (Allen, 1995; Banks, 2011; Pinderhughes, 2002). Scholars even speculate on income and education level differences, and other factors that make marriage appear less appealing to African American men and women (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011; Clark-Nicolas

& Gray-Little, 1991; Pinderhughes, 2002). However, research fails to consider the effects of the legacies of historical trauma (Heart, 2004; Sotero, 2006), specifically historical losses and resulting individual views of long-term relationships, emotional safety, and vulnerability.

For African Americans, slavery is a historically traumatic experience (Alexander, 2004). Gump (2010), states the impact of slavery reaches far beyond the plantation, affecting the entire culture throughout history until the present for African Americans. Gump contends trauma may either be explicit and conscious or unavailable to awareness—stemming from society (racist acts of oppression and discrimination). The contextually traumatic experiences transgressed daily through marginalization and racialization (Carter, 2007) is further compounded by nuclear family effects (Allen, 1995; Gump, 2010). This idea is known as intergenerational transmission. Through intergenerational transmission (Sotero, 2006), slavery permeates African American culture (Franklin, Boyd-Franklin, & Kelly, 2006; Kelly & Floyd, 2001).

Historical Trauma Response. Historical trauma response (HTR) and the intergenerational transmission of trauma (ITT) are evident in the current realities of African American children and couples. Rodney (2000) found the rates of African American youth who are children of alcoholics (COAs) doubles the rate for the greater population in the United States (*see also* Rodney, Mupier, & Crafter, 1996). These youth are also more likely to experience negative consequences from use (i.e. increased involvement in the criminal justice system and school dropout; Jones, Hussong, Manning, & Sterrett, 2008). Gil, Wagner, and Tubman (2004) discovered African American youth were at greater risk for substance use disorders resulting from contextual factors such as family life and environment—although comparatively under diagnosed or assessed due to access to mental health services. Further, African Americans exhibit disproportionately higher rates of hypertension, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and

stroke than other ethnic or racial groups (Adler & Newman, 2002) and are prone to higher prevalence of copious chronic diseases and illnesses (McFayden Jr., 2009). And when illness or disease is contracted, African Americans have one of the highest rates of morbidity.

Poussaint (2002) illuminates the effects of slavery on African American's mental health. He argues that some things that are coped with today stem from slavery experiences, including post-traumatic stress (PTSD), depression, inferiority complex, and substance abuse. He also contends contemporary incivility, indoctrination, and segregation exacerbate the contraction of physical and mental health issues for African Americans. Poussaint's assertions are consistent with the argument presented by Heart and DeBruyn (1998) establishing HTR as a framework to understand the Native American experience. These findings shed light on the current realities of African Americans and highlight parallels between this population and African Americans.

Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma. As a result of HTR, subsequent generations of African Americans experience the world through a different paradigm. Children are often the beneficiaries of conflict and transmission (Griffin, Botvin, Scheier, Diaz, & Miller, 2000; Amato, 2000; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Banks, 2011), creating low standards of relationships with members of the opposing gender, low expectations for future relationships, and difficulties navigating the world (i.e. lower self-image and confidence, and higher self-hatred). Research also shows the difficulty that African Americans have with transcending infancy attachment styles into adulthood in comparison to their White counterparts (Furman & Wehner, 1994; Furman & Wehner, 1997)—meaning this population has greater challenges with transferring positive childhood attachment styles to future relationships. This illustrates significant fundamental impediments in developing and maintaining healthy romantic relationships.

Giordano, Manning, and Longmore (2005) contend there are illustrated differences in marital expectations and the desire to engage in romantic relationships in adolescence for African Americans. In a number of studies (Crissey, 2005; Lawrence-Webb, Littlefield, & Okundaye, 2004), White adolescents were found to have more of a predisposition to long-term romantic relationships than African Americans. Studies have also shown African American adolescents are less inclined to develop romantic relationships and thus have a diminished number of prospects for long-term relationships (marriage) during adulthood. Although clear cause of such disparity is inconclusive, an argument for intergenerational transmission of trauma becomes plausible.

Negative Internalized Messages. Internalizing messages of self-loathing and hatred is another form of intergenerational transmission, which can contribute to relational dissolution for African Americans. Gump (2010) contends that while subgroups have their own norms, they inevitably internalize the normative process of the dominant group. In a study examining automatic thought, Malcolm (2005) found that African Americans react similarly to Whites in making stereotypic negative judgments of other African Americans. In a study of the attitudes of men toward marriage, Rashard Perry (2013) found family of origin issues were the major contributors to their view of marriage. Particularly, men who experienced illustrations of marriage during childhood and were able to internalize the positive were more inclined to view marriage optimistically. In contrast, those without illustrations were noted as fearful of intimacy, the opposite gender, long-term relationships, emotional trust and vulnerability. Consequently, individuals who perceive their relationship in a negative way based on working internal constructs tend to have more relationship instability. Such negative thoughts of long-term relationships or marriage based on history of failure or a mental construct of an inability to

endure or become successful (internalized racism or self-hatred), can be negatively impactful (Wamboldt, 1999). These studies allow us to conclude that if African Americans internalize negative messages about themselves, their desires and views toward marriage would be directly impacted. This supports the concept that beliefs about long-term relationships are passed down generationally, fueling decision-making about marriage or long-term commitment.

Additional stressors (i.e. job loss, poverty, racism/prejudice, etc.), coupled with intergenerational transmissions of trauma, can act as a replication or re-experiencing of historical trauma ((Poussaint, 2002). Consequently, stressors can act as catalysts to reactivity, often creating symptomatic behaviors for African American adolescents and adults, particularly with regard to romantic relationships.

The Macrosystem

Risk Factor—the Individual

Perceptions of Marriage for African Americans. African American men and women desire to marry and have strong beliefs about the purpose and benefit of marriage and long-term marital stability (Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2007). In a recent study by Rashard Perry (2013), African American men were found to view marriage as helpful to the community and households and as a precursor to the development of strong families. African American men were found to desire to develop, contribute to, and live in contexts and environments where marriage was encouraged, expected, and respected. These men also saw marriage as a way to edify and honor their partners, not as an arrangement that allowed them to dominate their wives, relegating them to subordinate roles. Previous research surveys show Blacks as more likely to express desire to marry than their white counterparts (Tucker & Mitchell, 1995, as cited in LaTaillade, 2006) and Black women were found more prone to state “I would like to get married

someday" (Chadwick & Heaton, 1992, as cited in LaTaillade, 2006) than white women. Low-income single mothers see marriage as an enhancement to respectability (Edin, 2000).

Overall minority couples, particularly low-income African Americans, hold deep reverence for the institution of marriage and subsequently delay marriage until a time when economic viability and personal readiness to maintain marital happiness and stability exist (Gibson, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005). Accordingly, marriage is seen as an ideal transition for individuals in adulthood and the perceptions of marriage are positive for Africans Americans in general. However, sometime in the transition from desire to decision, a barrier occurs. Research posits potential connections to attachment (Bowlby, 1969; Bretherton, 1992; Dexter, Wong, Stacks, Beeghly, & Barnett, 2013; Hazen & Shaver, 1987; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Furman & Wehner, 1994; 1997) and childrearing (Benson, Larson, Wilson, & Demo, 1993; Cavanaugh, Crissey, & Raley, 2008; Collins & Furman, 2009; Furman, 2002; Furman, Simon, Shaffer & Bouchey, 2002; Giordano, 2003; Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1994; Inman-Amos, Furman & Shafer, 1999) as significant contributors to romantic development (Seiffge-Krenke, 2003) .

Dexter, Wong, Stacks, Beeghly, and Barnett (2013) investigated seventy-four preschoolers and their primary caregivers to understand parenting and attachment among low-income African American and Caucasian preschoolers. These researchers noted that warm, responsive parenting behavior predicted attachment and determined that race was not a predictor. However, in a study examining the cultural relevance and application of attachment theory on non-western cultures, Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt and Zakalik (2004) observed a difference between minority groups (African American and Asian American populations) in comparison to Caucasians. In particular, the researchers noticed that African Americans were more attachment avoidant than their White counterparts. The context of childrearing and the structure of the family also play significant

roles in adolescent romance. In a study investigating the historical structure of family and its effect on adolescent development, particularly romantic desire, researchers found that family structure history has a significant impact on adolescents' romantic lives and can be transmitted generationally (Cavanagh, Crissey, & Raley, 2008).

The Exosystem and Mesosystem

Risk Factor—the Individual

Perceptions of Marriage for Youth. Experiences in childhood can affect development (Masten, Coatsworth, Neeman, Gest, Tellegen, & Garmezy, 1995) and create expectations for lived occurrences in the future for all children, particularly with regard to relationships, platonic, familial, and romantic (Furman & Wehner, 1997; Furman, 2002; Collins, Welsh & Furman, 2009. For African American youth, expectations and experiences of romantic connections and survival are confounded by external factors (Crissey, 2005; Giordano, 2003; Giordano, Manning & Longmore, 2005; Cavanaugh, 2008). Research indicated that African American couples demonstrate a level of difficulty transcending infancy attachment styles into adulthood in comparison to their White counterparts (Furman & Wehner, 1994; Furman & Wehner, 1997). African American youth are unable to develop strong expectations for romantic relationships based on their infancy attachment styles due to a set of occurrences between infancy and adulthood. There are illustrated differences of marital expectations and the engagement in romantic relationships in adolescence for African American youth in comparison to white youth (Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2005). In a number of quantitative studies (Crissey, 2005; Lawrence-Webb, Littlefield, & Okundaye, 2004), white adolescents were found to have more of a predisposition to long-term romantic relationships than their counterparts, marrying earlier than African Americans. Furthermore, studies show African American adolescents are less inclined to

develop romantic relationships and thus have a diminished number of prospects for long-term relationships (marriage) during adulthood. Although clear cause of such disparity is inconclusive, an argument for internalized racism and self-hatred becomes plausible and further investigation is merited.

Risk Factor—Family of Origin and Context

Socioeconomic Status and Education. In a qualitative study of African American men's attitudes toward marriage (Perry, 2013), younger men who were more economically disadvantaged held significantly less favorable views toward marriage than older men who were more financially stable. In a study predicting relationship stability of midlife African American couples, Cutrona and colleagues (2011) found undereducated and low-income parents as less likely to end up together, diminishing the possibility that biological parents would rear children together.

Family of Origin. In the same study of men's attitudes toward marriage, Perry (2013) found family of origin issues as a major contributor to views of marriage. Men whose parents were never married to each other held significantly less favorable views toward marriage than men whose parents were married. Particularly, men who experienced positive illustrations of marriage during childhood were more inclined to view marriage in a good light. These men were described as having a perspective of past family members dictating their belief systems and feelings about themselves and connected others. Those without positive illustrations were noted as fearful of the following: intimacy, the opposite gender, long-term relationships, emotional trust, and vulnerability. Consequently, individuals who perceive potential future relationships negatively based on working internal constructs tend to have more relationship instability.

Family Instability. Parents who are unable to maintain marital commitments due to a myriad of issues and dysfunction leave lasting impressions on their children. For urban African American children in particular, this family instability is common and acts as a barrier to long-term survival and success (Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). As a result of separation or divorce, it becomes increasingly difficult for both parents, especially the father, to maintain strong connections to their children. Family instability thereby contributes to the emotional experiences of these children and is shown to have considerable negative effects on their wellbeing (Osborne & McLanahan, 2007) as children become receptacles of the relational and environmental problems surrounding them. The experienced dysfunction in parents' relational challenges affects children's perceptions about relationships with others generally, and more specifically, with romantic partners as children tend to internalize and blame themselves for divorce and are affected by the family transition in significant ways, personally (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007) and academically (Massey & Denton, 1993). These effects create negative internal working models which mitigate even academic performance and problem behavior. For instance, children living in single-parent homes are known to be at jeopardy for greater risk factors, including high poverty, low academic performance (Strazdins, Clements, Korda, Broom, & D'Souza, 2006), and high problem behaviors (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000), decreasing economic viability and readiness for marriage. In a study on the effects of neighborhood residence on child and adolescent outcomes, high SES directly correlated with academic performance, while low SES and residential instability were related to behavioral and emotional outcomes.

The Microsystem

Risk Factor—the Romantic Relationship

Coupling Challenges for African Americans. African American couple relationships, although similar to other relationship practices, maintain uniqueness culturally (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). Patriarchy, gender roles, love, the history of enslavement and discrimination and the negotiation of these influences are particularly unique factors contributing to relationships between African American men and women (Banks, 2011; Lawrence-Webb et al., 2004; Hooks et. al., 1995) compared to other ethnic groups. For African Americans, marital practices have particular significance as they are embedded in cultural history, American history, and gender interactions (Lawrence-Webb et al., 2004), supporting findings that suggest a high value of marriage and long-term commitment for African American adults. However, there are contextual impediments to coupling that are prevalent for African American men and women that go beyond desire, such as unequal gender ratios, socio-economic conditions, income and education, and male-female relationships (see Gibon-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005 for *marital prerequisites*[3]*)*.

Unequal gender ratios in the African American community contribute significantly to relationship development and sustainability, illustrated by low marriage rates (Pinderhughes, 2002). Due to a significant amount of African American men in prison (Wilson, 1996), deceased, many with poor healthcare, or participants in or victims of violent crime, and/or otherwise absent (South and Lloyd, 1992; Tucker and Mitchell Kernan, 1995), African American women who are *marriageable* outnumber their *marriageable* male counterparts (see Edin, 2000). African American women are shown to have a greater income earning potential as well as an increased likelihood of completing academic degrees in contrast to their male counterparts (Pinderhughes,

[3] Financial stability, relationship quality, and marital longevity

2002). This difference in education and therefore power, makes it difficult for African American men and women to resolve the financial and educational disparities, having implications for power in the context of the relationship (Pinderhughes, 2002). This difference in ratios makes it difficult for women to find men who are willing to commit by way of marriage (Pinderhughes, 2002), and some theorists argue that these disproportionate ratios are too great to overcome for many African American women (Edin, 2000). Socio-economic conditions such as unemployment and underemployment challenge the ability of men to provide for their families. Men who are unable to provide are less attractive to women, while these same men are less willing to marry due to the same financial constraints on their role as providers (Pinderhughes, 2002).

Income[4] is also a predictor of low marriage rates or higher marriage rates. Couples who struggle financially tend to have more stress, more social problems, and more relationship distress indicated by high frequency of arguments and relationship dissatisfaction. Many unmarried individuals understand this, which contributes to their desire to avoid marriage until economic readiness is achieved. In a qualitative study of low-income single mothers' (75% African American sample), perceptions and thoughts about marriage, affordability, income, regularity of earnings, effort of men expended on finding and keeping a job and the source of the income of fathers/men were found to be significant concerns for these women. According to the study, the participants were clear about the need for a man to enhance their present circumstance and provide respectability to their lives. This would come in the form of a man who had routine income, was infrequently out of work or otherwise underemployed, and who did not supplement income through illegal means, or who had low opportunity to improve his present situation over

[4] Economic Strain

time. The women knew that if they chose to enter into a marriage with a man with lower-class than themselves, the marriage would likely not survive due to the economic pressures.

Education level directly overlaps with economic viability and income levels, particularly for African Americans as men with higher education and income were more likely to be in intimate relationships where both partners were already biological parents of the children. Additionally, the likelihood to marry is largely diminished by level of education. In the same study, low education was found to be a predictor of marriage in African American couples (Cutrona, Russell, Burzette, Wesner, & Bryant, 2011). In a nationally representative sample of urban African American and white couples in their first marriage (Veroff, Douvan, & Hatchett,1995), being African American and less educated were significant longitudinal predictors of divorce after controlling for marital self-report variables such as frequency of conflict and emotionally affirming behaviors (Orbuch, Veroff, Hassan, & Horrocks, 2002).

Male-Female Relationships. The interrelationship between African American men and women, the negative perceptions of the other gender and an inability to collaborate and establish roles create barriers in relationships (Pinderhughes, 2002). Stereotypes of men play a major role in this negative interaction. Men have a response to being treated invisibly by society and women have a response to the expectation that they are responsible for compensating for these social injuries incurred by men (Pinderhughes, 2002). Consequently, the power struggle has increased significance for African American men and women (LaTaillade, 2006[5]) given the social disparities that both groups, but particularly men, as they are stripped of societal power completely (Pinderhughes, 2002). Social stereotypes about men as irresponsible and unreliable, abusive and exploitative, or women as domineering and suspicious undermine a couple's expectations of one another (Pinderhughes, 2002).Thus, men lose confidence and expect to

[5] Power Discrepancy

regain confidence in the context of their homes regarding their position. Once this position is challenged, particularly as a provider, men feel powerless within their entire lives (workplace, socially, and home life), creating marital conflict. In a study of marital conflict, negative behaviors, and the implications for divorce, Birditt and colleagues (2010) examined 373 couples and found 53% of Black Americans were more likely to report conflict behaviors (destructive and withdrawal) compared to 47% for white Americans. They found individual, destructive behaviors and patterns of behaviors between partners such as withdrawal, predicted higher divorce rates and that husband's destructive and withdrawal behaviors remained stable while wives' behaviors diminished over time.

So where do these conflicting behaviors come from for this ethnic group? Unequal gender ratios, socio-economic conditions, income, education, and male-female relationships are unique areas of dispute for African American's preconceptions of marriage and long-term commitment. Each area creates hesitation for marriage and potential conflict. Are low rates of marriage and high rates of divorce just a manifestation of the aforementioned contextual factors, perpetrated through limited access to resources such as education, jobs, income, and over-access to unfavorable liabilities (Smedley & Smedley, 2005)? Research indicates that a connection to such contextual factors and race is at the forefront.

Racialization. African Americans endure sociological stressors in addition to normative relational stressors that other ethnic groups do not experience. Previously in this review, contextual barriers such as gender ratio differences were discussed as having negative influences on coupling for African Americans. These factors were discussed without any indication of a driving force that is consistent across the factors. Though there are reported differences between those African Americans who willingly migrated to this country in comparison to those who

were forcibly brought to this country (Ogbu, 19990), it is evident that each group has some experience with the legacy of slavery (i.e. racism and prejudice) (Pouissant, 2002). In the United States, race and ethnicity exist on a social hierarchy with ethnic minorities relegated to the margins of society, particularly with African Americans at the bottom. This social positioning has a negative impact on this population in overwhelming ways (i.e. psychologically, socially, emotionally, and physically) (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Racism and prejudice are constructs of racialization that hold historical significance (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). African American men and women particularly are having hard times maintaining relationships due to problematic behaviors in response to social and environmental challenges (Billingsly, 1992; Whelan, 2011).

As a result of racism and prejudicial experiences, many African Americans report feeling levels of invisibility (Franklin, Boyd-Franklin and Kelly, 2006). Franklin and colleagues (2006) investigated the effects of racism, discussing the nature of individual, institutional, and cultural racism and the creation of the invisibility syndrome,[6] and how this creates emotional and psychological trauma for people of color, particularly African Americans. Accordingly, African Americans report the highest level of discrimination of all ethnic groups and appraise discrimination (LaTaillade, 2006) as more stressful than other groups do (Ladrine et. al, 2006). Carter (2007) contends that racism toward people of color has psychological and emotional effects on individuals and their families. As a result of perceived discrimination and racialization, research shows a direct link to negative impacts such as hypertension, physical

[6] Invisibility Syndrome is defined as a person's perception that his/her talents and identity are not seen because of the dominance of preconceived attitudes and stereotypes. This is a form of internalized racism and racial permanence.

well-being, and disease (Poussaint, 2002). These racial experiences, combined with sociological conditions such as poverty and limited mobility contribute to stressor pileup[7]

Murry and colleagues (2008) hypothesized that stressor pileup would be associated with African American mothers' psychological distress and would be detrimental to intimate relationships. Additionally, they uncovered that maternal distress was linked to the quality of both mother-child relationships and intimate partnerships. When mothers reported experiencing higher levels of discrimination, there were stronger links between stressor pileup and psychological distress and the quality of relationship between mother and intimate partner. Thus, it can be concluded that sociological systemic injustices such as stereotypes, discrimination and racism (Sellers & Shelton, 2003), high rates of morbidity, incarceration, and unemployment, all act as additional stressors perpetuating cultural disenfranchisement (Pinderhughes, 2002; Bonilla-Silva, 2009), and each has an influence on coupling relationships. These variables directly negatively impact relationship desire, coupling, and maintenance for African American couples as perceived stressors create internal challenges that permeate relationships and interactions with others.

Still, there continue to be African American individuals who are able to overcome the obstacles presented prior to marrying but who choose to marry regardless. Black couples who do marry are found to have fewer mixed racial attitudes—more positive attitudes, and have more trust in their partners than unmarried couples. Husbands in marital relationships tend to have a higher SES and wives have fewer anti-Black attitudes than unmarried couples (Kelly & Floyd, 2006a). These couples are considered resilient and enduring (see Phillips, Wilmoth, & Marks,

[7] Increased stressors that trigger subjective emotional responses over time and disrupt interpersonal relationship and daily functioning

2012) and despite the consequences of being African American in a racialized society, they are able to transcend and reach the threshold. But, what happens after the starting line is reached?

The Marital Relationship

Risk Factor—the Marital Relationship

Marital Conflict. As stated in the previous chapter, African Americans view marriage positively and believe that it is an important union between two people. They also desire marriage in their own personal lives (LaTaillade, 2006; Rashard Perry, 2013) and approach marriage with clear understanding of expectations and the necessary practices to create an enduring commitment. In a qualitative study on African American couples, Marks and colleagues (2008) noted four important thematic concepts for couples as they approached and committed to marriage: recognizing challenges, overcoming external challenges, resolving intra-marital conflict, and unity and the importance of being "equally yoked". In another study examining the interplay between ethnicity, religion, and relationship quality, Ellison, Burdette and Wilcox (2010) noted a positive link between family devotional activities, shared religious beliefs and reports of relationship quality. This suggests that African American couples approach marriage with a strong understanding of the level of connectedness and the importance of sharing within a marriage that predicts long-term relational health. These findings imply that many African American couples have the capacity to endure and the skills to do so. In a study investigating enduring African American couples and the important characteristics within these relationships, Phillips, Wilmoth, and Marks (2012) found these couples reported happiness within their marriage in spite of varying obstacles. This illustrates a reality that many African American couples are able to transcend the initial commitment to marry.

Unfortunately, this endurance requires a very clear foundation for this population in cultural, spiritual, ethnic, and familial tradition. For African Americans, in addition to the normative marital challenges that all couples face regardless of race, they are also met with social pressures and internalized oppression that can negatively impact the relationships of these couples (Taylor & Zhang, 1990; Wamboldt, 1999; Cutrona, Russell, Burzette, Wesner, & Bryant, 2011). African Americans begin their relationship with intentions to promote and develop unity and commitment to one another, similar to other couples regardless of ethnic or racial identity. However, the pervasive and perpetual societal and systemic prejudices create a tumultuous and often untenable circumstance and emotional response that permeates that home life for this population. The internalization of trauma, coupled with the natural challenges of marital commitment creates very real obstacles to overcome.

Finances. In a quantitative study completed by Clark-Nicolas and Gray-Little (1991) examining the effects of SES variables on three aspects of marital quality (i.e. global marital satisfaction, reciprocity, and evaluation of spouse's role performance) for 150 Black couples, economic resources were found to be more important predictors of marital quality among low-income groups. For African American married couples, financial management such as budgeting, credit issues, and debt management continue to be one of the key areas that create marital conflict. Recent studies suggest that this is an ongoing stressor for Blacks couples. In a quantitative study on marital satisfaction among African American and Black Caribbean couples, results indicate stress generated from financial problems can lower marital satisfaction for both groups (Bryant, Taylor, Lincoln, Chatters, & Jackson, 2008). In a quantitative study on demographics, marital status, and racial perspectives for Black coupling relationships, 112 self-

identified African American couples were recruited and income level was found to dictate couple relationship and racial views, particularly for Black men (Kelly & Floyd, 2006a).

Relational Disconnect. In a study on marital conflict, Birditt, Brown, Orbuch, and McIlvane (2010) noted African American couples reporting more withdrawal from each other than White American couples and conflict behaviors predicted divorce. Kelly and Floyd (2001) established that internalized negative stereotypes and high Afrocentricity for men was associated with decreased perceptions of partner dependability and satisfaction in the relationship. They concluded that racial perspectives were important predictors of African American couple outcomes. Kelly and Floyd (2006) suggested income level dictated racial views and the couple relationship for men, and marital status was predictive for women. They also posited that anti-Black perspectives (internalized oppression) have an effect on individual and couple adjustment and racial factors (Franklin, Boyd-Franklin, & Kelly, 2006) predict couple outcomes (Kelly & Floyd, 2006b). Such challenges, coupled with social ills make the terrain for couple maintenance increasingly tumultuous.

Prejudice and Racism. In a quantitative study of 100 participants completed more than two decades ago (Taylor & Zhang, 1990) examining cultural identity[8] in maritally distressed and nondistressed Black couples, researchers found internalization of racism (i.e. internalized negative stereotypes) as more common in distressed couples. Several years following, Kelly and Floyd (2001) investigated the effects of negative racial stereotypes and afrocentricity[9] on Black couple relationships using a survey method. Researchers studied the relationship between internalized negative stereotypes, Afrocentricity, and dyadic trust and adjustment for seventy-three Black couples. Findings indicated internalized negative stereotypes alone generally did not

[8] An inverse estimate of Black cultural identity and internalized racism
[9] Emphasizing or promoting emphasis on African culture and the contributions of Africans to the development of Western civilization

predict relationship problems; however, the combination of internalized negative stereotypes and high Afrocentricity for men was associated with decreased perceptions of partner dependability, an aspect of relationship trust, and decreased dyadic adjustment for both partners. Contrary to predictions, Afrocentricity was associated with less perceived partner dependability and satisfaction for the couples. Controlling for socioeconomic status failed to alter these associations. Findings imply that racial perspectives are important predictors of Black couple outcomes (Kelly & Floyd, 2006b) and complex and conflicting racial attitudes held by Afrocentric Black men may cause deterioration in Black couple relationships. This suggests internalized negative feelings about self have an adverse effect on relationship functioning and perceptions of partners, and that racial factors predict couple outcomes as anti-Black perspectives have an effect on individual and couple adjustment (Kelly & Floyd, 2006a; 2006b).

In support, a study examining the correlates of marital satisfaction among African American and Black Caribbean couples, found differences in the predictors of marital satisfaction between and within groups, particularly with regard to race and gender. Black Caribbean women reported higher overall levels of marital satisfaction than African American women and African American women reported higher levels of marital satisfaction than their male counterparts. This signifies a cultural and gender divergence, which can be attributed to environmental and experiential differences (i.e. African American men have more pronounced negative interactions with society than African American women). In a conceptual paper addressing the need to understand African Americans in the context of couple relationship treatment, LaTaillade (2006) argued that experiences of discrimination, economic strain, and power discrepancy between partners are continuing negative factors inhibiting maintenance or development of healthy romantic relationships between African American couples.

Social and Economic Issues. Social issues that emerge from previous home lives, relationship expectations, and communication issues as a result create marital conflict for African American couples. In a qualitative study of thirty African American couples addressing the challenges and benefits of their happy and enduring marriages, Marks and colleagues (2008) found social aspects of individual childhoods and their desires and expectations for their role in their marriages were significant challenges, in addition to economic positioning as it relates to support for extended family, church communities, and neighborhood friends. In a quantitative study using the National Survey of Families and Households, Clarkwest (2007) found significant spousal dissimilarities between African American men and women on several categories, including income, spouses' average educational attainment, multi-partner fidelity, parental separation, approval of maternal employment, tolerance of infidelity, church attendance, desired number of children, sexual attitudes, and beliefs regarding appropriate levels of independence in marriage.

Role Confusion, Lack of Trust, and Marital Quality. For African American couples, the organization and agreement on roles and responsibilities are also significant triggers for relational difficulty. Couples who tend to promote patriarchal and matriarchal gender roles instead of role sharing [or egalitarianism] struggle more than their more equitable counterparts, particularly for African American couples (Veroff, Douvan, & Hatchett, 1995). In a quantitative study of 697 African American newlywed couples, Stanik and Bryant (2012) noted couples reported lower marital quality when husbands had more traditional role attitudes than themselves or others and husbands reported lower marital quality when the couple was more traditional in the division of labor.

Also, a common concern for African American couples is distrust. Chapman (2007) indicated a lack of trust prevents marital formation in several ways and often contributes to marital dissolution or emotional insecurity for African American couples in particular. Goodwin (2003) supported this idea, describing trust as something that "promotes sharing in relationships, allows for open and honest communication, and is essential to relationship growth because the trust spouse is perceived as dependable and predictable" (pg. 552). Both role establishment and trust levels create marital quality concerns for African American couples (Goodwin, 2003).. It is clear for African American couples that engaging in more equitable approaches to roles and responsibilities, which has cultural significance (Boyd-Franklin, 1989), is more beneficial and increases trusts.

However, many couples fail to reach the point of marriage to even begin negotiating roles and expectations due to various contextual influences such as economic viability and readiness and the timeline for reaching professional goals. Consequently, many African American couples are choosing cohabitation as an alternative to marriage.

Cohabitation as Alternative to Marriage. Although unmarried couples are not exactly privy to the challenges facing them in marriage from personal experiences, indirect knowledge from family of origin illustrations and contextual variables such as socioeconomic status and dissimilarity on vital issues can create negative predispositions for marriage. Due to difficulties reaching the decision to marry and obstacles within the context of marriage, there is a growing trend for unmarried couples to cohabitate to illustrate long-term commitment as an alternative to marriage (Furstenberg, 2007). Unfortunately, many couples who choose this option fail to consider the negative effects of living "married" lives without making formal commitments. Research suggests that cohabitating couples are less likely to ever marry than couples who do not

live together prior to marriage (Banks, 2011). Also, cohabitation prior to marriage with a future partner or a previous partner is a predictor of divorce and marital dissolution over time. These couples are often thrust into marriage with low levels of commitment, lower standards for cohabitating partners than for spouses (Furstenberg, 2007), and relationship compatibility because of the natural timeline cohabitation demands for marriage as the end goal (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006).

Not only does cohabitation negatively affect long-term commitment, but it also affects racial views. In the same study completed by Kelly and Floyd (2006a), women's marital status[10] was found to be a significant predictor of fewer anti-Black and mixed attitudes and anti-Black perspectives were predictive of couple outcomes. Women who had more prospects for marriage as an alternative to cohabitation were more positive about themselves racially. Likewise, relationally secure women had better attitudes about being Black, enjoying their relationships more than less secure women. Ostensibly, it has been well substantiated that cohabitation lacks benefit for African American individuals. However, the pressure to choose this lifestyle is prompted by overwhelming historical, sociological and contextual factors, which are difficult to transcend for this population (Evans, 2004).

Responding to the Stress

Evans (2004) found that African American families are exposed to considerable levels of violence, poverty, and chronic hassles that affect adjustment. In spite of this, African American families typically negotiate a successful existence in spite of several risk factors that are often visible including poverty, single parenthood, large households, low parental education, unemployment, and low-income communities and schools, maternal depression, and lack of social support (Evans, 2004). There are couples who continue to transcend the interactions of the

[10] Moving towards marriage or currently married

systems toward marital health and maintenance. Obgu (1990) contended African Americans have developed natural overcoming and resilient characteristics that enable transcendence in spite of contextual barriers. LaTaillade (2006) agreed by asserting that although African American couples tend to face harsh conditions in comparison to other couples, numerous couples continue to survive and even thrive in spite of race-related oppression. The next section discusses the resilience of African Americans , in particular, discussing coping strategies and protective factors they used to endure relational adversity.

Resilience—Protective Factors

In spite of the historical and social realities, African Americans have established forms of resilience (Marks, Hopkins, Chaney, Monroe, Nesteruk, & Sasser, 2008; Phillips, Wilmoth, & Marks, 2012). Spirituality, faith, and religion (Cutrona et al., 2011), family connectedness (family, kin, and social support), and ethnic identity (Williams, Champan, Wong, & Turkheimer, 2012) are several aspects that have protected African Americans and African American couples from complete social destruction and cultural eradication (Brown, Orbuch, & Bauermeister, 2008; Ellison, Burdette, & Wilcox, 2010; Kamo & Cohen, 1998; LaTaillade, 2006). In a qualitative dissertation study, Brooks (2007) engaged in a case study of eight couples using semi-structured interviews and follow-up interviews. In the study, commitment, trust, communication/conflict management skills, similarity, religion, love, doing things together, understanding, and willingness to forgive were significant factors of resilience for African American couples.

Spirituality and Religiosity. Spirituality and religiosity are strong constants for African American couples and African Americans in general. Religious practices act as a strong buffer and coping strategy for African Americans to minimize external stressors. Phillips, Wilmoth, and

Marks (2012) studied African American couples in the rural south to highlight the needed positive, strengths-based oriented studies that provide awareness of factors that strengthen and maintain marriages. Researchers distributed 300 survey packets to historically Black churches (i.e. Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal (AME), Pentecostal, etc). Questions included: 1) What do the two of you believe is the top reason your marriage has lasted so long?; 2) What would the two of you describe as the biggest challenge or obstacle that you've had to overcome in your marriage?; 3) Looking back over the years that you've been married, what would the two of you say is the one thing that you've disagreed about the most? Findings suggested that enduring couples attended church frequently, prayed often, and believed their faith plays a large role in the longevity of their marriages. Respondents also indicated a strong belief that marriage was kept together primarily by God.

In a longitudinal quantitative study of 373 couples (199 African American), Brown, Orbuch, and Bauermeister (2008) examined religiosity and its influence on marital stability for African American and white couples. Findings suggested a variation in the importance of religiosity by race and gender. African American husbands and wives reported religion as more important, illustrated by a higher frequency of religious service attendance than white husbands and wives. Cutrona et al (2011) noted religiosity as an important resource in the lives of African Americans. This resource promoted stability through its association with marriage, biological-family status, and women's relationship quality.

Using the National Survey of Religion and Family Life, 400 working-age adults were surveyed on the topics of religion, race and ethnicity, and relationship quality. Research findings illustrated partners who were a part of the same faith who attended religious functions often were more prone to report superior relationship satisfaction than others (Ellison, Burdette, & Wilcox,

2010). As well, religiosity creates positive views of marriage relationships for African Americans. Rashard Perry (2013) found men who were more religious held more favorable attitudes toward marriage. It is clear religion and spirituality provide a strong sense of support for African American couples.

Personal Confidence in Problem-Solving Skills. In a qualitative study of low-income families, most from an African American background, Orthner, Jone-Sanpei, and Williamson (2004) found personal confidence in problem solving skills, family cohesion, clearly established rules, communication, and social support as aspects of strength and resilience for these families.

Family Cohesion and Communication. In a quantitative study of 41 Black dual-career couples, Thomas (1990) examined the contribution of 10 aspects of life ranging from marriage, to leisure time activities, to global life happiness. Results illustrated that for husbands, family cohesion was the strongest determinant of marital happiness, and quality communication was the strongest for wives.

Gender Role Diffusion. In a quantitative study concerning the marital quality of newlywed African American couples, Stanik and Bryant (2012) found couples reported lower marital quality when husbands had relatively more traditional gender role attitudes. This was also true for husbands who tended to report having lower marital quality when labor division was more traditional.

Ethnic Identity. This population has continually overcome historical experiences and contemporary systemic oppressions through cultural forms of resilience. Greater understanding of the effects of historical trauma would only serve to increase the resiliency found in this community, addressing the current trends in marriage and cohabitation rates such that African American families are strengthened (LaTaillade, 2006; Phillips, Wilmoth, & Marks, 2012).

Learning about this phenomenon and discovering the skills used by successful individuals and couples would support the development of a culturally relevant treatment approach for premarital and struggling couples toward a model that is culturally relevant and responsive to the uniqueness of this ethnic group's experiences and socio-historical context.

CHAPTER THREE: STUDY ONE

Transmitted Messages: The Influence of Childhood Experiences on the Perception of Intimate Relationships for African Americans

Abstract

This article describes the covert and overt messages received about relationship connections in childhood in a sample of married and divorced African American individuals. The study explores descriptions of childhood (challenges and successes) and the following relationships: 1) parents' romantic relationships, 2) home environment, 3) sibling relationships, and 4) adult-child relationships. Thirty-one individuals, representing fifteen couple dyads (10 married, 5 divorced) and 1 individual, were interviewed for the study. In each interview, participants were asked about childhood experiences, types of relationships with siblings, parent-child relationships, family challenges and successes, parental romantic relationships, and the home environment. Findings illuminate the importance of these early relationship experiences in the light of long-term views of relationships and how these messages may influence relationship expectations and behaviors. I propose a theory of intimate relationships for African Americans based on the interviews and related analysis that illustrates the process by which individuals learn about relationships. This theory revolves around three themes: 1) relationships are unstable, leaving holes in my life, 2) there is no blueprint—absence of model relationships, and 3) maybe I am lovable and relationships do work. Implications for intervention and prevention with African American couples and families are discussed.

Introduction

Numerous studies have investigated the adverse effects of negative childhood experiences on adult behaviors and relationships (Amato, 2000; Balestrino, Ciardi, & Mammini, 2013; Underwood & Rosen, 2011). Studies on childhood abuse including sexual (Lundqvist, Hansson & Góran Svedin, 2004), emotional (Burns, Jackson, & Harding, 2010), and physical (Ford, Fraleigh, & Conner, 2009) all suggest that adult survivors are less likely to commit to long-term relationships, are more likely to engage in maladaptive behaviors such as alcohol abuse, drug abuse, and other forms of self-defeating behaviors (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007). Children who have experienced victimization and abuse tend to have severe health and psychological problems during childhood (Finkelhor, Ormrd, & Turner, 2007), which extends into adulthood (Nock & Kessler, 2006). As well, young people who have experienced maltreatment appear to engage in higher levels of externalizing and internalizing problems compared to children who have not have similarly abusive experiences (McWey, Cui, Pazsdera, 2010). Children witnessing violence during childhood, especially those who have been exposed to domestic violence, are at increased risk for emotional, academic, and behavioral difficulties (McKinney, Sieger, Agliata, & Renk, 2006; Cole, Zahn-Waxler, Fox, Usher, & Welsh, 1996; Carter, Kay, George & King, 2003). In short, difficult experiences in childhood affect the well-being of children into their adult years.

Effects of Adverse Childhood on Future Intimate Partner Relationships

Negative childhood experiences also affect how individuals enter into and maintain intimate relationships as adults. For example, adults with negative childhood experiences are more likely to respond adversely to strained intergenerational relationships, eventually influencing marital quality (see Allen & Mitchell, 2015). Reczek, Liu, and Umberson (2010) found that children

with issues with their mothers were more likely to struggle in their marriages. For African American individuals, childhood experiences influence beliefs about relationships, social skills, ethnic socialization and racial pride, and other pro social life benefits. However, very little research has focused on the influences of childhood on adult intimate relationships for African American individuals, with a particular focus on the implications of these experiences on feelings about adulthood relationships. It stands to reason that childhood has a tremendous impact on the perceptions of long-term relationships considering childhood is the first exposure to relationships.

Childhood experiences, in particular, relationships with significant individuals, are thought to influence adulthood in a series of ways (Allen & Mitchell, 2015). These childhood relationships include parent-child, sibling-sibling, parents' romantic relationships, peer relationships, and the interaction of the individuals in these relationships with the other members of the relationship system. More specifically, childhood experiences (positive or negative) are thought to affect the following relational variables: adulthood attachment styles, behaviors in relationships, parenting approaches, trust in relationships, views of relationships, and the level of vulnerability in relationships (Allen & Mitchell, 2015; Hazen & Shaver, 1987; Fincham & Beach, 2010; McCloyd et al., 2000; Perry, 2013). For African American individuals, the effects of these relationships are complicated by the socio-historical and contextual influences including racism, thereby producing reactions that impact future generations (Boyd-Franklin, 2006; Kelly & Floyd, 2006; Pinderhughes, 2002). The current study investigates the childhood experiences of African American individuals to make connections between these experiences and perceptions about future adult romantic relationships. This is an important consideration in that African Americans enter into marriage less frequently than do other ethnic groups (Cherlin, 2004; Jones, 2011), and

when they do, these relationships are at a much higher risk for dissolution (Hill, 2006; LatTaillade, 2006). While some studies have examined this issue, we do not know a great deal about the early childhood experiences of these individuals and the influence of these experiences and subsequent relationship coupling.

Purpose of the Study

This study describes the childhood experiences of a sample of previously and currently married African American individuals, with particular focus on their early relationship experiences and how these experiences may contribute to future romantic relationships successes and struggles. Using qualitative in-depth interviews, I explore childhood relationship experiences of a sample of married and divorced African Americans, with a view to understanding the impact of childhood messages on adult intimate relationship development.

Ecological Systems Theory: Theoretical Framework

Questions for this study were guided by human ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), as a way to establish a framework by which to understand and conceptualize relationships between an individual's context and the interactions of those relationships. The primary premise behind this theory is that human development occurs in context and conceptualizations of development and influence should occur with the consideration of context and its impact, both positive and negative, on the identified person(s). Context includes the individual, the immediate surroundings, the environmental factors, and sociological and societal influences. Each aspect of influence interacts with others directly and indirectly and is transactional in nature (Bronfenbrenner, 1988, 1989). The theory hinges on the premise that external environments have significant influence on human development and family processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1988).

In the case of this study, ecological systems theory is used to discuss the effects of childhood experiences (ecological components) on the perception of relationships for the identified individuals as illustrated by Figure 3.1. The external systems affecting the perception of the individual are characterized as macro, exo, meso, and micro-systems. Schweiger and O'Brien (2005) summarize the ecological system as

> "a) the *microsystem*, or the immediate settings or environments in which the child lives, primarily the family; b) the *mesosystem,* or the linkages between two or more microsystems (such as the parent to parent interactions, or child to adult interactions); c) the *exosystem,* defined as settings not experienced directly by the child but that influence the microsystem (parent behaviors in their personal lives (i.e. drug and alcohol abuse, family histories); d) the *macrosystem,* or the wider society and culture that encompasses all other systems" (p. 513)

Each component of the system has embedded characteristics and subsystems that interrelate within and between the other to influence other parts of the larger system. Together, each interrelation is proposed to impact the development of a child's perception of long-term relationships.

The Microsystem

The micro-system refers to the most immediate systems and institutions directly impacting the individual's development. Aspects of the micro-system include immediate family, childrearing and childhood development, school, peers, religious affiliations, social groups, and job or career. Included in the microsystem is parent, family, sibling, friend, and adult behaviors within the immediate context of the child.

The Mesosystem

The meso-system involves the interaction between the micro-systems (i.e. parent-parent romantic, child-adult, sibling-sibling, family relationships, neighborhood/friends, surrogate parents and family experiences) and their collective influence on the individual. For example, an individual's family may attend church together, experience rearing together, and be a part of the same community. The interrelationships between the systems are the meso-system in effect (Schweiger and O'Brien, 2005).

The Exosystem

The exo-system contains the direct linkage between social settings wherein the individual lacks an active or direct role, while involving the individual's immediate context (i.e. family experiences, extended family, neighborhood, mass media messages, parent's work life/environment (types of employment)). For instance, the individual's parents may interact with society with frustration, confusion, and uncertainty. The individual is not directly linked to these experiences, but may be a direct beneficiary of the emotional result.

The Macrosystem

The macrosystem includes the culture wherein the individual lives and the policies, family history, social conditions, culture, and family economics present within that culture. Cultural contexts include ethnicity or race, socioeconomic status, history of poverty, racialized oppression and prejudice, and generational cultural traditions. The macrosystem is not limited to time and can be transmitted generationally and intergenerationally to offspring consciously and unconsciously.

The Chronosystem

Finally, the chronosystem is comprised of patterns of environmental occurrences, events, and transitions over the life course, including socio-historical circumstances (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2010; Vander Zanden, Crandell, Crandell, 2007) such as slavery and the experience of being treated as chattel. For African American individuals, influences from an ecological perspective are specific to the socio-historical experiences of this ethnic group (Pinderhughes, 2002).

Methods

Procedures

Participants for this study were recruited from a small-population city located in the Midwest. This city is racially diverse with domestic and international citizens, heterogeneous, and home to numerous African American churches and communities with members from differing backgrounds, including varying socioeconomic status, education, income, geographical location, and careers. After receiving institutional review board approval, participants were solicited through the use of purposive sampling methods including social media websites (Linked In, Facebook, and Twitter), word of mouth advertising, emailed flyers to colleagues, friends, and professional networks.

Individuals were eligible for the study if they were African American and either married or divorced and between the ages of 21 and 65. For inclusion in the study, the following criteria applied to both the married and divorced individuals: 1) living together; 2) self-identify as African American, United States citizens (resided in the United States all of their lives); 3) English as the primary language; 4) married for at least 6 months. For the married individuals, 5) must self-identify as having a healthy and rewarding long-term relationship—operationally defined as expressed feelings of support from partner, indicated overall happiness with partner,

and an expression of positive future plans for the relationship. The criteria set forth for married couples were necessary for the following reasons: 1) individuals who cohabitate in a marital relationship are able to engage in more intimate discussions and interactions than non-cohabitating married couples, 2) individuals who are higher in age are more mature than younger individuals and more able to assess their childhood experiences and 3) to discuss the implications of these experiences on their relationship perception considering the length of their marital relationship. As well, 4) domestic individuals who are non-immigrants have the historical experiences of being minority in this country, both interpersonally and historically within their families. Finally, 5) self-identifying as happily married allows participation to come from a strengths-based perspective, illuminating any biases based on current marital issues. Couples were excluded for the following reasons: 1) if they did not meet all inclusion criteria, 2) if there had been an extended absence from the marital relationship due to criminal reasons, 3) if there was a history of domestic or family violence, or 4) if there was serious mental health issues or concerns that might prevent participation in the study.

Given the nature of the study (marital issues) and the cultural climate of mistrust and privacy of many African American individuals, and challenges with recruitment in the geographical context, I expanded the study to include areas around the country. To increase participation, I relied on snowball and word of mouth recruitment. This expansion increased the sample in diversity and provided an ideal population sample. Interviews took place in person, via phone, or through video chat. In person interviews (n=10) occurred either in the homes of the participants, at local community centers, or at schools. Phone interviews (n=18) and video chat interviews (n=3) were conducted from my private office. Participants were asked their location/time

preference and interviews were scheduled based upon participants' schedule and convenience. Interviews lasted on average of 1.25 hours.

Each participating individual received a $20 gift card for participation in the study. During the overview of the study, I provided a brief presentation of the overall goal of the research project and informed participants they were allowed to view the data before publication for member-checking purposes and confirmation of findings. Finally, I informed participants that they would receive a brochure (poster board presentation template) with the results of the study and recommendations for couples based on the findings of the study.

Participants

Thirty-one (N=31) African American heterosexual individuals, legally married or divorced, were recruited for this study (see inclusion criteria for specifics). Twenty of the individuals (10 men, 10 women) were married couple dyads, and 11 individuals (5 men, 6 women) were from 6 divorced couple dyads. One individual participant (unable to solicit the participation of the male divorcee) participated outside the couple dyad. The following Tables illustrate the geographical breakdown (current residence of participant), demographics (including age at marriage, years of marriage, and number of children of participants), and educational attainment of participants:

Table 3.1: *Geographical Breakdown of Participants*

Region	Percentage of Participants
Michigan	61% (n=19)
Indiana	6.4% (n=2)
Texas	13% (n=4)
Alabama	6.4% (n=2)
Colorado	3.2% (n=1)
Ohio	3.2% (n=1)
Louisiana	3.2% (n=1)
California	3.2% (n=1)

Table 3.2: *Demographics of Participants*

Mean Age (yrs)	45.0	Range (25-68)
Mean Age at Marriage (yrs)	26.7	Range (21-50)
Mean Years of Marriage	13.7	Range (1.66-46)
Mean Number of Children	1.3	Range (0-3)

Table 3.3: *Educational Attainment of Participants*

High School Diploma	6.5% (n=2)
Some College	32.3% (n=10)
College Diploma	19.4% (n=6)
Advanced Degree	41.9% (n=13)

As indicated in the above tables, the participant pool was diverse geographically from various parts of the country. Participants were generally mature in age (average 45 years) of age, with an average marrying age of 27 and an average total of years married of 14. On average each

individual who participated parented 1.35 children (range, 0 to 3). The participant group was diverse in age, education, marital status, age at marriage, and number of children.

Data Collection

Data were collected through individual interviews for both the married and divorced individuals. A decision was made to conduct the interviews individually as opposed to conjointly, in order to elicit more candid, accurate, and honest responses from participants, especially related to gender and power differences (Seymour, Dix, & Eardley, 1995). For example, Thomas (1990) interviewed dual-career African American couples separately to ensure sensitive perspectives were gathered that would otherwise not be shared. In support of the concept of sensitivity to individual perspectives, Perry (2013) interviewed African American men to discover their attitudes toward marriage and their mates; individual interviews were more useful in yielding more risky comments about the opposing gender and themselves.

While engaging in interviews with this population, it was also essential to pay attention to the power distance between the interviewer and participants. To ensure a shared level of power during the interviews, collaborative interviewing (working in conjunction with the participants to construct and work through the conversation, rather than hierarchical inquiry) is advocated for by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) as an approach to address the power differential present between the interviewer and participants. Thus, this approach was used given the nature of the topic of inquiry and the role of the researcher in the community, being an African American educated man. To accomplish this, I engaged in small talk to provide ease to the participant about the topic and to increase comfort for the participant. I was transparent about the purpose of the interview and highlighted specific instances where discomfort might occur during the interview. Finally, I allowed participants to engage in discussion as freely and non-directed as desired without

attempting to maintain rigidly to the interview schedule. This approach increased the opportunity for freely spoken and in-depth narratives during the interview process.

Individual Interviews. To begin the interview phase, participants were welcomed to the interview (in person, via phone, or over the internet (Skype or Zoom)) and provided consent and demographic forms to complete. After providing signatures to the required documentation, participants were informed that the interview would last between 45 and75 minutes. Audio-recorders (2) were used to gather the responses to the interview questions. Participants were informed of the location of the audio recorders to encourage their responses to be clear and directed toward the recording equipment. Prior to beginning the interviews, I informed participants when the recording would commence.

Semi-structured, narrative-based individual interviews were conducted to elicit responses to the questions provided, while allowing opportunity for participants and encouraging them to respond in detail by building on the interview questions with stories of their personal lived experiences (Josselson & Lieblich, 1993). Participants were asked the following questions and to describe in detail: 1) what was childhood like for you, 2) what type of relationship did your parents have as you grew up, 3) what type of neighborhood environment did you grow up in, 4) what types of relationships and interactions did you and your siblings have with your parents and other family members, 5) what types of relationship interactions did you and/or your siblings have with one another growing up, 6) what types of challenges and successes did your family experience when you were a child or adolescent. Follow-up questions were asked to illicit clarity or additional information for deeper understanding.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed to begin the analysis process. Data analysis initiates during the transcription process as the researcher becomes immersed in the data and categories begin to emerge (Creswell, 2013). Consistent with grounded theory analysis, individual interviews were analyzed using a three-phase coding system, common to the grounded theory approach to qualitative inquiry: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) using *Dedoose* to organize the themes and subthemes. For this study, the constructivist grounded theory approach was used as opposed to the traditional approach offered by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Constructivist grounded theory (Creswell, 2013) includes an inductive approach to theory building (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) providing a way to search for patterns in data, develop ideas, and examine individual processes, interpersonal relations, and the reciprocal effects between individuals and larger social processes (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2002). Henderson (2000) found that an inductive approach to theory reveals the interpersonal interactions and allows for an analysis of personal experiences, providing a clearer understanding of the study's couples.

Open coding was used to breakdown, compare, and to categorize the data to build towards axial coding. This occurred by completing several readings of the transcripts in their entirety several times (Agar, 1980). In this process, I developed major categories emerging from the data through line-by-line analysis. I examined the text for salient categories from the information provided by the transcribed texts. The constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 2009; Creswell, 2013) or axial coding was used to make connections between categories that emerged from the open coding process (Glaser, 1964). Larger categories were compared to emerging categories on an ongoing basis. At this phase, the analysis was descriptive for the purpose of arriving at particular details of the couples, rather than establishing or building towards a theory

initially. The objective was to avoid providing an explanation for the lived experiences and paradigms of the participants, while simultaneously attempting to saturate the categories for all possible new information (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Rather than identifying one open coding category, a social constructivist perspective was used (Charmaz, 2006). This approach emphasized the multiple realities, diverse local worlds, and the complexities of particular worlds, views, and actions of African American individuals, giving heavy emphasis to interpretation with flexibility in the guidelines. As such, several categorical themes were identified as the main foci.

I revisited the data to create categories using the main focus as the framework for analysis (Creswell, 2013). I made decisions throughout the process of establishing categories, posing questions to the data, and pushing personal values, experiences, and priorities relevant to African American couples and myself as a researcher (Charmaz, 2006). In this approach, I was given freedom to construct knowledge based on my own epistemological viewpoints and approach to research practice (Charmaz, 2008). This process was undergirded by the self-reflection engaged by myself (researcher transparency), which occurred through constant reflection throughout the process, mentioned previously as journaling, and through the use of member-checking. Finally, selective coding was the final step in the coding process. A set of categories was selected and its relationship to other categories established, essentially "building a story that connects the categories" together (Creswell, 2013, p. 195), while maintaining flexibility and researcher involvement (Charmaz, 2008).

Trustworthiness

Throughout this process, I completed memoing to illuminate the emerging theory (Creswell, 2013) to establish trustworthiness. These field notes were based on interview observations for the

purpose of triangulating perspectives (i.e. husband report, wife report, interviewer's observations); I also completed retroactive journal entries to address researcher bias and trustworthiness.

As well, I discussed personal biases, social positioning, presuppositions and assumptions made throughout the process with the research advisor, in a process otherwise known as reflexivity. Member checking and rich, thick description were used to maintain validity throughout the analysis and reporting process. Member checking was a significant part of the analysis to ensure that the emerging themes and constructed theory are consistent with the views and perceptions of the participants to increase credibility of findings and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

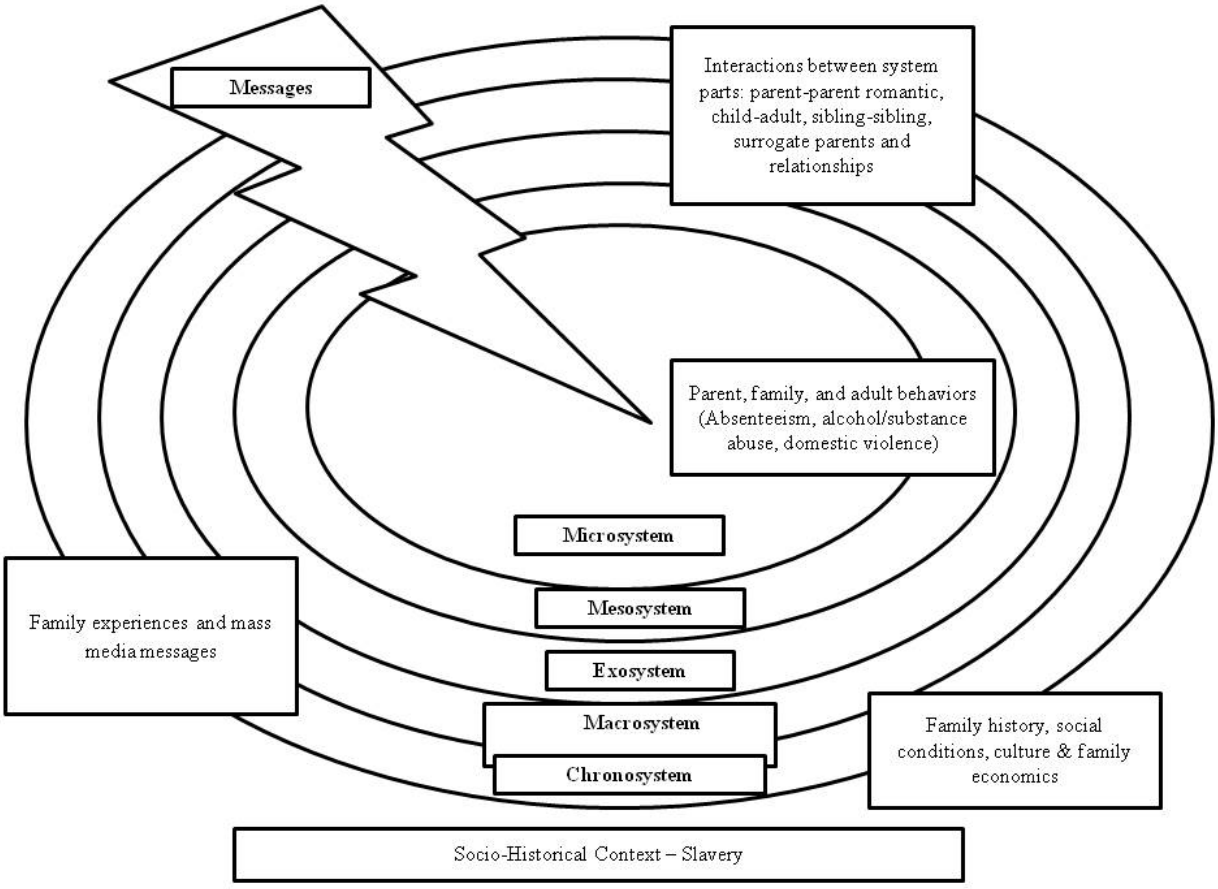
I was intentional about maintaining the reliability and interpretability of the data, allowing the co-construction of meaning between the research and the population of interest. Rich, thick description is a process of providing in-depth, detailed information about the process and findings, enabling readers to transfer information to other settings and make decisions of transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An audit trail was maintained for the duration of the research process to support the need for transferability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Findings were cross checked with the advisor of the study to ensure findings were consistent. As well, I identified a trusted member of the ethnic community to member-check on findings and emerging themes present in the data.

Results

Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see

-President John F. Kennedy

Figure 3.1: *Ecological Systems Relationship Influence Model*



Study participants described early childhood messages about relationships that influenced their views of their current intimate relationships as adults. These messages included information passed to them in the form of words and actions. Figure 3.1 illustrates, ecologically, the various forms of messaging around relationships based on the data. Messages are both intentional and unintentional, and communicate the values, thoughts, expectations, and beliefs of the speaker from whom the message is provided. The following results report on the retroactive accounts of lived experiences of a subgroup of African American individuals during their childhood. These

results highlight significant influences and implications on relationships for the sample. Three themes of messages were identified: 1) experiences of significant emotional disruption described as *relationships are unstable and they leave holes in my life, 2) no blueprint—absence of model relationships,* and *3)* surrogate relationships and counter-narratives*,* identified as *maybe I am lovable and relationships do work.*

Relationships are unstable, leaving holes in my life

Participants described several negative formative relationship experiences from their early lives that left significant scars that carried into adulthood. These experiences included: 1) family transitions and instability, 2) abandonment and absenteeism, and 3) violence in the home.

Family Transitions and Instability. Instability is defined as inconsistency in the home life, including changes in living situation, economic hardship, frequently moving from home-to-home for familial or socioeconomic reasons, and changes in job for parents. Participants discussed feeling unstable and unsettled, and these experiences led them to feeling less certain about predictable events in their future living circumstances. Participants reported having to move around due to many reasons including difficult familial complications at times when their parents were not able to care for them due to a lack of readiness (e.g., teen parents), the absence of resources, parenting incompetence (e.g., inability to nurture), or mental health difficulties including drug addiction. Participants described these changes in their lives as disruptive, impacting their feelings of security and stability within relationships.

George, a 25 year old married man, reported being born in Michigan even though this was a significant life change for his mother.

> My mom…she got pregnant with me out of wedlock. So my granddad actually kicked her out of the house because she was pregnant. She didn't have nowhere to go, so my aunt took her

in. So that's how I actually ended up being born in Michigan. Um…my mom's family is from Alabama.

George goes on to describe being left with his great aunt, who took his mother in during her pregnancy. Following the pregnancy, his aunt (who was 50 years older than him) kept him when mom returned to school down south stating:

> So, I was born in Michigan and my aunt took her in for awhile and my mom went back to Louisiana for school and that's how I ended up staying with my aunt. So, it was kind of like..um…it was for the best, but it kind of put a rift between my aunt and my mom because my aunt feel[s] like she's my mom. But, my mom feels like she birthed me, so she's my mom.

George recalls this as part of his life, although he doesn't have direct recollection of the details from a personal perspective. Rather, he recants the story based on what was shared with him by his aunt. Brandon, a 40 year old married man, offered a similar story to George:

> My mom was in high school when she got pregnant with me. She really never took care of me. I was raised basically by my grandmother. So, as a child, I moved around a lot. So, we had so many different residences and…It was kind of…It was just different.

Participants identified specific environmental changes during childhood and adolescence that affected them. George stated:

> My childhood…I moved around a lot, so [it was] unstable in the sense of…I was born in Saginaw and then from there I stayed with my aunt until I was about 12. In that period of time, I think I lived with my mother for a year. And then from there, I moved to Maryland…stayed there for a few months. Maybe 6 months, I think. After that, I went to Louisiana with my mom and grandparents and stayed there. So, kind of all around.

Tasha, a 36 year old married woman, shared her experience with moving regularly during childhood:

> We moved quite a bit when I was younger. We started off in a two-bedroom house where we all shared a room. And then, we ended up moving when we were in 7th or 8th grade to a bigger house where it was a 4-bedroom house and that was nice…My mom, she just was a student. She started off as a student and then once we got a little older, she started working…While she was a student she got [State] assistance.

Monica, a 28 year old married woman, remembers moving regularly since her father was in the military. She listed four different environments wherein she lived:

> We moved around a little bit when I was born, so I was born in Florida. When I turned 3, we moved to England and I was there for 3 years. Then, we moved to North Carolina for 6, and then we moved to Montgomery in 1998 and that's where we've been since…I just remember moving every so often when I was younger.

Gina, a 37 year old married woman, offered her experience of frequent transitions when asked about her childhood:

> We moved around a lot. My dad was a civil engineer. From infancy to toddler, I was living in Houston (TX). From toddler to school age, I lived in Nigeria and then basically when we came back, we moved around a lot…We moved around a lot until I was 10. Then, they [my parents] divorced. We moved in with my grandparents out of state. It was kind of hard. My mom was a stay-at-home mom. It was tough.

As a result of these constant changes in environment and location, feelings of disconnect in relationships with others resulted. This disconnect in relationships created a distance between individuals and their family members. George discussed the following:

> It was always like them…and me [indicating separation]…So when I went to Louisiana, I only went there for a little bit. And I think I was like 7…like for a year. So, I was already accustomed to being by myself. So when I went to Louisiana and was around my cousins, it was like "I am glad to be around my cousins and other people my age", but it was like "I don't get the sibling vibe" because I wasn't around them that long and long enough to feel like sibling.

When asked to describe his relationships with peers considering the frequent transitions, George described how frequent moves were barriers to creating deeper connections with others:

> I was very introverted. I always saw them from an outward standpoint looking in, rather than not in it too, if that makes sense. I always looked at them like…I don't know how to articulate it. I just saw them on the outskirts. I never thought I could feel like close family. I just felt myself like an outsider…not as close to them as I feel like maybe some of the other cousins were that grew up with them.

Brandon discussed a similar reaction to the impact of frequent transitions stemming from his parents' inability to care for him:

> I got to meet a lot of people, but I never really got to develop a lot of close friends growing up. I kind of stayed to myself a lot of times. I was kind of quiet… My mom ended up having my brother when I was like 5 and then I had two other sisters that she had when I was like 16, but I never…like I said, I was kind of raised by my grandmother and she was older… Even though I had other siblings, I was basically with her most of the times. It's like basically, I was the only child

When asked how it impacted him, Brandon stated:

> I matured a lot faster than most people my age. And, the people that I was around with her, they were older as well. So, I was always around older people. So, I think it affected me with people my age growing up. I always felt like I didn't belong. It got to be tough sometimes because I never really belonged.

He continues to speak after being asked a follow up question, indicating:

> I never really had no really strong relationships…I met a lot of people, but I can't say that I have people that I am really close people to this day, really. I kind of like closed off to them or really didn't open up myself up to a lot of people…[Question: is this still true as an adulthood man]…Yeah, I would say so. Like I said, when I moved to Lansing, I know a lot of people up here, but I am not really close to anybody, if that makes sense.

George highlighted the impact of frequent life transitions and how they complicated childhood relationships for him saying, "I have been very introverted, so I never had a lot of interpersonal relationships or deep-meaning relationships…So, not very many."

Loss. Other individuals experienced transitions following the death of loved ones with whom they lived. *Loss* due to death created circumstances where participants were placed in the care of other family members or circumstantially forced to adjust their lives in significant ways. Renisha, who is 26 years old and married, described many instances of death, psychological absence (e.g., drugs), and loss in her family. She experienced transitions from a loving environment to an abusive one as a result of the death of her grandparents. She discussed her life in early childhood in this way:

> I grew up with my grandmother, who is my cousin…called her 'grandma' because I grew up with her grandchildren. For the first three years, I was raised by my immediate family, meaning my [maternal] grandmother, my grandfather, and my mom growing up for like the

> first three years. And then, because some of my family members…my grandmother, my grandfather, and two of my aunts passed away, I was then transferred from out of my mother's care to my cousin, who I call my 'grandmother'. That was due to the fact that my mother was incapable of taking care of me because she was on drugs.

Renisha later discussed her specific experiences with death in her family stating, "Within eighteen months, all four, my grandmother, my granddad, and two aunts passed away, and that was when I was younger." Later, she shared the effects of losing her mother and the resulting unstable childhood:

> The challenges kind of got different for me, personally, when my mom passed… So, that kind of changed for me because now I am dealing with the awareness that you would never have the relationship…I dealt with a lot of depression and trying to realize "who am I". I never had that affirming of who I was because of the way my grandmother was and the dynamics of my environment was. I didn't see someone that was directly from me or I am from them, so it was kind of hard to try to understand who I was. And so, I fought with that a lot

Desiree, a 68 year old married woman, highlighted the loss of her father and its impact, stating "My father, unfortunately, died when I was 17. He died of a heart attack and he was only 51 years old. And because, even though I realize it was my father's choice to smoke, I was very angry because he died early." Desiree reported losing her father due to his substance and alcohol abuse at the age of 17. She indicated being very angry and resentful toward him stating "although it was his choice to keep smoking and drinking, I felt he was really selfish for making this choice and I was angry at him for this". She moved on to report that she intentionally identified a partner who was "opposite my father".

Kevin, a 65 year old married man, described his childhood this way:

> It was a varied childhood. Sometimes pleasant and rewarding, other times not….the early part was good, pretty good. We lived in the coal mining area of southwest Virginia. My dad owned some business and we were reasonably comfortable during that time period. But, my dad died when I was 9 ½…Basically went from being in a real comfortable and nurturing environment to one, as I got older, I began to see that there were some harsh realities about life and sustaining yourself and being outside of a framework that would readily allow you to move forward

Kevin's description of family life ultimately stemmed from the death of his father, creating a domino effect on the economic stability of the family. Consequently, Kevin and his family were forced to relocate out of state with significantly less resources. This change in environment created disconnects between Kevin and his brothers as the environment was much larger in context and the siblings were attending different schools and working to help sustain the family financially.

Carolyn, 40 year old married woman, offered a different example of loss, which involved the illness of an important figure in the family and the responsibility of her mother to care for her grandmother, causing significant financial and emotional distress for the family as she exclaimed, "My maternal grandmother became ill. And, we then had to move back up to Canton (OH) because my mom needed to care for her. So, then we were uprooted from our school and everything and had to start all over." Later, Carolyn shared the simultaneous economic change resulting from her father losing his job after the airline for which he worked, filed for bankruptcy:

> And, during that time, my dad also lost his job probably a year or two into that transition. My mom was a stay-at-home mom also, during our time. And that really caused a lot of hardship in our family at the time and I was maybe about 12 when things started to get really tight. So, we lost our house, our car was repossessed, we had no car .um… so just a very different socioeconomic status shift for us.

Significant losses and disruptions, for these participants, left gaping holes during their childhoods, requiring adjustments in relationships and shifts in expectations for relationships. In essence, these transitions, losses, and relocations prevented the creation of emotionally connecting relationships and led to an insecure foundation from which to operate.

Absence and Abandonment. Another form of loss experienced by participants was *absence* and *abandonment,* experiences which also were disruptive to relationship stability and connection to others. For many participants absenteeism, represented in the form of abandonment and no connection to desired adults, were significant in their lives. Both leave unanswered questions and wounds that are often unhealed. The absence of an instrumental parental figure creates several emotions, including feelings of worthlessness, inadequacy, *lovelessness,* and feelings of isolation. There are long-term implications for the absence of a parental figure in the life of a child. Participants shared these affects, echoing the absence of parents in their lives.

Alixandria, a 50 year old divorced woman, described her relationships as follows:

> I didn't have a close relationship with my mother. I just expected to have a relationship with my mother. To be closer with her. So that's why it was a challenge for me. And then a lot of things that she did, I didn't like. As far as her being gone all the time...her letting my

grandmother step into her role as the mother. I had a close relationship with my grandmother. As of today, I do not know my father.

Denise, a 31 year old married woman discussed her childhood in detail:

> My childhood was not that great as far as my relationships. My biological father was never in my life. From my understanding, he never claimed me…My relationship with my mother was not great. I was pretty much always the one that…I was the middle child. I was like the black sheep of the family.

Later, she described the random behavior of her stepfather after several years of living with him saying, "He had a whole 'nother house somewhere that I ended up researching on my own. And, he was pretty much like, yall are not my children, I am not concerned. It was almost like we had not been a family for 26 or 27 years. He completely detached." Shawn, a 55 year old divorced man, described family life as living with a single mother with his younger brother:

> My mom raised two boys by herself. My parents divorced when I was five years old. So, we didn't have a dad in the home. My mother did the best she could to raise two boys… She would never keep us from our dad, so if he wanted to come and visit, he could come visit or we could go with him. But, he never would come. He would say he would come or he was coming and he never would come. He might call on the phone, but he never would come.

When asked about the effect of the divorce on the family, Shawn focused on the absence of his father more than anything,

> I know as I got older, I would go to school and they would have things at school. I remember how I felt that my dad wasn't present when other kids' dads were present. I felt like an outsider or less than a kid without his dad. My mom was my dad… Wherever I went, I still

felt like I'm missing my dad because everybody's dad is with them, but my dad's not here, so it was tough because wherever I went or whatever I did, I didn't have my dad.

When asked if he had a relationship with his dad, George stated "No. Not until more recently. We don't really talk. We talked and got introduced, but we don't really know each other on a personal basis". Samantha discussed barriers to developing a relationship with her father stating:

My father always put women before me and my sister. We always went over to my auntie's house, which is my daddy's sister; we always went over to my auntie's house. That's the only time we would see my father. We really wouldn't see him a lot because he would be with all his different ladies and stuff like that. We wouldn't really see him. We wouldn't really see him.

Like George, many participants who were abandoned received care from another family member (or surrogate parent), which will be described later. As a result of the abandonment, older woman members provided support to the young mothers. In the cases of both Brandon and George, this surrogate relationship, however, created some confusion with the biological mothers who remained connected to them during childhood and adolescence. Brandon stated,

Growing up, for the longest, I thought my mom was my sister. I knew my grandmother was my grandmother, but I don't know if it was subconscious or something, but I didn't really see my mom as my mom until I was about 10. I called her by her first name until I was like 10. I think as I got older, I felt like she kind of just abandoned me because she took care of my brother and two sisters. So, I started to feel a little resentful toward her. It was really hard because I didn't feel *anything.* I just felt like she was my sister…for the longest, I felt like

she was my sister…I feel like, a lot of times, it's like a stranger…I feel like even when I get together with my other siblings, I feel like the outsider.

George confirms the complications of this family dynamic in his explanation of his relationship with his mother:

When I was a toddler (ages 0-2), I always called my aunt 'mom' and then this one summer I went to spend time with my biological mother and I guess they told me "well, the one that you call your mom is actually your aunt. This is your biological mom"…I don't think I knew because this was the first time I had met her. So, my relationship with my mom has always kind of been odd. It wasn't like a mother-son…more like a sister-brother relationship.

In some cases of abandonment, the child took ownership over the way it was operationalized. Commonly, it is assumed that abandonment is only transgressed by the abandoner. However, in cases where violence is imminent and fear is a tactic to control, participants found a means to escape future pain.

Self-Imposed Abandonment includes the individuals who chose to escape their family lives due to either fear of continued harm, or feelings of a lack of safety. Self-imposed abandonment highlights the reality that although participants chose to leave their environments, the social-emotional impact of this choice has similarities to abandonment as one losing his/her concept of family and security, even if generally absent. This may be compounded by the realization that the relationships meant to provide security were in fact the opposite.

Kesha described a home life where abuse was commonplace, specifically toward the woman in the home (herself, her sisters, and her mom), transgressed by dad. Kesha discussed multiple incidents where dad would sexually molest her and would be violent toward mom. The violence was so common that she developed coping skills to survive by accepting that "danger is

unpredictable, but violence is imminent". Consequently, she began to find ways to escape her home life. Eventually, she explained, she ran away at the age of 14 years old and described leaving the home as a result of her abuse with a fear to return. "I literally thought I would die if I went back because I defied him. Everyone was afraid of my father. When he said *if I can't raise you, I will kill you*, we believed it."

Violence in the Home. Violence in the home was identified by participants as forms of control through parenting styles (control and strictness) and various forms of abuse (physical, emotional, sexual). Renisha, discussed earlier, experienced forms of loss and abandonment during her childhood after living in an emotionally healthy environment with her grandparents. Following the death of her grandparents, she transitioned to her aunt, who she called 'grandmother'. Here, she experienced physical and emotional abuse through strictness and control.

> She was a prison warden. So she was very, very strict. Yeah, she was very strict. When I got with her, I remember the first time I got whooped because I never really got whoopins' before…It was just a different environment…when I was younger, I got a lot of whoopins'. It was for reasons, but it wasn't reason enough to get a whoopin'

Participants identified physical, emotional, and sexual abuse as forms of violence in the home. Renisha shared some of her experiences with "abuse" as she defined it.

> It got worse as I got older. When I was younger, it was something like I would get whooped with leather belts that had metal on them. When I got older it was leather belts that had beads on them…as I got older, it became more...it was still physical, but it became more emotional and verbal abuse

Denise shared the perspective of her mother's discipline:

> I was always in trouble for something. My mother hitting on me that was her way of discipline. Or, I was always on punishment. She would always tell me "Hey you know, I didn't want to bring you up the way my mother raised me", but that's pretty much what she did, except for maybe she didn't use a cord to hit me like her mother did, but it was pretty much the same strict pattern

Tony highlighted his own experience with abuse:

> I was taught how to be under submission, but it was beat into me how to be. And for me, that was something that…if you understood my problem…It wasn't uncommon for me to get 15-20 whoopins' a day... I always felt like I needed to challenge people…In the process of how I was disciplined, it was nothing for me to come home 2-3 days out of the week and stand in the corner for 6-8 hours until it was time to go to bed. I would go to bed; I would eat, and come back in the morning and do the same crazy stuff

Trina spoke about her childhood, providing specific instances of sexual abuse: "It was good, but bad because I was sexually abused by my father for nine years of my life." Trina later exclaimed,

> When we were not together [as a family] or by ourselves, then it was a different story…When I was by myself with my father, it was a different story. When we were all together, it was good. When we were separate, it was not good…I got the verbal and the physical, but they [my brothers] got the more verbal…I got the physical, the sexual, and mental…I got the threats by the throat and that kind of stuff….controlling abuse

Kesha talked at length about the many experiences of abuse that transpired in her home life. She described being unable to pinpoint when violence might occur:

> It was tenuous…There was episodes, I would say of violent and abusive behavior. That's my memory. I can remember my sisters and my older brothers getting really serious beat downs

and degrading kinds of things happening to them…He [dad] would beat my mom…You learned to cope. You learned to, I think, in looking back, it was unpredictable, at times, but you probably always thought that it was imminent, or could be imminent…When they weren't arguing, when they weren't fussing, when he wasn't screaming or fighting, you'd be happy and everybody's chillin' and laughing for a minute and then something happened, and then 'boom'. So, it could be sporadic

For many participants, frequent transitions and instability, loss and abandonment, and violence in the home were part of their daily lives. Most learned to cope with this reality by identifying strategies that were beneficial to their survival, others endured different relational challenges that communicated diverse messages. All of these experiences appeared to contribute to difficulties in later life in some way, and for many it was in their intimate relationships.

No Blueprint—Absence of model relationships

A common influence on children and adolescents is the positive romantic relationship of parents or other adult role models. Such blueprints of relationships were identified by participants as absent during their childhood lived experiences.

Brandon described it in this way:

I didn't see a lot of married couples, especially Black. Even with my grandmother and her brothers and some of her siblings…they were married to all White woman. I didn't see a lot of Black marriages or Black relationships. As a kid I saw that, but I didn't really understand it. I just know I didn't see a lot and the only ones I saw were on TV or …maybe at church, but it wasn't around me

Gwen, a 28 year old divorced woman, identified the absence of blueprints as an infringement on her ability to know what to do and how to behave in her previous marriage. She attributed

much of her behaviors in her marriage as a result of not seeing positive examples and models for good relationship in her childhood. Consequently, she described herself as "I am definitely a work in progress because I had no example...It's just trying to figure it out", indicating an ongoing need to continue learning more about marriage and long-term relationships by way of experience and error—a consequence of having no examples in the home during childhood.

Alixandria, a 50 year old divorced woman, reflected on her childhood experiences and shared a similar story about absent blueprints sharing, "My mother, she has been married four times. I didn't know, as a child, what a relationship between a man or a husband and a wife should be like. So, I didn't experience that. So, I just kind of had to learn on my own how things should be." George provided his perspective of not learning from his aunts, uncles and grandparents about relationships:

> Because my aunt and my uncle and my grandparents were so different. And once again, I think it goes back to going back and forth [moving from place to place]. I never really got a chance to go into what is a marriage supposed to look like, or what is a relationship supposed to look like, or what should a boyfriend and girlfriend relationship look like, what does single mean.

George highlighted his own inability to identify healthy romantic relationships between adults. He described not learning from grandparents, uncles, or aunts due to instability in his home life and frequent transitions. In support of this theme, Renisha, a 26 year old married woman, described the effect of not seeing positive relationships in this way:

> I don't really have a "true reference point". Sometimes I think it is okay for me to be in your area and me to be in my area and we are still cool together. Other times, I think about the closeness, but because it wasn't relayed to me for a significant period of time because my

> grandparents died when I was younger, there is not action to it… I don't have a reference point, or it doesn't make sense

Renisha continued to explain that this absence of a reference point during a childhood created a belief that "men were not needed" as most of the women in her life were without a man partner for years.

Brandon provided a similar consideration, while highlighting a motivation to become the model. With this in mind, he described the importance of representing himself positively as a result of the absence of role models who resembled his ethnic/racial background who were in enduring, healthy relationships:

> I was determined that I was gonna marry a Black woman because I felt like I want people to see…like real young Black men like myself. I want them to see Black couples. That was always in my mind, even as a teenager. I want to marry a Black woman…. That kind of motivated me in that way because I didn't see that. I want my children to see that because I didn't. That motivated me in that way

Shawn expressed similar inability to remember intimate relationships and interactions between his parents, claiming this was a result of his dad's work schedule. In all cases, the absence of a blueprint acted as a message to participants about the importance of romantic relationships. On the other hand, some individuals were privileged to have parents or guardians in the home that remained in committed relationships. Nevertheless, these functional couples struggled to demonstrate affection and intimacy.

Absence of Affection and Intimacy. Participants' indicated three areas illustrating an absence of intimacy and affection between their parents or other adults within their lives. The

three areas include: 1) no physical contact, 2) no terms of endearment, and 3) arguing and fighting.

No Physical Contact. George recalled not seeing them [grandparents who raised him] physically together. Instead, he saw mostly separation:

> I never seen them like together…physically. Even my aunt and my uncle and my grandma and granddad, I never seen them like…I seen my aunt and uncle hug, I seen them kiss, but I never seen them sit and watch TV together, or eat dinner together, or go on a date, or do something like that. It's always been my aunt is in this room or in the kitchen, or my uncle is in his room or the basement. Or, my granddad has an office…he's in his office or my mom is doing something else.

He described this experience as an encouragement for him to be single as an adolescent and adult, increasing his comfort with solitude, stating "if we are not going to be together, then why be together". Jeremy noted his parent's level of affection, suggesting "They were not very affectionate... For about a 4-year period, they argued a lot, I mean a lot. At times, they would hug and that kind of thing, but they weren't very affectionate at all." Justin exclaimed his thoughts on his parent's level of intimacy:

> They loved each other, but it wasn't real romantic or anything. They had their moments of where they would show affection, but they really didn't show a lot of affection, it seemed like, towards each other. But, I knew they loved each other, but it wasn't shown a lot.

Michael provided his perspective on the presence of intimacy and physical contact:

> In that era, parents did not show intimacy in front of the kids. So, you would see it on TV, but not necessarily in the home. I knew that my dad loved my mom and I knew that she loved him, but as far as an outward expression of intimacy, I did not necessarily see it…As far as

openly kissing, I didn't necessarily see it. I would see them holding hands, but as far as the outward expression [reaffirming it did not occur often]

No Terms of Endearment. Illustrations of love can be found through the ways in which partners talk to or about one another. Many thriving couples have 'pet names' for their partners as terms of endearment and fondness. Kesha discussed her parents as lacking these expressions:

> I never heard ever remember hearing remember my mom or my dad say "I love you" to each other or compliment each other…not 'you look nice' or not 'you look good' or 'that was nice'…I don't remember the…just the basic manners; 'thank you', not very often or not very sincere. I just don't remember seeing that a lot.

Arguing and Fighting. Trina provided a narrative about her parent's relationship with one another in response to a question about their level of intimacy and romantic interactions. She stated:

> My mother and my father had a lot of arguments, a lot of disagreements. We didn't see a whole lot of that [affection and intimacy]. If we did it was very little. It was a lot of anger, a lot of bitterness between the two of them most of the time. They never could agree or see eye to eye with a whole lot of stuff.

Gwen shared her experience with her parents in similar ways, while highlighting the uniqueness of her parent's interactions on two different extremes:

> They would kind of go back and forth. They would either be positive. Times where they were like 'super lovie dovie'. And then there would be times where they would be at each other's throats. They just could not find a happy medium. So, it was either we are super, super happy and everything is super, super great or we are MAD at each other to the point where we can't even look at each other.

As a child, it is very difficult to truly understand and conceptualize the reasons why parents may not be affectionate or close to one another. However, this absence of closeness has an effect on how we understand and expect romantic relationships to behave. To gain insight into this issue, I inquired about reasons as to why parents were not affectionate. Jeremy described it in the following way:

> My father, he was a lot like me. He was a warrior. He was always concerned about making sure that things were taken care of. Making sure we always had money for food, making sure housing was taken care of, making sure things were in working order, the cars were taken care of. He was just always providing. So, he [father] wasn't very overly affectionate with my mother…She, in some cases, I thought, resented that…Yes [that contributed to the arguing between them]

For couples who lacked affection and intimacy, participants described them as "business relationships." Terrell discussed his parent's relationship as follows:

> I never saw any of the romance. It was more like business…If you saw them; you wouldn't say "that's a couple that is so in love, they're romantic". There was never any display of affection. I can never see a time where they were in the room having sex or anything like that.

Justin shared this perspective when sharing his parent's relationship:

> They were together a good portion of the while because of me and my brother. They didn't want to separate. They went through some hard times because of my father drinking on the weekends…It was more of 'we got this house together and I can't afford to go nowhere'. They stayed together for the kids

Infidelity and Promiscuity. Not surprisingly, couples who maintained 'business relationships' often engaged in extramarital activities outside of the marriage. In this participant pool, infidelity was the number one contributor to marital failure in their parent's relationships. Many participants reported having fathers who engaged in infidelity. Terrell shared a story to highlight a negative experience in his family growing up:

> I was like 7 years old and my dad had left a note from a lady that he had met at this club in his pockets. And my mom was showing me how to me how to wash clothes. And I picked up his pants to see if there was anything in there. And I looked in the pockets and pulled it out and I started reading the letter. I was like "oh mom, dad wrote a love letter to you". She was like "what do you mean." It actually was from another lady. And it was pretty graphic as far as the details of what this other lady had did as far as oral sex, etc. and the next time they would connect. So, I gave it to my mom and she instantly got upset. So, later on that night, I guess they got into an argument. But I was 7 years old and I wasn't real clear on 'cheating'. I just thought it was a love letter to her…At that point I realized what being unfaithful was at age 7

Denise reflected on her stepfather's behavior and treatment toward her mother:

> He had a cheating habit. Early on, I couldn't speak on because I was like, you know, 'I am a child and I can't speak on it'. The older I got, I became the investigator and started figuring things out and once my younger sister left the house, it all hit the fan…My stepfather, he just did like a 180 on us. He was just going off with these other women. He just didn't care…It was evident that my dad [stepfather] had stepped out on her [my mom].

As well, Tasha, 36 year old married woman, described having no experience with positive and healthy romantic interactions. Instead, she recalled seeing very unhealthy interactions between

her mother and several men whom she entertained frequently in a sexual capacity in the home. She indicated feeling very bad for her mother and wanted better for her mother, while also wanting to avoid being anything like her.

Domestic Violence. Another form of negative examples for participants was the presence of domestic violence in their parent's romantic relationships. Craig, a 45 year old married man, during the description of his childhood, recalled the interaction of his parents:

> More so at the age of 6 is when I first began to experience seeing my parents fuss and fight in the yard. And I would see my father beat on my mother…Also, the couple next door. If it wasn't my parents, it was the man next door beating on his wife and fussing and things of that nature…Those incidents always stand out.

Shawn stated, "[alcohol abuse] was one of the reasons why my mother ended up divorcing him on top of wanting to fight and beat her…They [uncles] all had that issue [alcohol]…Domestic abuse, I am not for sure, but I would bet money on it". When asked if he had ever witnessed domestic violence toward his mom, his answer was:

> I know of a couple of times [dad toward mom], I think I was maybe like five years old, I got in between them. He had come home drunk either one day after work or something like that. He came in early in the morning and I got in between them and maybe one other time before that. I was maybe 4 or 5 years old. I remember one time for sure…getting in between them and trying to stop it

Gwen shared a similar experience stating,

> My dad was abusive for the majority of my childhood [towards my mother]. They were really abusive towards each other. A really volatile relationship, so when they got divorced

we weren't sad about it at all. It was actually good. They are much better apart than they are together

Kesha provided her experience with the abuse of her mother, giving context to the reason, yet with unanswered questions:

> But then [my mom was] very passive when it came to my dad [paused]. Well, I don't like to use the word 'passive'. Maybe submissive, beat down, repressed…I don't know what the word was. That's the confusing part growing up with my mom was that she allowed all this to happen; the abuse [toward her]—the abuse of her children for years.

The absence of healthy interactions such as intimacy and affection (terms of endearment, physical interactions, and positive communication) often leads to conflict between individuals within an intimate relationship. Over time, aggressive behaviors such as arguing and fighting, insults, and relationship disengagement (i.e. disconnect, infidelity) may result. In most cases, unhealthy behaviors will lead to the consideration of divorce or separation.

Divorce or Separation. Divorce and separation are two viable options in marriages that are often used as solutions to marital problems. For the participants, many of their parents and other adults in their lives identified these strategies as preferred ways to work through relational problems. The following table provides a breakdown for the parents of the participants and the outcomes of their relationships.

Table 3.4: *Marriage Status of Participants' Parents*

Never Married	9 (29%)
Separation	3 (9.7%)
Divorce	7 (22.6%)
Stayed in Unhappy Relationship	6 (19.4%)
Happy Marriage	6 (19.4%)

Shawn shared the experience of the men in his life and their commitment to their romantic relationships, including his parents' relationship:

> My father's brothers... Let's see, uncle Peyro. I don't even know if uncle Peyro was married. But Uncle James and Uncle Jimmy was married and they got divorced. When they got divorced,…we didn't see them that often. We may have seen them over my grandfather's house a couple of times. They all had issues…[My mom] divorced [my dad] …I don't remember exactly what took place. I just remember my mother telling us that she was gonna get divorced and it was just gonna be us three

Interestingly, in all cases of divorced parents, the mother was the initiator of the divorce. The reason for initiating the divorce was primarily safety: emotional or physical— protection of self, children, or both.

In rare cases, unhappy mothers chose to remain in the relationship for the sake of the children. In particular, mothers chose to stay to avoid absenteeism of father, assuming that if a divorce was initiated formally; the father would no longer remain in the lives of the children. Terrell shared this perspective when describing his mother's decision to keep the marriage intact after learning of his father's infidelity:

Later on in life, I asked my mom about it. I was about maybe 18. I brought it up to my mom saying that "I am glad you stayed and didn't leave. I like our family structure. But, why didn't you?" and she said "she didn't want to take our dad from us." She felt like a family should be mother and father and she didn't want us to grow not having a dad. She had a dad growing up, but he was abusive. He really wasn't around a lot. He drunk a lot and he kind of had a lot of woman as well. So with her experience growing up, she didn't want my brother and I to have the same experience. She wanted to have a man in the household. And we got along really well with my father. She didn't just want to end it. But she did deserve better and wanted to leave, but she kind of hung in there to do what's best for my brother and I.

Maybe I am lovable and relationships do work

This sample identified forms of surrogacy and counter-narratives as mediators of the absence of healthy connections and relationships during childhood. Surrogates included church and spirituality, surrogate parents, sibling relationships, and neighborhood as an extended family. Counter-narratives involved family vacations; transcended positive family qualities; strictness and discipline as forms of support and protection, and positive examples of relationship (personal relationships and televised illustrations).

Surrogate Relationships

Church and Spirituality. Spirituality and religion or attending church is reported to be a strong resource for African American individuals, both married and divorced. In particular, those who discuss the importance of church and spirituality do so in the context of helping them to overcome historical hurt and pain as a result of abuse, abandonment, or neglect, or as a means to support and find refuge when faced with difficulties in the romantic relationship. For individuals, church and spirituality was a safe haven by which to process significant trauma and hurt

transgressed at the hands of loved ones, particularly biological parents or grandparents. Trina, a 52 year old divorced woman, reflected on the role her church played in helping to overcome the pain and suffering of ongoing sexual, emotional, and physical abuse at the hands of her father (who also attended and maintained a public office in the church).

> I was sexually abused by my father for nine years of my life....but I was raised in the church so I think that was my blessing that I knew God as I grew up.... but God helped me through the way with my faith in him. As a child, I got saved at a very young age, so that helped a lot.

Other individuals discussed church and the connection to a higher power as providing a strong foundation for a loving home environment. Gwen, a 28 year old divorced woman, described having a strong foundation in church and crediting her parents for providing this foundation for her and her brother, reflecting on this in a positive way. Renisha discussed her experience with church as being a part of her life by saying "my grandfather, he was a Bishop so that atmosphere was really loving. We were always at church". Melissa, a 32 year old married woman, noted her personal experience with church as a strong foundation for her family life stating, "We were raised in the church. I wouldn't say traditional, but we were raised in a Black church…My dad and my mom were very strict when it came to dating and stuff like that…I always had that accountability growing up." Russell, a 54 year old divorced male, recollected his childhood and the influence of church/spirituality in a positive way:

> We had the typical 'old school' family. My dad worked. My mom did not work. Mom cleaned house. It was an old school kind of family, so it was good…It was pretty much a great situation. Parents didn't fight. Parents raised all three of us in church…My dad was a pastor—his dad was a pastor before him. It was a good situation. They lived a good life. They were happy. We as kids were happy…I started out real young.

Monica, a 28 year old married woman, shared the frequency and the level of commitment to church for her family as she grew up:

> We were really big into church. Went to church pretty much whenever it was opened—Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday bible study. And that's regardless of where we were. I remember that even living in England when I was like four or five, I remember going to church a lot

Surrogate Parents. Participants reported experiencing abandonment by either their biological mother or biological father for a myriad of reasons. Reasons for this abandonment included age of mother at child's birth, addiction to drugs, alcohol, or partying, an absence following a divorce (more common for men), death as a result of substance and alcohol abuse, or general absenteeism unexplained (fathers or mothers who have rarely/never been met). In most cases, participants identified an experience where they were able to receive love from a stand-in individual by way of surrogacy. Grandmothers, aunts, and the fathers of friends through extracurricular activities, were identified as resources from which, the participants as children, could glean emotional, physical, and psychological support.

Alixandria, a 50 year old divorced woman, reflected on this reality with emotion:

> I had a close relationship with my grandmother...We had the best relationship. She taught me things that she knew how to do. How to cook, how to clean, how to do my hair when I wanted [begins to cry]…When I wanted someone to play with me with my baby dolls, she played with me. So, she taught me how to just do everything that I wish my mother...(continues to cry)...We shopped together, we went for walks. A lot of times when my brothers did stuff with their friends, I was with my grandmother. She had a garden and I

worked in the garden with her. We talked.. She just showed me a lot of things....I always felt that she was the only one that loved me in my house (cries more)

Shawn found connection in extracurricular activities with surrogate fathers:

I had a best friend by the name of Spencer and his dad was like 'my dad' whenever I would go over there house. I would go over there house probably a couple of weekends out of month. Go to church with them. His dad was an alcoholic too, but his parents stayed together. Mine didn't…that's pretty much how I got through. I would hang with him…I stayed involved in activities to stay occupied…So, I guess that took the place of not having a father because everywhere you went, you had dad's with their sons

Others found support from the love of surrogate fathers who were involved with their mothers. Alixandria reflects on her relationship with her mother's four different husbands. In particular, she highlights one who provided emotional and physical safety, which warranted her calling him "father":

My mother's last husband, I considered him being my "dad". We spent a lot of time together. He was a teacher and took me to school--I didn't have to walk. He did homework with me and we read the paper together. He was twenty years older than my mother. So he spent a lot of time with me. He would sit on the porch and we did a lot of talking and crying together

Denise, a 31 year old married woman, shared her story with her stepfather:

For the most part, he was a great father as far as making sure he took care of home and being that father figure. They were always…they never missed an event at our school no matter what our family issues were. They never missed an event. They never missed any of our games. They were everywhere we were—money or no money

What's more, some found support through positive interactions with parents' of friends in the neighborhood and on sporting teams as Shawn explained, "One of my friend's father I was close with…He kept us occupied. He took the place of not having a father because there were dads around."

Surrogate relationships provided at the cost of absenteeism, was instrumental in the emotional regulation and long-term survival of many of the participants. Having positive role models fulfilled the void of abandonment and supported healing and future healthy relationship opportunities as a counter story to distrust, abandonment, and neglect. In many of these same cases, participants leaned on the relationships between themselves and their siblings for comfort and support.

Sibling Relationships. A sibling relationship was one of the major positive resources identified by participants. Siblings were viewed as unchangeable and constant sources of emotional support and validation in the midst of tumultuous lives. Generally, participants reported having great relationships with siblings and normal interactions that provided predictability and emotional safety. Participants described 'normative' interactions with their siblings, including fussing and arguing, small fights and disagreements. Largely, participants identified their sibling relationships as close knit and communicative—a source of pride and relational connection that is long-lasting. Terrell, 36 year old man, talked about his relationship with his brother excitedly stating "Real strong relationship. We did everything together. Even though he was four years old, we just always had a ball. Everything that we did, it was always together. We were each other's best friend. Hanging out, playing sports, music, we had a wonderful relationship." When asked where he thought this type of relationship came from, he responded:

> My mom, man. She really instilled in us the value of us protecting one another being there for one another and being supportive. She just always kept emphasizing 'you're brothers and at the end of the day, whatever was said and done, you gotta look out for each other'.

Shawn spoke at length about his relationship with his brother:

> We had a really close relationship growing up. She [mom] believed in the older [sibling] taking care of the younger…We were pretty close. He would get on my nerves like little siblings do, but we got along. My mother never made any differences between us.

Desiree noted a strong requirement of her parents to be very close as siblings, stating,

> We were raised to be very close and still are…I was raised with 7 siblings and we were all raised to be very close. We were never allowed to fight. We had to always get along with each other and no one was every physical. You could never ever hit your sister or your brother and never say harsh words

Sibling relationships were found to be invaluable and a particularly impactful surrogate relational resource, especially in instances where other relationships provided negative messages about safety and security. Individuals who were fortunate to have siblings were able to use the sibling relationship as a buffer to ward against the implied messages presented from abandonment, absenteeism, and the absence of blueprints.

Counter-Narratives

Messages received which contradicted the adverse childhood experiences were identified as positive counter-narratives. Positive counter-narratives provided a new framework for understanding the benefits and effects of relationships in comparison to previous lessons learned. Participants spoke at length about new opportunities during childhood that helped to support their matriculation into adulthood in spite of the overt challenges of significant emotional

impacts and the absence of blueprints. Individuals noted quality time with family, transcendent family qualities, positive relationship examples, and other healthy relationships (otherwise identified) as instrumental in developing a new construct for relationships.

Quality Time with Family. Opportunities to travel on vacation with family, engaging in productive familial gatherings such as movie and game nights, or outside activities with fathers after work or during the summer were listed as key positive moments during childhood. Terrell described many occasions when his family would spend Friday and Saturday nights listening the *Blues* while playing card games, talking, and eating with his parents until early the next morning. This experience for Terrell, aided in his connection to his family, which provided a counter-message to the lesson he learned from his father's infidelity and the instability of his home life from that regard. Likewise, Trina described having great experiences traveling with her family on vacation, particularly highlighted everyone's happiness when they were together as a family, spending time enjoying the moment. Others found character traits that were passed down by their parents even in environments where abuse was commonplace.

Transcendent Family Qualities. Participants offered positive character traits gleaned from parent interactions and childhood rearing experiences. In particular, work ethic, respect (i.e. boundaries), and discipline through strictness was observed as positive lessons absorbed from pre-adolescence and adolescence. Tony reflected on his childhood and his introduction to work ethic stating,

> My mother was very instrumental in the work ethic. My dad was very instrumental in the work ethic. I think that is partially the reason why I am successful because of both of them instilling the work ethic that I have today. Which as a result I think and know if I would have went to college I would have been anything I want to be.

Though Tony left his home at age 13 due to extreme abuse, he could reflect positively in the qualities and traits gleaned from his family household, countering, to some degree, the more prevalent narrative learned from the abusive home life. Michael reflected on his exposure to healthy boundaries and respect during his childhood:

> At that time being around grandparents, aunts and uncles there was a saying "stay out of grown folks business." The mindset was, they're your parents and whatever is done in the household, they have the final say. That's right, wrong or indifferent no matter what you think because they're your parents. And that was it! Whether there were things I agreed with or not, I didn't have a say so!

The boundaries established for Michael were instrumental in helping him to know the healthy lines in his life that should not be crossed. Learning this boundary helped Michael understand that strong relationships include healthy boundaries that are clear and consistent. Melissa spoke about the type of strictness in her household and her appreciation for this strictness in her adulthood:

> My dad and mom were very strict when it came to dating and stuff like that. I was involved in a lot of extracurricular activities starting in Junior High like sports. It was the same for my sisters and everybody. Pretty much my parents had a stronghold on us, not in a bad way but were very strict with their rules such as dating. I always had to have accountability about my whereabouts and stuff like that… Thank God that my Dad was as strict as he was in my courtship

Melissa's positive viewpoint of the effect of strictness on her decision making in courting illustrates a perceived benefit of discipline through discipline that provides protection from

immature decisions in adolescence. This, in the future, would support the development of healthy standards and expectations for relationships.

Positive Relationship Examples. Over 19 percent of the participants came from homes with positive romantic relationships between the parents. Several individuals discussed their experiences within their childhood relationships. Tanya, a 65 year old married woman, proudly shared her memory of her family growing up:

> I had a happy childhood. I got along with my siblings. I didn't want for much. I had two caring and involved parents who had a pretty solid relationship and are still married to this day. I had clear expectations about behavior and doing well in school, so I did well in school

When asked to highlight a negative example of family experiences, Tanya struggled to identify anything, underscoring the countering impact of healthy, positive relationships on adverse childhood experiences.

Television and Media Exemplars. Some individuals discussed seeing examples of thriving couples in their personal lives when transitioning between households that counteract the negative messages received about relationships from their parents or other unhealthy instances. In particular, respondents reported being able to see how couples can work together and build positive interactions, relationships, and families. Others reported being socialized by their neighborhood community to have enduring relationships with relationships in close proximity that did not illustrate unhealthy interactions. Several participants report seeing relationships that contained gender equity roles with each individual in the relationship supporting and helping each other, while others indicated being able to see how couples can work together and build positive interactions, relationships, and families

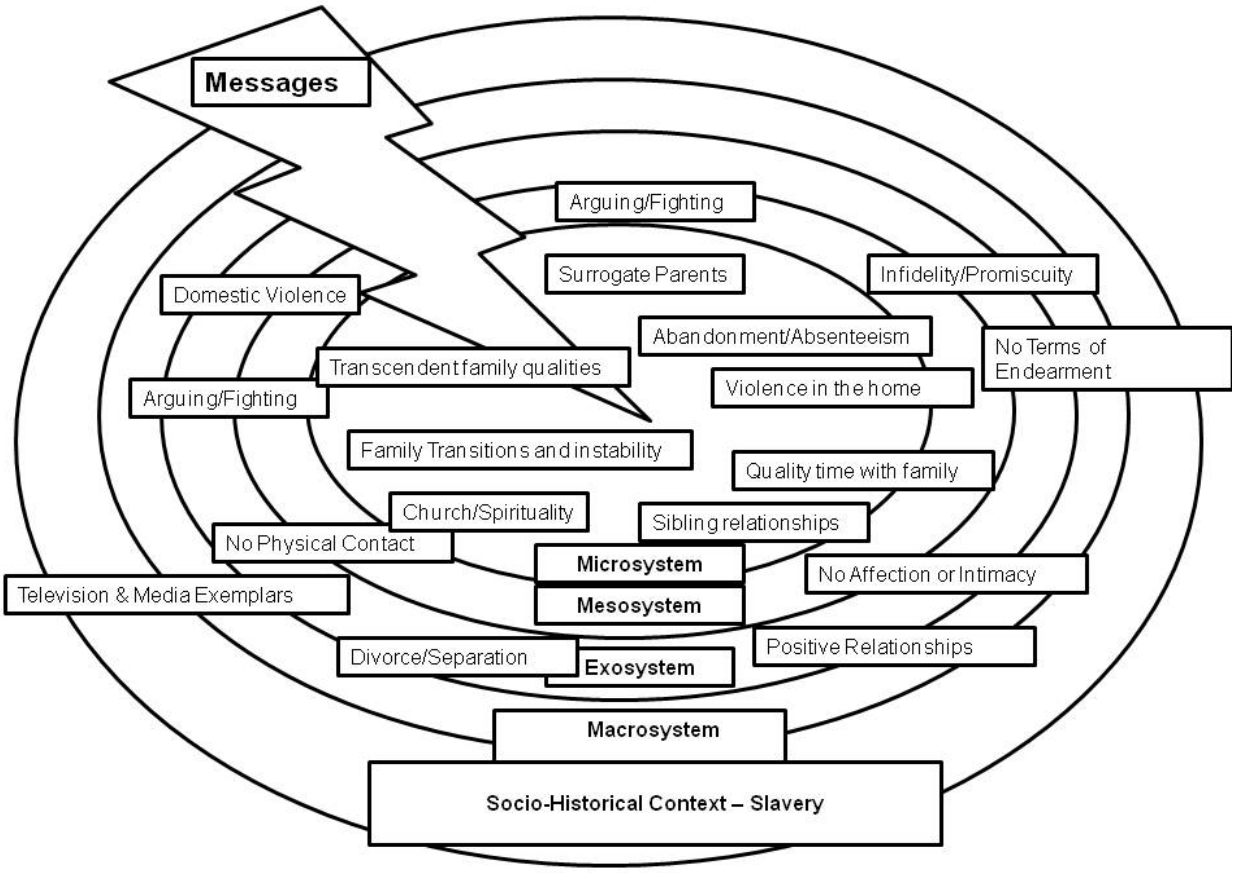
For persons who were not fortunate enough to see successful models in their homes, families or neighborhoods, individuals sought out healthy examples in creative ways (i.e. television and media illustrations). For example, Michael stated:

> There were persons on TV that I would see and the men were dressed well. They were clean cut and they just treated women in such a way that it just made them feel special. At a very young age, I actually had a subscription to GQ [magazine] and I said that 'when I grow up, I want to dress like this' and 'I want to look a certain way'

Kesha agreed with this viewpoint, learning to observe television relationships as examples for positive interactions between couples. She stated "I believed in how the media and books portrayed them to be. You will meet them, fall in love and live happily ever after. I still do believe in that." Brandy also used television as a counter message to her lived experience stating: "TV. I watched soap operas and I wanted to mimic the lives of the characters there because my life was kind of simple. There was nothing exciting in my life and I was always looking to have that."

Figure 3.2 provides a reconstructed ecological systems relationship influence.

Figure 3.2: Ecological Systems Relationship Influence—Themes



Discussion

Children are like cement, whatever falls on them makes an impression

-Haim Ginott, Child Psychologist

The purpose of this study was to learn about the childhood experiences of a subgroup of African Americans to understand, more in depth, the messages received about romantic relationships during childhood and adolescence. For African Americans, relationships are complicated by the socio-historical and contextual influences on African American individuals and families, consequently producing reactions that may impact future generations (Collins, 1989; Pinderhughes, 2002).

Study findings suggest this subgroup of African Americans have significant experiences with relational instability (indicated by frequent family transitions and geographical location changes) and experiences of trauma (illustrated by issues of abandonment, loss, parental absenteeism, and violence in the home). Three themes emerged from this study as present in the lives of participants as children: 1) relationships are unstable and unpredictable, 2) a lack of positive relational blueprints, and 3) protective relationships that lead to resiliency.

Relationships are unstable and unpredictable

Family stability is imperative for child well-being with both immediate and long-term benefits for children (as cited in Brown, 2010). Yet many children are often members of unstable and unpredictable family structures. Children who are abandoned are shown to experience aggression, depression, and heightened emotional reactivity. Likewise, children with instability in their home lives are documented to have academic challenges, internalizing and externalizing behavioral issues, and self-regulation woes, including other psychological affects (see Bakker, Ormel, Verhulst, & Oldehinkel, 2012; see McCoy & Raver, 2014). Family instability contributes to the emotional experiences of children and is shown to have considerable negative effects on wellbeing (Osborne & McLanahan, 2007), yet children's living arrangements are continually becoming more diverse and unstable (Brown, 2010). Forms of instability and abandonment were found to be true in this research study across many of the participants. Three textural themes emerged in the data as experiences of significant emotional impact: 1) family transitions and instability, 2) loss, abandonment and absenteeism, and 3) violence in the home. Twenty-three of thirty-one participants (including married and divorced individuals) expressed instability and unpredictability in their childhood, each underscoring the significance of these instances in facilitating long-term emotional reactions and effects. Family transitions and instability were

often due to economic changes in the family such as job loss, deaths in the family, or frequent moving due to the inability of adults to properly care for children. This is consistent with prevalent literature on family instability (Fomby & Bosick, 2013), asserting [family instability] "will independently influence children's and adolescent's development and well-being above and beyond family structure at any point in time because of uncertainty and change in roles, relationships, and circumstances that accompany family change" (pg. 1267). Furthermore, family instability is also found to be associated with lower quality parent-child relationships (Cavanagh, 2008; Cavanagh, Crissey, & Raley, 2008) and other compromised outcomes in childhood (Fomby & Bosick, 2013). For this sample, frequent and unpredictable transitions created an unsettling feeling, indirectly messaging to adult participants they were either not wanted, unlovable, or not worth proper care and consistency as children (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007). For a transitioning adult, unstable childhood experiences may cause an individual to seek companion and consistency in a romantic partner. Reviewed literature shows family instability (both early and later) as a predictor of early marriage (Fomby & Bosick, 2013). Three of the seventeen participants with reported unstable family lives sought romantic relationships prematurely to provide a source of stability and security. Each eventually divorced in their own marriages.

Lack of positive relational blueprints

Romantic relationships for African Americans when compared to other ethnic groups, are often characterized by considerable conflict, instability, and dissatisfaction (Amato, 2011). Over the last several decades, there has been a gradual decline in marriage rates (Amato, 2011). As a consequence of marital decline for African Americans, increasingly less positive examples of healthy romantic relationships are prevalent. African American children are therefore left without viable model relationships—negatively impacting the ability to transcend behaviors into

adult relationships (Furman & Wehner, 1994, 1997). Social learning theory suggests behavior can be learned through observing the actions of others (Bandura, 1977; as cited in Allen & Mitchell, 2015). Behaviors of adults are commonly observed and mimicked by children, especially behaviors in relationships (Basuil & Casper, 2012). As well, beliefs and attitudes toward marriage and divorce are developed by what is learned from the illustration of parent's marriage and divorce (Cui & Fincham, 2010), cohabitation (Banks, 2011), or a lack of romantic interest. Previous research on the absence of healthy relational role models indicates a higher risk of dissolution for potential marriages for college-aged adults (Trotter, 2010). Furthermore, there is evidence suggesting the importance of experiencing parental couple relationships and their influence on perceptions about romantic relationships for African American emerging adults (Sassler et al., 2009, Trotter, 2010), including the identification of meaning (i.e. quality, mate selection, and mate characteristics and personal traits) (Allen & Mitchell, 2015).

The literature on positive model relationships and perceptions on relationship development shows an instrumental effect (Allen & Mitchell, 2015; Cui & Fincham, 2010). Seeing illustrations of positive relationships creates a working framework for understanding how relationships are to behave, promoting increased vulnerability in relationships moving forward (Basuil & Casper, 2012). Conversely, the absence of positive relationships and healthy examples sends another message entirely—relationships are not common, relationships are unsafe, relationships cause harm, or relationships are unstable and unpredictable (Allen & Mitchell, 2015). Although messages during childhood are not always overt, the implications of these messages are often understood and played out in later adult relationships (Allen & Mitchell, 2015; Willoughby, 2012).

This study supports these findings and sheds light on the importance of modeling and its influence on relational perceptions of romantic relationships for African American children. Positive healthy model relationships were identified by this sample as absent during childhood. Instead, participants discussed, at length, the ever-present negative examples of relationships (i.e. high levels of conflict, separation, divorce, domestic violence) during their childhood, creating negative perceptions of marriage and other romantic unions (Willoughby, 2012). Nine out of thirty-one individuals had parents who were never married. Three of the thirty-one were separated and seven out of thirty-one were divorced. Six of the thirty-one, reportedly, stayed in unhappy marriages to benefit the children and only six of the thirty-one experienced happy marital relationships. From the absence of affection and intimacy presented by their parents' romantic relationship, to behaviors of infidelity and promiscuity, to the presence of intimate partner violence, divorce and separation, there was a clear invisible example for how to develop and maintain a healthy, rewarding relationship. The experienced relational dysfunction in parents challenged children's perceptions about relationships with others generally (Willoughby, 2012), and more specifically with romantic partners. Consequently, the odds of struggling to develop and maintain positive romantic relationships increases (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2011)

For many individuals, having *no reference point* made it difficult to translate expectations and behaviors into future relationships, contributing to the use of ineffective relational strategies. Perry (2013) found family of origin issues were the major contributors to their view of marriage. Men who experienced illustrations of marriage during childhood and were able to internalize the positive were more inclined to view marriage optimistically. In contrast, those without illustrations were noted as fearful of intimacy, the opposite gender, long-term relationships, emotional trust and vulnerability. Consistent with previous literature suggesting children learn

from their parents' romantic relationships how to engage in relationships, replicating values and behaviors (Allen & Mitchell, 2015), this study suggests an invariable transmission of relationship expectations from adults to children, impacting (positively or negatively) relational perceptions and likely future marital behaviors (Brown, 2010).

It is important to note this finding is not solely unique to African Americans. However, the causes of the absence of positive model relationships have systemic and historically significant implications. Presently, there are disproportionately unequal gender ratios prevalent in the African American community, resulting from inequitable policies (Pinderhughes, 2002). There is an unbalanced amount of African American men in prison (Wilson, 1996), deceased, many with poor healthcare, or participants in or victims of violent crime (South and Lloyd, 1992; Tucker & Mitchell Kernan, 1995) in comparison to other racial groups. Accordingly, there is a significant difference in African American women who are *marriageable* in comparison to their *marriageable* male counterparts (see Edin, 2000). Thus, the likelihood of seeing positive relational examples is increasingly diminished for many African American children, leading to heightened barriers ro developing healthy views of relationships and positive expectations.

Invariably, children who are exposed to these inequities and low resources relationally may have more to overcome, especially considering the ongoing impact of marginalization, prejudice and inequity insidiously and pervasively present in this society (Pinderhughes, 2002). It is evident that many African American children are faced with increasingly difficult obstacles to overcome in order to produce a positive view of romantic relationships. Given that parental models are our first examples of relationships; African American children are forced to identify other exemplars from which to glean this information. The fortitude and resilience required to seek out and identify alternative models is an illustrated form of resilience.

Protective relationships that lead to resiliency

There is profound evidence suggesting that in spite of adverse childhood experiences, resilient children seem to do well in life (see Killian, 2004)—appearing to have the ability to *bounce back* and cope well (Rutter, 1985). Regardless of the presence of hardship and adversity, resilient children are shown to work well, play well, love well, and expect positive futures (Garmezy, 1986). Children are resourceful and often identify surrogate relationships for nurture and support when available options are limited. African American children, especially, have been found to engage fictive kinships and extended family supports (Baldwin et al., 1990; Garmezy, 1988; Werner & Smith, 1982) when parents or caregivers are unavailable (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; 2006; Myers & Taylor, 1998). In this study, although individuals experienced negative moments, all were able to identify a surrogate relationship as a form of resilience and resourcefulness. Surrogate relationships were used to counterbalance the influence of unstable relationships (i.e. abandonment, absenteeism, transiency, abuse and loss.) Surrogates included: church and spirituality (Haight, 1998), surrogate parents, sibling relationships, and neighborhood kinships (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). These surrogates provided a resource and counter-narrative against the negative storyline presented in other childhood relationships—both experienced and observed.

Amazingly, individuals were able to identify a resource which provided an alternative message to them about relationships and the benefit of relationships long-term. The ability of these individuals to identify and open up themselves to receive love is undoubtedly a form of resilience. Of course, as human beings, there remains a yearning for connectedness to other human beings. However, some children are not given opportunities to experience positive relationships. This reality makes it increasingly difficult to replace negative images, cognition,

and core beliefs about being lovable and feeling relationships are not inconsistent and unpredictable.

> *What we don't realize is that we do carry things that happen in our child life and it's important that we are able to talk about it.. Number one, we have to admit that it is there and that it exists and to be able to work on it within ourselves. Because if you don't, you will carry it on. And, that's one of the things that I didn't want to do is carry it on to my children....that they carried on to us as far as the anger, not being able to relate to people because you are carrying that hurt and pain or something else (Trina)*

Uniqueness of African American Couples

One might argue, and do so convincingly, that any individual who experiences significant instability and unpredictability without a healthy relational model would have negative perceptions of romantic relationships in adulthood. While this is likely the case, for African Americans, this experience carries with it historical meaning and contextual implications, further exacerbating preexisting conditions. African American couple relationships, although similar to other relationship practices, maintain uniqueness culturally (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). Black feminist thought highlights the experiences of oppression for African American individuals, underscoring the importance of including an awareness of how disparity shapes the lives of African Americans (Collins, 1989; 1996). African Americans have profoundly been affected by slavery and its aftermath in astronomical ways. Several theorists have argued this important fact (Pinderhughes, 2002; Pouissant, 2002; Pouissant & Alexander, 2000). From this research, it is commonly accepted that slavery and its impact continues to carry with it psychological and emotional ramifications for African Americans, in particular, generations of African Americans experience the world through a different paradigm.

Children are often the beneficiaries of conflict and transmission (Amato, 2000; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007; Griffin, Botvin, Scheier, Diaz, & Miller, 2000; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Banks, 2011), creating low standards of relationships with members of the opposing gender, low expectations for future relationships, and difficulties navigating the world (i.e. lower self-image and confidence, and higher self-hatred). Research also shows the difficulty that African Americans have with transcending infancy attachment styles into adulthood in comparison to their White counterparts (Furman & Wehner, 1994; Furman & Wehner, 1997)—indicating this population has greater challenges with transferring positive childhood attachment styles to future relationships. Although recent literature suggests African American adolescents report longer lasting relationships during adolescence than their racial counterparts (Karney, 2007), there remains significant fundamental impediments in developing and maintaining healthy romantic relationships. Allen and Mitchell (2015) assert "the social and societal context of relationships in the African American community must also be viewed to better understand intimate relationships in emerging African American adults. A history of the intentional separation of committed couples through enslavement has posted challenges for the contemporary couples" (p. 517), citing Patterson (1998). Giordano, Manning, and Longmore (2005) contend there are illustrated differences in marital expectations and the desire to engage in romantic relationships in adolescence for African Americans. In a number of studies (Crissey, 2005; Lawrence-Webb, Littlefield, & Okundaye, 2004), White adolescents were found to have more of a predisposition to long-term romantic relationships than African Americans. Studies have also shown African American adolescents are less inclined to develop romantic relationships and thus have a diminished number of prospects for long-term relationships (marriage) during adulthood. In a number of quantitative studies (Crissey, 2005; Lawrence-Webb, Littlefield, & Okundaye, 2004),

white adolescents were found to have more of a predisposition to long-term romantic relationships than their counterparts, marrying earlier than African Americans and maintaining marriage longer. Findings from this study support this, although identified as an ancillary theme, as participants noted the impact of their childhood on their perceptions of relationships, although less important than other themes. It is clear, adolescent barriers to relationship development for African Americans is further exacerbated by systemically pervasive, disproportionate outcomes, including an overrepresentation in incarceration, those impoverished and of low socioeconomic status, and an underrepresentation in the workforce.

Implications of Study

The Need for Stability

Stability is a vital resource for children, especially social-emotionally and relationally. Having predictability in home and family life provides a sense of regulation and comfort for children. For children who are not able to have stability, emotional dysregulation, anxiety, or the need to react tends to follow. Often, children create strategies to cope with irregularity and inconsistency. There is justified cause and evidence suggesting a focus on helping African American individuals and families to create and maintain consistent family lives. Much of the cause for instability includes teenage pregnancy, poverty, or resource depletion due to joblessness, and relational conflict between parents. Intervention programs are needed to support familial stability, including workforce training to increase opportunities for escaping poverty and educational programs and access to resources for youth to help them engage in less risky behaviors. Also, culturally relevant, family stability promoting therapeutic interventions are needed to help reduce intimate partner violence present in many families, while capturing the unique cultural challenges inherent in African American communities.

The Need for Positive Marital Role Models

There is a strong need for positive marital role models in the African American community. As research suggests, children identify their expectations and behaviors from what is modeled in their personal families and home lives. If positive, healthy relationships are not prevalent and easily accessible, children will search for models to mimic. In some cases, children will be successful in identifying healthy models in the neighborhood community, the house of worship, friend's parents, aunts and uncles. In other cases, children may identify positive examples through television series and illustrations. The lack of positive role models increases the difficulty for children and emerging adults to practice behavior relational behaviors that are effective. Thus, individuals are left to engage in trial and error attempts to romantic intimacy and commitment. Unfortunately, trial and error often involves unnecessary hurt and emotional wounds, which are transferred into future attachment relationships. Having a positive role model relationship in the African American community would diminish the need for trial and error, while functioning as an ongoing resource for matriculating couples. In the African American community, marriage is desirable (as cited in LaTaillade, 2006.)

The Importance of Surrogate Buffers

Surrogate buffers provide alternative experiences that challenge existing perceptions and expectations for relationships. For this sample, surrogate relationships were vital in helping to reopen relational vulnerability and risk-taking for participants. Parents of friends, grandparents, single mothers, and spirituality and sibling relationships were specifically identified as resources for African American children. The findings of this study shed light on the value of having extended family and fictive kinship members for African Americans (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; 2006). The presence of surrogacy offers an opportunity for children to experience being valued,

nurtured, and attended to. This suggests a need for programming in the community that provides alternate opportunities for minority youth to engage with other adults who are positive role models, consistent with research on youth development.

Limitations of Study

The present study offers a view of the experiences of thirty-one adult African American individuals who are either married or divorced. The study had several limitations to consider. Although the sample is generally diverse geographically, socioeconomically, and in age, the small sample size precludes generalizability to the larger population of African Americans. This is especially true given almost forty-two percent of the sample had advanced degrees. Advanced degrees are usually indicative of higher SES, which may have implications for how childhood experiences are conceptualized and organized.

As well, the flyer, which noted "given the racialized society" may have solicited a certain type of participant who sees the world as racialzed rather than more objective participants. The flyer may have acted as a primer for participants. Also, the study did not differentiate between participants with families who were unwillingly brought to the United States versus families who willfully migrated to this country. In addition, the interview location was inconsistent. Not all participants were interviewed in person. This created some difficulty with follow-up questioning and participant engagement. Although participants appeared to be directly involved in the data collection process, the importance of face-to-face interviews for sensitive topics such as childhood and relationships require intentional engagement and connection for researchers and participants. Finally, the study lacked a strong sample of divorcees (11 divorced individuals).

Future Directions of Research

Given the limited sample size, future research might consider expanding the sample to provide a larger and more educationally diverse sample size. Using the methodology of this study, future research might replicate the study to confirm findings or to offer other explanations to move the literature and field forward. Also, future research should investigate the direct messages received during childhood for African Americans about their family histories with regard to the presence of historical trauma (i.e. slavery and oppression).

There remains limited research in the area of adolescents' perceptions of romantic relationships as a derivative of their parents' romantic interactions and how this translates into adulthood, especially for African Americans. Research in the future should continuing expanding the research question to ascertain more clear evidence for the phenomenon of coupling for African Americans. Investigating the influence of childhood would seem to be the most useful approach considering the importance of childhood in shaping adult behaviors and expectations. Likewise, considering the socio-historical context for African Americans and the incomprehensible impact of slavery, more work can be done to better understand transmissions of trauma inter-generationally.

On another note, although not directly discussed by all participants, African Americans have experienced racism and trauma for centuries. Perhaps this was the aftermath that many of these couples described. Moving forward, research must investigate the effects of trauma and combine this with the research on African American couples' exposure to trauma in family histories, how it's passed down generationally, and how this trauma impacts individual behavior in relationships. As well, future research might include a longitudinal study of individuals with adverse childhood experiences, specifically following a group over a 10 year span, with several

time point interviews in the interim, to learn the 1) perceptions of romantic relationships and how they change over time, 2) the process of courtship, and 3) strategies used to create and maintain healthy relationships. Although relationships are desired in this population, there remains an absence of prevalent working examples and models from which to mimic. There are more recent studies highlighting couple resilience from a strengths-based perspective, however, more is needed to provide further understanding about the process of developing relationships for African American couples. Childhood, indeed, plays a significant role and further examination is essential to construct strengths-based clinical interventions for this population.

Conclusion

This research investigates the influences of childhood experiences on the perception of long-term relationships for African American individuals. Studies have indicated an important role of parents' romantic relationships, or lack thereof, and its impact on later adulthood as emerging adults base their values and beliefs on their parents' illustrations (Allen & Mitchell, 2015; Cavanagh, Crissey, & Raley, 2008; Evans, 2004; Underwood & Rosen, 2011). Studies also show adolescents who have experience with divorce or separation are more inclined to experience instability and lower levels of fulfillment in their own romantic relationships (Sassler, Cunningham, & Litcher, 2009). The current study supports literature on the influence of childhood experiences on perceptions of romantic relationships. As a result of negative emotional experiences such as abandonment, loss, family instability and transiency, and the absence of blueprints, children might feel several negative emotions, producing low esteem and low self-concept. On the other hand, the presence of a surrogate relationship can aid in reframing and reshaping the negative cognitions.

Based on the findings of this study, it appears that although there are numerous negative messages received about relationships during childhood for this subgroup of African Americans, the resilient nature of this population works to identify surrogate relationships or examples that help to shape a more positive outlook on present and future relationships. This speaks to the inherent desire to construct positive meaning in relationships due to the natural desire to seek romantic connection and intimacy. From this study, we know in spite of significant adverse experiences, the impact of surrogacy changes the effect of adverse childhood experiences for African American individuals.

CHAPTER FOUR: STUDY TWO

Risk and Resilience: The Development and Maintenance of Healthy Marital Relationships for African American Couples

Abstract

This article examines factors related to the development of healthy, rewarding, intimate relationships for African American couples. Using a risk and resilience framework, I discuss the strategies used by successful African American couples, in comparison to unsuccessful couples, to develop and maintain healthy relationships that last long-term. This study uses interpretive phenomenology to describe the viewpoints of participants about the process with which African American individuals develop and establish romantic relationships and overcome the difficulties of relationship development and maintenance. Ten married couple dyads (20 individuals) and five divorced couple dyads (10 individuals), representing fifteen couples, were interviewed for the study. In each interview, questions were asked related to the impact of the following issues on relationship development and maintenance: childhood and racial experiences, their courtship period, definitions of the primary role of a romantic partner, and recurring challenges in the relationship. Results show racial marginalization as a risk factor for these couples in that, for some, it can produce displaced rage and disrespect in marriage (as cited in Kelly & Floyd, 2006). However, resiliency factors of parental socialization, safety and security in partners, and finding middle ground are all useful in developing a healthy and rewarding relationship. Recommendations are provided for clinical prevention and intervention treatments for premarital, married, and divorcing African American couples.

Introduction

The family is an important social institution, serving the role of provision of necessities, nurturance, and socialization (Perry, 2013). One of the initial introductions to the creation of family is the marital relationship, and this relationship is worthy of consideration in African American couples. African American families are among the highest representations of "nontraditional" family structures (e.g., two-parent households representing "traditional"), and there has been a historical decline in the percentage of married African American adults since 1960 (Jones, 2011). There is a strong likelihood that a relatively high percentage of African Americans who marry will end up divorced, when compared to other ethnic groups (Hill, 2006). In addition, a number of African Americans choose not to marry in comparison to other groups. While there are numerous benefits of marriage (Blackmon, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colon, & Roberts, 2005; Goodwin, 2003; Nock, 1998, Waite & Gallagher, 2000), the tendency of African Americans not to marry along with high rates of divorce means that many of these families are going without marital benefits (Cherlin, 2004; Dixon, 2009; LaTaillade, 2006; Phillips et al, 2012). These benefits include better psychological functioning and mental health, improved emotional regulation and higher self-esteem, more economic freedom and less economic stress (Phillips, Wilmoth, & Marks, 2012).

Currently, African Americans have the lowest rate of marriage in the United States (Cherlin, 1992; 2004; Dixon, 2009) in comparison to their racial counterparts, directly affecting family stability and overall familial health. The 2012 Census reported that 46% of African Americans never married, 11% divorced, and 4% separated. Dixon's (2009) study indicated that less than half of African American adult individuals are in committed marital relationships. Phillips et al (2012) summarized current research on this population regarding marital rates in comparison to

non-Hispanic Whites and listed the following differences: African Americans 1) are less likely to marry, 2) tend to marry later when they do marry, 3) spend less time married, and 4) are more likely to divorce (see Dixon, 2009). These contrasts are staggering considering marriage is found to have positive implications on mental health for African Americans (Lincoln & Chae, 2010).

A significant amount of research discusses the causes of marital avoidance and dissolution, especially when the discussion focuses primarily on African American adults (Broman, 2005; see Phillips et al, 2012). Research studies investigating healthy African American marriages note commitment to marriage and the presence of trust as vital factors in successful marriages (Marks, Hopkins, Chaney, Monroe, Nesteruk, & Sasser, 2008), whereas unsuccessful marriages are commonly made up of frequent conflict, an absence of economic security, and stress resulting from work (Marks, Nesteruk, Hopkins-Williams, Swanson, & Davis, 2006). In spite of these broad findings, there is relatively little research on the special ingredients enduring and healthy African American couples use to construct a surviving marital relationship, and even less literature that draws comparisons between currently married and divorced couples. In particular, little research speaks to the courtship process and the necessary partner variables that individuals see as the initial motivation to seek marriage. Likewise, a small amount of research provides a deeper understanding of the *required* characteristics identified by married individuals for the relationship to sustain and endure. In a study on constructing a marriage, Wamboldt (1999) found that the perception of safety and predictability was associated with positive self-reported relationship status. Other studies reference the important link between couples' communication practices and their relationship quality and stability (as cited by Wamboldt, 1999). Although these studies are not exclusive to the marital experiences of African American couples, the identified characteristics of healthy relationships are notable and should translate.

For enduring African American couples, especially, studies highlight the following as important: religious practices (Ellison, Burdettte, & Wilcox, 2010), specifically, attending church and praying frequently (Phillips, Wilmoth, & Marks, 2012); having the ability to overcome external challenges to the relationship through collaboration; and the ability to resolve intramarital conflict and the "effective management of differences through communication and understanding" (Marks et al, 2008, p. 179). However, limited knowledge exists that demonstrates experiences of racism, which are unique to this population, as a risk factor for relationship health. From this review of literature, the questions yet to be answered are: *how do African American couples develop and maintain healthy romantic relationships,* and *what are the specific characteristics of a healthy, happy enduring relationship for African American couples?*

Study One offered three themes influencing the perception of relationships for African Americans: 1) African Americans witness relationships which are unstable and unpredictable, 2) African Americans have few positive model relationships, and 3) individuals who overcome these challenges reach a position where they view themselves as lovable. Findings from this study were clear that childhood experiences can negatively impact perceptions of relationships for African Americans. In spite of these themes, African Americans are able to exercise resilience as they are able to develop relationships in spite of the ever-present barriers.

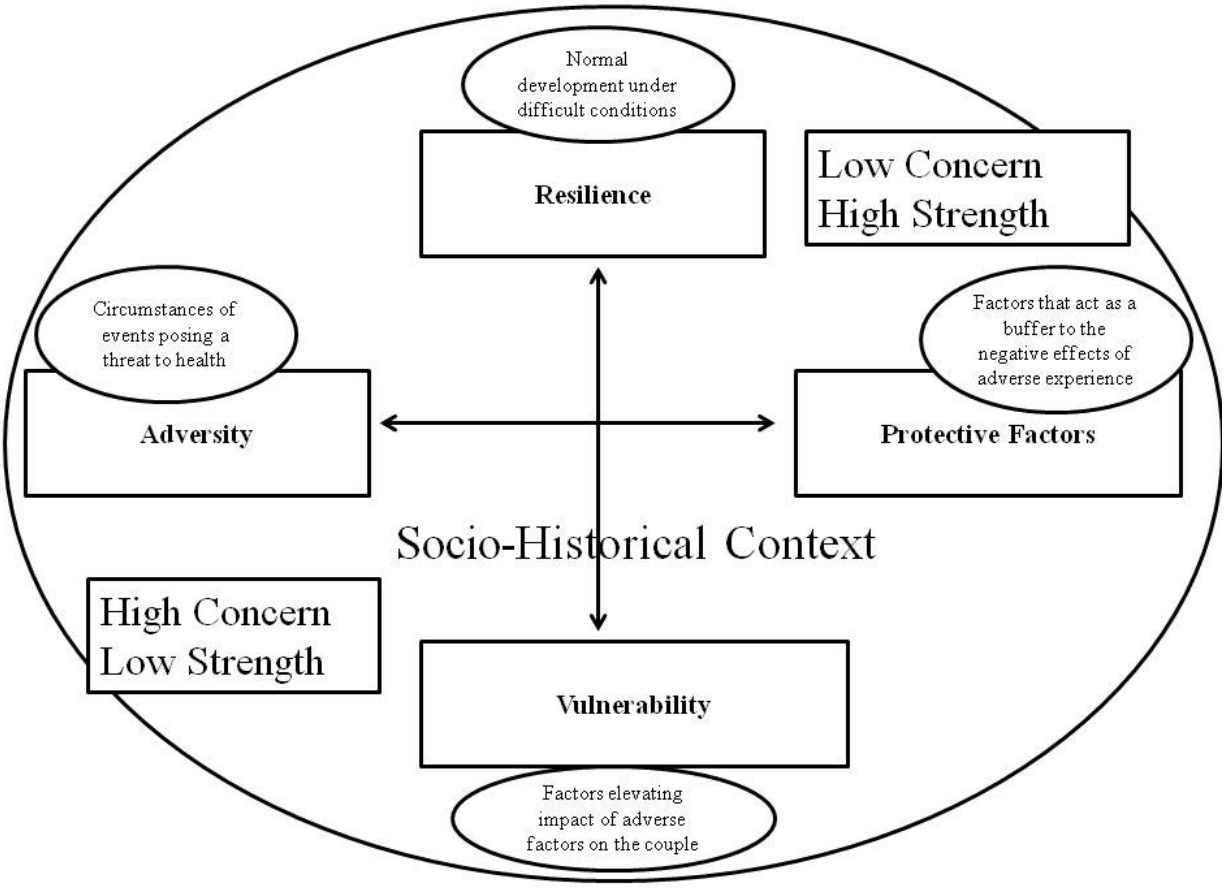
Risk and Resilience Theory: Theoretical Framework

Study questions were guided by risk and resilience theory. Risk and resilience theory is useful as it suggests resilience as a framework to organize the various influences on intimate partner relationships for African Americans, particularly, while underscoring the ability of many couples to overcome barriers to establish healthy, rewarding relationships. Risk and resilience theory was developed as a strength-based approach, identifying the negative contextual barriers

and protective factors used by individuals to overcome contextual obstructions. It primarily focused on youth and adolescents (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; German, 1979) and was later applied to other populations (see Anthony, Alter, & Jenson, 2009). Risk, protection, and resilience use a strength-based lens to capture the lived experiences of persons with adversity, and in this study, it highlights the contextual factors surrounding African American couples, particularly focusing on systemic impediments such a race/ethnicity, economic viability, social factors, normative relationship challenges, and historically traumatic experiences. As well, protective factors used by successful couples were identified and conceptualized for the purpose of replicating the successful protective factors to increase mental health services for struggling couples.

Daniel, Wassell, and Gilligan (2010) developed an assessment model to conceptualize the effect of risks on the well-being of children to strategize and implement a plan to address emerging issues. The midpoints of the intersections represent the focal point or identified client and the external markers (four quadrants) indicate factors that may reduce and/or increase potential risks. The four quadrants or variables included in the model are: adversity, vulnerability, resilience, and protective factors. The Resilience and Vulnerability matrix provides a useful framework for laying the foundation for understanding how African American couples, as the identified intersection of points, and the risks associated with these couples, may reduce and/or increase potential risks for divorce, separation, or never marrying. Figure 4.1 illustrates the model.

Figure 4.1: *Risk and Resilience Model for African American Couples*



Purpose of the Study

Relationships are instrumental in overall well-being for individuals (Ribar, 2004). Those who are married tend to have better quality of life than unmarried persons (Frech & Williams, 2007; Fuller, 2010). Married people live longer, have less stress, and are able to manage life difficulties better (Amato, 2000; Frech & Williams, 2007). The partnership embedded in the bond acts as a resource of support when life circumstances become overwhelming. For African American persons, this benefit especially holds true, particularly socially, economically, and psychologically (Marks et al, 2008). As noted previously, a significant amount of African American couples are divorcing, while others are choosing to avoid marriage altogether, instead choosing cohabitation as an alternative (Banks, 2011). In this study I provide a voice to African

Americans who made the commitment to marry to learn how they constructed healthy and rewarding romantic relationships. By engaging in rich description of the process of relationship development, I hope to contribute deeper understanding of how successful African American couples build relationships. In addition, I contrast the couples doing well to a subgroup of couples who divorced. By exploring couples who were successful in their marriages in contrast to those who were not, I aim to provide a rich description from which to explore prevention and intervention strategies for African American couples. This in depth description will support the cultural adaptation of current approaches to treatment, paying particular attention to the lived experiences of African American couples.

Methods

Procedures

The targeted population for this study was a mid-major, small-population city, located in close geographical proximity to a large university. This identified city is racially diverse with domestic and international citizens, and home to numerous African American churches and communities with members from various backgrounds, including socioeconomic status, education, income, geographical location, and careers or jobs. After receiving institutional review board approval from the university, participants were solicited through the use of purposive sampling method via social media websites (Linked In, Facebook, and Twitter), word of mouth advertising, emailed flyers to colleagues, friends, and professional networks based on the desired demographics of participants for the study.

Individuals were eligible for the study if they were African American and either married or divorced and between the ages of 21 and 65. The following criteria was adhered to for participants: 1) self identified as African American, 2) currently living together (married) or have

lived together (divorced) with their married partner, 3) United States citizen; domestic born and raised, 4) English is primary language, 5) married for at least 6 months and 6) self-identify as having a happy, healthy and rewarding relationship (operationally defined as expressed feelings of support from partner, indicated overall happiness with partner, and an expression of positive future plans for the relationship (married couples only).

The criteria set forth for married couples were necessary for the following reasons: 1) individuals who cohabitate in a marital relationship are able to engage in more intimate discussions and interactions than non-cohabitating married couples, 2) individuals who are higher in age are more mature than younger individuals and more able to assess their childhood experiences and 3) to discuss the implications of these experiences on their relationship perceptions considering the length of their marital relationship. As well, 4) domestic individuals who are non-immigrants have the historical experiences of being minority in this country, both interpersonally and historically within their families. Finally, 5) self-identifying as happily married allows participation to come from a strengths-based perspective, illuminating any biases based on current marital issues.

Couples were excluded for the following reasons: 1) if they did not meet all inclusion criteria, 2) if there had been an extended absence from the marital relationship due to criminal reasons, 3) if there was a history of domestic or family violence, or 4) if there was serious mental health issues or concerns that might prevent participation in the study.

Given the nature of the study (marital issues) and the cultural paranoia and privacy of African American individuals and the challenges with recruitment in the geographical context, the researcher expanded the study to include areas around the country. To increase participation, the researcher relied on snowball-effect and word of mouth recruitment. Interviews took place

either in person, via phone, and or by means of the internet (Skype, Zoom, etc.). In person interviews (n=9) occurred in the homes of the participants, local community centers, and schools. Phone interviews (n=18) and internet interviews (n=3) were conducted from the researcher's private office. Participants were asked their location/time preference and interviews were scheduled based upon participants' schedules and convenience. Each interview lasted an average of 1.25 hours.

Each participating individual received a $20 gift card for participation in the study. During the overview of the study, I provided a brief presentation of the overall goal of the research project and informed participants they were allowed to view the data before publication for member-checking purposes and confirmation of findings. Finally, I informed participants that they would receive a brochure (poster board presentation template) with the results of the study and recommendations for couples based on the findings of the study.

Participants

Thirty (N=30) heterosexual African American, legally married or divorced individuals were recruited for this study (see inclusion criteria for specifics). Twenty of the individuals (10 men, 10 women) were members of 10 married couple dyads and 10 individuals (5 men, 5 women) were of 5 divorced couple dyads. Table 1 illustrates the geographical breakdown (current residence of participant), demographics (including age at marriage, years of marriage, and number of children of participants), and educational attainment of participants. The participant group was diverse in age, education, marital status, age at marriage, and number of children:

Table 4.1: *Geographical Location of Participants*

Region	Percentage of Participants
Michigan	63% (n=19)
Indiana	6.6% (n=2)
Texas	13.3% (n=4)
Alabama	6.6% (n=2)
Colorado	3.3% (n=1)
Ohio	3.3% (n=1)
Louisiana	3.3% (n=1)

Table 4.2: *Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

Mean Age (yrs)	46.6	Range (25-68)
Mean Age at Marriage (years	26.8	Range (21-50)
Mean Years of Marriage	13.9	Range (1.66-46)
Mean Number of Children	1.3	Range (0-3)

Table 4.3: *Educational Attainment of Participants*

High School Diploma	6.7% (n=2)
Some College	33.3% (n=10)
College Diploma	16.7% (n=6)
Advanced Degree	43.3% (n=13)

As indicated in the above tables, the participant pool was diverse geographically from various parts of the country. Participants were generally mature in age (average 46 years) of age,

with an average marrying age of 26 and an average total of years married of 14. On average each individual who participated parented 1.3 children (range, 0 to 3). The participant group was diverse in age, education, marital status, age at marriage, and number of children.

Data Collection

Individual interviews were the primary mode of data collection for the married and divorced individuals. Each individual in the couple dyad, both married and divorced, participated in a 45 to 75-minute semi-structured interview. This data collection approach was chosen for this topic as research contends that individual interviews elicit more candid, accurate, and honest responses from participants and overcome gender and power differences that might be present if the dyad is interviewed together (Seymour, Dix, & Eardley, 1995). For example, Thomas (1990) interviewed dual-career African American couples separately to ensure sensitive perspectives were gathered that would otherwise not be shared. In support of the concept of sensitivity to individual perspective, Perry (2013) interviewed African American men individually to discover their attitudes toward marriage and their mates, illustrating usefulness in yielding more risky comments about their mates and themselves in relation. Thus, individual interviews occurred with each member of the couple dyad at a time identified by each individual. Informed consent was provided to the participants transparently detailing the purpose of the research, procedures for data collection, protection of data, confidentiality measures, the benefits of participation, and an incentive of $20 for their time.

Individual Interviews

To begin the interview phase, participants were welcomed to the interview (in person, via phone, or over the internet (Skype or Zoom) and provided consent and demographic forms to complete. Participants were informed that the interview would last between 45 to 75 minutes,

and were instructed to sit where appropriate for audio recorders to capture responses, specifically in in-person interviews. Audio-recorders (2) were used to gather the responses to provided questions. Participants were informed of the location of the audio recorders to encourage their responses to be clear and directed toward the recording equipment. Prior to beginning the interviews, the researcher informed participants when the recording would commence.

Semi-structured, narrative-based individual interviews were conducted to elicit richly descriptive responses to the questions provided, while allowing opportunity for participants and encouraging them to respond in detail by building on the interview questions with stories of their personal lived experiences (Josselson & Lieblich, 1993). Participants were asked the following questions: 1) can you describe the process of development of your courtship with your partner, 2) what do you think is the primary role of a romantic partner in a romantic relationship, 3) what are/were some recurring challenges in your relationship, 4) have you ever considered separation or divorce (married individuals), 5) what is your belief about divorce, and 6) do African Americans have it different than any other racial group, if so, how so? Follow-up questions were asked to clarify or elicit additional information for deeper understanding. These questions were used at the researcher's discretion regularly throughout each interview.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was comprised of disciplined interpretation of individual narratives (Koenig & Chesla, 2004) through interpretive phenomenology (Benner, 1994; Chesla, 1995; Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology was used to analyze the common experience that African Americans share---existence in a racialized society as a marginalized community historically, with generational transmissions of trauma responses as identified by 200 years of slavery. Phenomenology is defined as a unique experience that is shared by a group of individuals whom

have experienced the same phenomenon. Phenomenology is often used to study shared life experiences such as illness, sports, and moments in time (Creswell, 2013). Interpretive phenomenology includes a shift back and forth between analyses to interpretation embedded in the data. This approach ensured the interpretation lingered in the context of the lived experiences (Tarlier, Johnson, Whyte, 2003) of the studied population. Consistent with phenomenological analysis, significant statements about how participants experience the development of relationships as African Americans were identified, organized, and grouped into larger meaning units or themes (Moustakas, 1994) using *Dedoose*. A social constructivist perspective was used (Charmaz, 2006) in combination with interpretive phenomenology. The social constructionist approach emphasizes the multiple realities, diverse local worlds, and the complexities of particular worlds, views, and actions of African American individuals, giving heavy emphasis to interpretation with flexibility in the guidelines. On the other hand, the interpretive phenomenology is dependent on the researcher and participants' views, providing latitude to the research to interpret narratives and meaning units.

In the analysis, I made decisions throughout the process of establishing meaning units, posing questions to the data, and pushing personal values, experiences, and priorities relevant to African American couples and myself as a researcher (Charmaz, 2006). Textural and structural description were used and incorporated into a composite description (Creswell, 2013). This process was undergirded by the self-reflection engaged by myself (researcher transparency), which occurred through bracketing my own experience out of the findings throughout the process. To do this, I completed retroactive journals to reflect on my own reaction to each interview. As an African American male marriage and family therapist who benefitted from a two-parent household and loving marriage, it was important for me to consider my own

assumptions about the topic of inquiry throughout the process of discovery. Finally, constant comparative methodology was used to compare and contrast the differences between married and divorced couples (Creswell, 2013; Glaser, 1964; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; 2009).

Trustworthiness

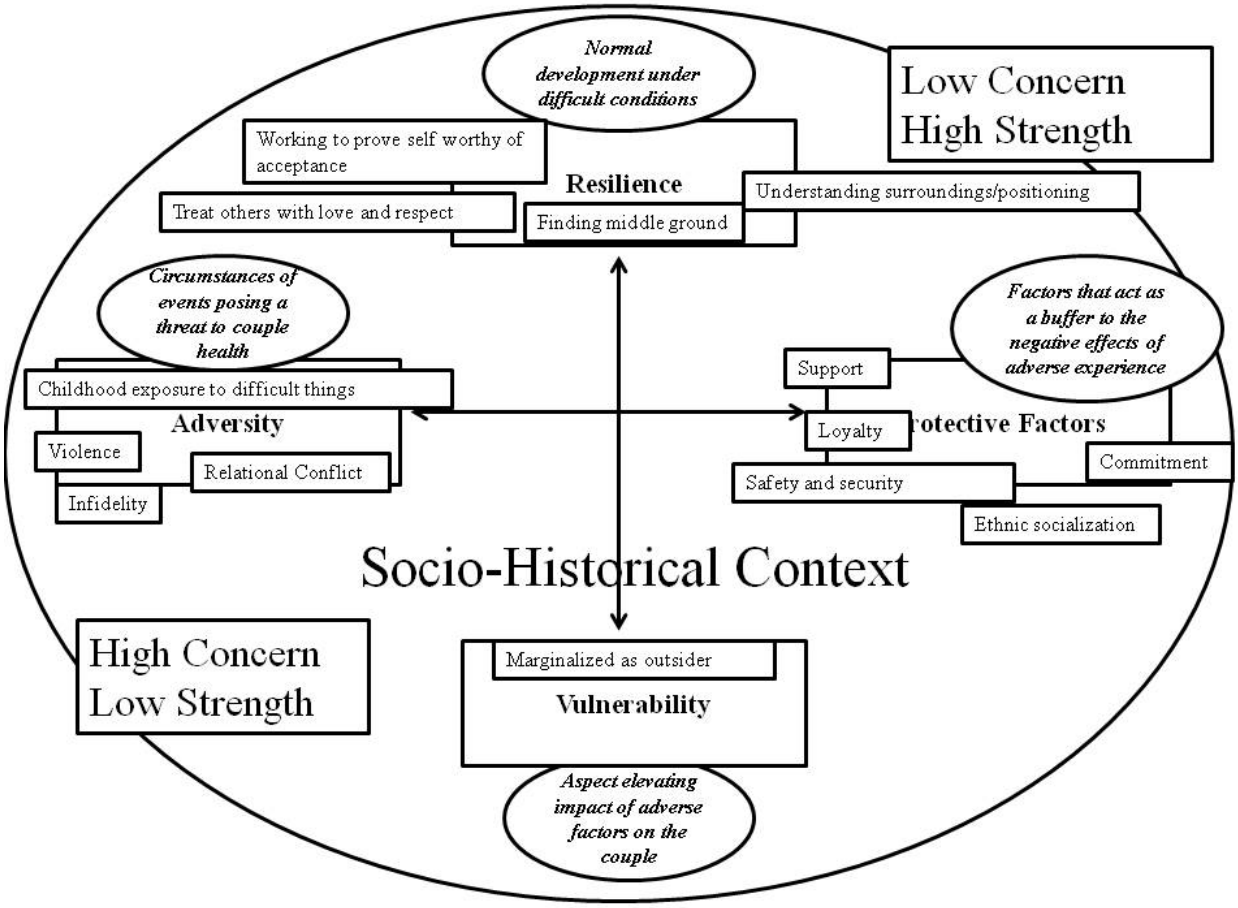
Trustworthiness is the process of creating credibility, transferability, and dependability within a study. Throughout the study process, I completed field notes based on interview observations for the purpose of triangulating perspectives (i.e. husband report, wife report, interviewer's observations) to illuminate the emerging theory (Creswell, 2013). As well, I reflected on personal biases, social positioning, presuppositions, and assumptions through recorded journaling, otherwise known as reflexivity. Member checking and rich, thick description were used to maintain validity throughout the analysis and reporting process. Member checking was a significant part of the analysis to ensure that the emerging themes and meaning units were consistent with the views and perceptions of the participants, increasing credibility of findings and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An audit trail was maintained for the duration of the research process to support the need for transferability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Findings were cross-checked with the advisor of the study to ensure findings were consistent to support the need for reliability.

Results

In describing their process of courtship and the development of their romantic relationships with their partners, couples who are able to reach marriage and stay together, happy and healthy, were able to implement and engage in strategies that are unique to this population and yet effective in promoting marital longevity. Several themes emerged as factors of risk and resilience for enduring couples. A major risk included being *marginalized as an outsider*, while resilience

factors involved: 1) *being prepared and prideful*, 2) *safety and security* and 3) *finding middle ground*. Figure 4.2 is an adapted model representing the experiences of these couples, particularly illustrating adverse influences on relational development and maintenance based on the findings and the context of being African American in a socio-historical context. For African Americans, this reality is significant and must be considered, particularly when developing relationships despite these pervasive barriers.

Figure 4.2: *Adapted Risk and Resilience Model for African American Couples*



African American Marriage

For the African Americans in this study, the construction of the relationship and the specific dimensions and required considerations for building an impermeable, enduring, and long-lasting

relationship must consider the context in which it is built. When asked *do African American couples have it different than any other ethnic group*, respondents indicated similarities in the challenges of developing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships with a partner. As well, they offered perspectives of the uniqueness of being African American and building relationships, specifically identifying additional barriers that have to be navigated for the relationship to work successfully. Brandon, a 40-year old married male, noted the *invisibility* of African American couples and how this might impact the self-concept of currently married individuals, especially in contrast to other ethnic groups:

> I feel the African American couple is not as visible as other couples, so I think that is hard because I don't feel like you hear people or other people or other races talking about where is the good black man at. You don't hear other race saying where the good Asian men at or where the good white men at. In our community, you hear that a lot. Even just by going to my children schools or different events, you don't see a lot of black couples that are married. You might see black parents or single parents or just the father showing up. I feel like you see more White married couples, Asian married couples, or Latino married couples

Will, a 46 year old married man, described this reality as such:

> We are different; it's hard… We struggle because…for whatever reason, our history makes it seem like we always struggle; we have this aggressiveness in our nature and sometimes it doesn't always work when you have this nature -- it doesn't always work when you get two people together like that [two traumatized people who are working to develop a relationship]-- angry...Just angry

Will's perspective notes the historical reality of many African Americans and the internalized anger that stems from centuries of oppression and marginalization. Terrell spoke candidly

sharing an example of how this plays out in the work place, indirectly affecting a relationship:

> Because their [white people] experience is so much different than ours growing up. They don't have the same level of burden. When you're white you don't have that, the level of responsibility is different. Whites do something and they don't represent everyone that is white. Blacks do something and they represent everyone who is black. [Names his company], out of 717 employees there are 77 black employees. Seventy-seven black teachers, 17 black male teachers. So if one of those black male teachers does something, how does it look for everyone else?...So the pressure and the burden are totally different. The responsibility of being white is different from being black. It's totally different

Melissa, a 32-year old married woman, offered her point of view on the differences for this population:

> Yeah, only because black men are seen differently, so when it comes to purchasing a home, it may be more challenging for a black man to do so in a certain neighborhood. Black couples have to try harder and that pressure can spill out into the relationship. The pressure will come from finances, a career, having familial goals, etc.

Melissa's stance acknowledges the discriminatory and predatory occasion of prejudice toward African American men, in particular, and how this affects relationships.

Jeremy, a 55-year old married male discussed why he believes this is the case:

> History, I think by black women having to raise children by themselves started from slavery. I think they just adapted and evolved into the stronger women and more dominant. They won't give up that role… I think black women for the most part had to evolve, become strong to raise their children… Black men in my opinion have it hard. When black men go to work there's still discrimination, I don't care what profession they're in. You will still deal with

racism at work. They'll find a way to let you know that you're not better and you're still not in charge. When you come home, you're not given the chance to be the head of your household. You're still being told you're not in charge. It's frustrating sometimes, I think it's frustrating for a black man. Especially for those who try to do the right thing.

Jeremy's thoughts accentuate the challenges with changes in relationship dynamics between African American men and women, stemming from slavery and perpetuated by racism and prejudice.

Tasha, a 26-year old married woman, noted specific instances where she had to support her husband because of racial treatment and how it impacts their relationship:

Sometimes it can, depending on what's going on. I know I've dealt with some things that I've brought home that made me upset. He would try to crack a joke to make me feel better but I didn't feel like joking. He was only trying to cheer me up from what's going on. If he came home from work and was quiet, I would try to cheer him up and poke him in the belly and he would tell me he didn't feel like playing. Again, it's knowing the other person. I try to make his favorite meal just to see him smile and enjoying it. He doesn't have to talk about it but I know it's making him feel better just having that meal

Understanding this, several participants emphasized the need for a partner who was not only empathic, sensitive and understanding, but moreover someone who had similar familiarity with their experiences. Tanya described her perspective on the challenges of dating a guy from a different race, indirectly highlighting the barriers for African American relationships:

I went out with a guy my freshman year [in college] and it was a White guy because I had grown up, notwithstanding the racial climate in this country growing up, I had grown up with 'people are just people'. So, I got to [college] and this guy asked me out and I said "sure". So

we went out and we were talking and there was a point in the meeting when I thought "this would never work. He doesn't have a clue about my experiences as a person in this country and never will understand that. I just can't get passed that

Renisha, a 26 year old married woman, affirms Tanya's position stating:

One of the biggest things for me is that I wanted someone who had, if not equal, but very similar background to me…For me, I wanted someone, because I didn't have my mother, I wanted someone who didn't have their father. I know it sounds weird, but I wanted it because I knew I would have insecurities…I felt like if we both came into it on an equal playing field, I wouldn't feel like I was lower. So, my thought was we would both learn together

Here, Renisha placed value on having someone who had similar experiences to her own and believed that having this would produce more connection and dependability in her marriage.

Marginalized as an Outsider

African American individuals reflect readily on being treated as *others* during their childhood and into adulthood. This treatment produces a need to create safety and protection in intimate relationships to overcome a world that is not safe, particularly when identifying a partner. When asked if race was a factor during their childhood, participants remarked on the degree to which this was the case, underscoring their exposure to race and racism and its influence on their perceptions of themselves. Kesha said:

It was the 60s and everything on table was about race. It was also the South. The confederate flag was everywhere. There was the dichotomy of knowing your place and knowing your stations; as long as everyone knew there place and their stations that (even with white folks), that was the status quo. It was the 60s and everything on TV was related to change, so we saw Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. The schools were segregated but not

the neighborhoods. We played with the white boys and white girls and everyone was friendly to everyone, but outside the neighborhood we all knew our place

Kesha continued by stating:

> There were times when people would drive by our home and scream "Nigger." I was in 9th grade when they desegregated schools and the tension was very thick and my mom told me that if someone said anything to you, you beat their asses. The first day of school was uneventful, everything went smooth, but the next day when the bus dropped us off someone screamed out "Niggers."

Though he indicated race was not a factor due to the strength of the Black community in his neighborhood and his ability to "see people as people," Michael described an experience during his childhood that had racist undertones:

> When I first encountered racism I was in the 1st grade. The school was putting on a play and they asked for volunteers for this one part…I came home and told my mom and dad I was in the play. They asked me what part and I told them I was playing *little black Sambo*. They looked at me and said "what?". I told them I'm playing *little black Sambo*. They said "no you aren't playing that part." To me it was just a part but I didn't necessarily know what it symbolized or the stereotype black child with white eyes and white lips

Tanya talked about her experience having to shop in another city outside of her hometown due to the policies surrounding serving Blacks in this era:

> It [race] was a significant part of my experience because we did not do clothes shopping in Xenia [her hometown]. We went clothes shopping in Dayton because when my mother was growing up, if you were black you could not try on clothes in Xenia. You have to look at the clothes, see if you could fit them, and buy them off the rack… I do remember when there

were restaurants that would not serve black people

Kevin described his exposure to issues of race as a child, exclaiming:

> We lived in a segregated community in Virginia. This is the 50s and in that part of Virginia they actually funded schools for black people. They began to bust black kids from certain counties into the white schools. In my step-mother's times she shared that the blacks worked in the mines, a few were teachers, many worked in hotels as hospitality workers cleaning and bringing up towels for the white folks. I do remember my dad going to the pool halls and there weren't any blacks going to that pool hall

Tony spoke of his experience with racism and prejudice as well:

> Racism I remember when I was in the 8th grade that they had a riot. This is when the segregation of the schools was coming together; when blacks and whites were starting to go to school together. On that very first day, I remember my sister going out and getting water hosed and sprayed. For me, that was a fight I did not want to be a part of. I wanted to get out of there. I wanted to go. I already knew I wanted to leave wherever I could go, I wanted to go

Terrell offered a detailed recollection of his indirect exposure to racism through his paternal grandfather:

> Well growing up my dad is from Atoka, TN. My dad shared stories with us about my grandfather being kidnapped by the Klan (KKK). They took him out to this field and hung him up and cut off his testicles. Back then it was a big deal to have a black man's testicles. They would put it in a jar and we told the Gazette [a local newspaper], and it had a picture of this white guy standing around pointing at the jar, smiling and while my grandfather hung from a tree. My dad kept the article

He continued by sharing how he was socialized to think about white people:

> He started telling us then that you can't trust white people, watch white people, they're evil, they're the devil…Even to this day, when my dad goes down south he's conditioned. If he saw someone in the store, he wouldn't make eye contact with them because of how he grew up. It was a fear of what white people could potentially do to you. Race was very crucial and I think it played a role in me joining the Nation of Islam. I definitely think race was a factor

Trina shared her childhood story stating:

> Yes. I grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood and was the only black child when I was in middle school. My teacher was actually a racist; she would not allow me to go to the bathroom along with others and she kept me isolated from the others. I did not know the concept of race and didn't understand why this was happening, but when I shared with my mom, she told me what racism was and took care of the situation at my school

From these narratives, it is clear the prevalence of prejudice and discrimination and the unique impact it has on African Americans. Being treated as an "*other"* or hearing stories of loved ones enduring inhumane treatment may produce internalized negative feelings of self and others. And, perhaps more importantly, this inferior treatment may fabricate outcomes such as low self-esteem, self-protection (i.e. emotional walls), and isolation, creating unintended outcomes for future relationship prospects and companions.

In some instances, prejudice and forms of racism was experienced at the hands of intra-group members (i.e. other minorities or members of the same ethnicity/race). This is notable as racism and prejudice can exist in variations. Three participants highlighted their exposure. Shawn shared "I was being teased about being dark skinned… That was by blacks. I was ridiculed by my peers who were cracking jokes to be funny. I was about 8 or 9 up until 6th or 7th grade." Denise offered a similar story:

> People treated us like we weren't black. They set fire to our front yard every day. In school, my sisters and I were spit at, and rocks were thrown at us, a girl even cut off my hair that hung down my back during night time. I grew up having to identify with blacks but blacks didn't receive me. It was very rough trying to understand why you weren't accepted in your community. From my mom's generation on down, those people [community members with darker skin complexions] were taught to dismiss black people [lighter skinned Blacks] because they wanted to be white people. The black people there were mean to other blacks, whereas the whites were generally nice to the blacks.

Gwen underlines this experience with her thoughts:

> We experienced more from blacks than we did from whites… They would talk about how we talked and called us an "oreo". I didn't have that experience until I got around black people. Those identity issues of what it means to black… We were talked about because we didn't speak Ebonics. It was interesting to hear other people's thoughts of what black was.

Participants who experienced intra-group racism shed light on the pervasiveness and insidiousness of racial prejudice, which can often exist both outside and inside the African American community, confirming historical examples of the *house slave/field slave* skin complexion dilemma.

Influence of childhood and racial experiences on behaviors and expectations in marriage. Racially prejudice childhood occurrences are significantly impactful for this subgroup. When asked "*what is the influence of childhood and racial experiences on behaviors and expectations in marriage,"* participants shared the meaning of childhood and its influence on relationship expectations and behaviors. In sharing this, Terrell noted how his experience with race informed his drive in his marriage and his focus to provide for his wife emotionally and financially:

> Yeah I do, because I see the experience I had growing up dealing with racism on one side and I don't know what to call what my grandparents did. I think the method in which I grew up had a critical role in making me who I am. I definitely think it had an impact on my marriage. If I had not had those experiences I probably wouldn't be the way I am as far as the level of drive and focus. I wouldn't have that. So I definitely think it had a role in my marriage

His racialized experienced produced a drive within him to strive for a better outcome for himself, his wife, and the relationship. By working hard, he believed he could work to diminish and dispel the racism and prejudice he experienced in adolescence, while accepting its impact on his behaviors in marriage. Also, his desire to work harder increased his desire to earn additional income to create a better life for his wife so that she was satisfied with him as a husband as he stated "I just want to make sure my wife has $500,000 in the bank when I die. I am willing to work to make sure she is taken care of." Terrell's belief about the role of a partner stems from his identity as an African American man. Working hard to provide for his wife and their relationship was essential to his role as a husband and African American man. Terrell's perspective accentuates the influence of racism on individual perceptions and their performance in their relationship. By understanding his role in society through being marginalized and *othered*, Terrell used this as motivation to produce positive outcomes for his family and relationship. One of his very important goals in life is to ensure his wife can survive beyond his death. Brandon supported Terrell's comment, highlighting the influence of childhood on his behaviors in his marriage and family life:

> Just from my experiences, it is harder for me to see a black man treat a white woman better than a black woman. Just from growing up and seeing it. I felt like I wanted my children to

see that you have to lift the black woman up. That you have to love her and be strong for her. I want my daughter to see that she should have high expectations for somebody to treat her a certain way. I think seeing that racial part of it, that I want people to see that even with my son and his friends to see that this is a strong black relationship here.

Brandon's position acknowledges an absence in model relationships for African Americans, and also asserts its influence and the reality of race on his behaviors in his marriage. His desire and motivation is to strive to demonstrate positive examples of relationships to counteract negative images of African Americans promoted by racism and prejudice reveals intention to work hard to produce a relationship that is happy and healthy. Michael also held the role of his childhood and racial experiences on his behaviors and expectations in marriage, stating:

We told our children that race was there but don't look on the outside, what's on the inside is the most important. You can be with someone that has the same hue or color as you do but on the inside be a total knucklehead. And they cannot treat you right. In what the kids have seen, we hope they model the good portion of the marriage. He always tried to portray a good husband and wife working together. If there was problems we didn't try to air them in front of the kids. We just try to work it out

Michael's standpoint on the issue of race was to teach his children that character was more important; exercising a form of resilience to avoid being labeled and succumbing to racialization. Instead, he and his wife promoted positive marriage and an effectual relationship, with illustrated skills and practices to maintain peace and love in the home.

In addition to working hard, Jeremy suggests pride and acceptance were important behaviors in his marriage, exclaiming:

There's no other woman in my life except her. I have female friends, always but there will be

> no other lover in my life but her. As far as race, what it had to do with my relationship...I guess pride…. Later on in life I started to study black people and who we were. I realized what we have gone through and still going through, I built a strong black pride. I ended up letting my hair grow… I had dreadlocks down to my shoulder-blades and a lot of people didn't like it… We started dating and I liked the fact that she accepted my hair, who I was and the fact that I was really into my culture

Jeremy suggests that in addition to working hard for his relationship to ensure she felt commitment, pride became a significant part of his self-identity and having a partner who accepted this piece of him was crucial.

In rare cases, race was reported not to be a direct factor. Shawn stated:

> Before *Roots* the movie came out, we didn't talk about race or think about it. There were shows such as *Good Times* or the *Jefferson's* we would find on. That was race was for me. I went to a predominately black school. Race wasn't an issue in my house. We didn't talk about race that much. My mom would tell us to not hate anyone black or white. [Race was not a factor] because I lived in a predominately black neighborhood. Why would race be an issue if no one is treating you negatively? I believe it becomes an issue when someone is treating you negatively. I didn't see racism until I went to college

Notably, Shawn was able to avoid direct racial exposure, particularly from majority group members. However, based on his neighborhood context, which was contained a high density of African Americans, systemic racism was evident. Nevertheless, some participants were able to avoid racially charged experiences, particularly several female participants. In other cases, similar to Shawn, the absence of racism was connected to the homogenous environment wherein many African Americans lived. Several participants reported not being exposed to other racial

groups, thus eliminating opportunity for *overt* racialization.

For many participants, experiences of racism and prejudice were used as training tools for future generations to not only understand how to effectively navigate, but also to build the community. In most cases, race was reframed and reclaimed to be a positive component of identity, and parents prided themselves on preparing their children for the outside world.

Being Prepared and Prideful, Race Matters

Being prepared for racialization was highlighted as an experience during childhood that influenced their perspectives of themselves in relation to society and in their future relationships. Participants spoke often about the approach of their parents in ensuring they were aware of the outside world and its reaction to their ethnicity and race. Parents' attempts to socialize children in preparation for the reality of being Black in America were important in shaping their interaction with the world around them. In some cases this preparation provided skills and strategies for how to respond, react, and process the emotions associated with racism and prejudice. Preparation and pride contained three subthemes: 1) *prove self as acceptable, worthy,* 2) *understand surroundings and how you are positioned in society*, and 3) *treat others with love and kindness*

Prove self as acceptable, worthy. Working to prove one's self as acceptable and worthy was a message many participants shared receiving from their parents. Whether through strategic social positioning or the pursuit of education to gain access, participants were taught to prove themselves to their counterparts with an understanding that what they had to offer was valuable precious. Shawn's mother responded to his reaction to racism as a child in this way:

> My mom would have me go into the bathroom and have me look at myself in the mirror and explained to me that black is beautiful and that I am a good person. That was one of my most

memorable moments. After she did that, whenever I would get teased, it didn't bother me as much.

In most cases, this advice was provided as a source of reality checking and pride, understanding the inequitable opportunities for Blacks and the importance of striving in spite of this. In other cases, it was strategic advice to help children navigate racial spaces effectively. Will noted how his father and mother helped him understand:

> They explained it to me. I saw a lot because my dad had a rental property. While he would be working he would have conversations and how he would tell us different things that happened to him and what he could and couldn't do. So of the things that are happening today are still happening. He explained to us how to be poised and positioned… Even though you see things happen and you might even witness it. You have to take a stand. Whether it is going to help you or your community or yourself better the situation. You have to weigh things out so one, we don't get in trouble. He told us how people perceived you

Gwen's parents provided similar guidance:

> [My] parents taught me that I was Black and I need to be proud and also to understand the environment in which you exist… Other people would get Dr. Seuss books but we got books about great black people. My parents taught us how to deal with situations if they arise. They felt strongly about education and not dumbing ourselves down because we're black… We were taught that blacks were these great people—Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks, and we valued being intelligent… I wanted to be a doctor at one point so I had a bunch of black doctors hanging on my wall. Those people are black to me, being forward.

Gina highlighted her parent's value in education in helping to compete with majority members to warrant acceptance, stating:

> Yes, because we were always in the suburbs and the only black persons. Or one of the only black people. I wanted to fit in or be seen as normal. I think that affected me in a sense. One thing my parents always stress with education so I tried to make sure that I was the smartest person in the class. Then I got noticed… Right, I guess in a sense. I felt like my work will speak for itself.

Understand surroundings and how you are positioned in society. Respondents reported that their parents helped to educate them on the social hierarchy in the culture and its resulting treatment. Brandon provided a narrative of his experience learning where he fit into society as learned from his grandmother. He stated:

> I was in 2nd grade and I had a teacher and her name was Ms. Parks. I had good grades and I was a really great speller. She excused me of cheating. She called my grandmother and they had a conversation. I know my grandmother went off on her and at that point, I understood that race is an issue. I understand everything that my grandmother told me, I am starting to see it. There is racism here and she never tried to sugar coat it

Blake confirmed this by sharing the lessons learned in his community about behaving as a Black male:

> Yeah I mean it were discussion about it was a discussion about what does it mean for me to be black and how it means I have to act a certain way [indicating a need to behave positively]; that there are special consequences I might receive because of my blackness and so because of the special ways, I need to act because of that as well [noting how he may be perceived by others who do not look like him]

Because of this reality of treatment, some parents became hyper-vigilant in their preparation—teaching their children to avoid spaces altogether. Brandy highlighted statements

from her father about her surroundings and his adamancy on being sure to avoid certain areas. She said “I remember my dad saying something that was strange about people going up north. My dad would say they didn't want us up north and we didn't have any business there. I never went up north until I got married.” Being taught to be mindful of surroundings for fear of harm from others or exploitation has numerous implications on relationships and the importance of self-protection. Consistent messages to be hyper-vigilant in unfamiliar spaces may produce fear of vulnerability, openness and trust in others. Such behavior might make it difficult to participate deeply in intimate relationships. Nonetheless, many found solace in responding with positive behavior toward their transgressors despite second-class treatment.

Treat others with love and kindness. In spite of the marginal, racist, and prejudicial treatment, as a form of resilience and often as a result of religiousness, African Americans choose to respond to marginalization with kindness and forms of love. This is important in producing positive reframes of negative experiences, which can be useful when moments of challenge arise in intimate relationships with romantic partners. Participants noted the training they received from their parents along this vein. Craig stated:

> My mom always told me to kill them with kindness. It derived from her Christian background. It was the way she was reared by my grandparents and the way my grandparents were reared by my great-grandparents. My Mom always use to say, "be careful how you treat people because you never know who you might need to bring you water while on your death bed." That's something I live by today

Shawn supported this teaching from his parents as well. He said, “She [mom] always told us to love everybody no matter what their color was. That love allowed us to see people the way God sees them and not the way they are.” Trina confirmed this teaching sharing that “We were taught

not to hate others that God created us all equally and we should love each other."

Preparation is valuable to many as it provides a starting place for understanding the reason why behaviors occur and strategies for navigating those experiences without taking it to heart the message is received. Unfortunately, racism and prejudice remains common for this population in spite of the preparedness provided by parents. Thus, some African Americans are unable to adopt the strategies in protecting themselves from the emotional response inherent in being marginalized. As a result, African Americans hold onto the negativity associated with being a minority in this country, which translates into feelings of hurt, anger, anxiety, frustration or passion. A common reaction to this is feelings of not being wanted, desired or an absence of belonging. This, at times, may have implications on intimate relationships. Brandon captured this feeling well:

> It is always in the back of my mind in how I approach people and deal with people. I feel like I think about if I am with a Caucasian or how I am interacting with them, I feel like I am always thinking about that. It is really hard for me to have a good friendship with a Caucasian person because I am always thinking about that. How there are going to treat me or think about me. I am always thinking about it.

Brandon's rumination, constant awareness, and anxiety in the presence of majority group members illustrates a deep-seeded apprehension for racialization and inhumane treatment—one that many African Americans burden daily. This burden can find itself affecting daily interactions with his partner as he may return home with additional stressors on top of typical daily stressors. In this case, this requires support system in the home and an empathetic partner who understands the effect of this experience who can sympathize effectively.

Parental socialization set the groundwork for helping to maintain security and internal safety.

For this population, having a partner who provided this same safety and security, both emotionally and physically, was an asset to their well-being and relational health.

Safety and Security are Important within the Relationship to combat challenges outside of relationship

All individuals spoke at length about the pertinent resources necessary to build their model relationship with their partners. Both men and women described their initial attraction to their partner and moved into descriptions of motivators to continuing to seek the relationship, how they endured relational challenges before marriage, during marriage, and strategies used to process relational issues. These reflections illustrate the importance of partner variables and skills that influence relationship commitment and longevity. Specifically, safety and security were identified by participants as important behaviors and desirable traits in their partners as they pursued a relationship. Safety and security are found to be instrumental variables in relationship comfort, especially for this sampled population as it ensures dependability and confidence that external harm will not occur. Safety and security, in this case, included subthemes of *support, commitment,* and *loyalty*.

Support. Michael, a 68 year old married man, talked about the importance of supportive behaviors in marriage:

> I wanted her besides being my wife; I wanted her to be my very best friend. I know that there is that wifely role but I wanted it to be at the end of the day, there was someone who had your listening ear and to support you. If you make a mistake, they wouldn't rub it in your face

Tanya, a 65-year old married woman, described the importance of support in her marriage this way:

> [The primary role of a partner is] To help the other person to be the best they could be…It

> can include giving feedback. I think being supportive in efforts that there are making in terms of career and parenting, but also providing good feedback because sometimes we are busy doing things that we don't see the bigger picture…So, just giving feedback; helping them to identify ways to go and what they should do

Tanya's perception of the role of support in their efforts in life and the provision of feedback as the form of support emphasizes the supplemental component of a romantic relationship and the need for a partner to enhance one's life. Tasha corroborated this perspective stating "I really think my expectations in marriage are just being committed to the other person. Knowing that person and helping [them] grow. I don't think you take on their emotional baggage but you help them through it."

Brandon had a similar desire for support from his wife as he indicated "And so, it's like I know I am looking for somebody to help me; build me up, and help be my strength for what I am weak in and vice versa for me". Support is evidenced to produce a level of vulnerability that enhances security and safety in the intimate relationship, increasing intimacy and connection between the two partners.

Commitment. Commitment was also identified as a necessary demonstration in the relationship as well. Michael described his committed behavior during his courtship:

> I would send flowers to her and there were times when she was working that I would pick her up and take her out to dinner. She would say "you don't have to come down and do that." That's what courting is; you may not be able to say it with all the words, but actions speak louder than words. The things that I might not have been able to say, I could show them in my actions

Michael's value placed in treatment toward his wife, demonstrated an in depth concern and care

that he had toward her. This behavior, he believes, contributed to her wanting to be with him. Tasha, a 36 year old married woman, felt the behavior of her husband demonstrated a level of commitment that she valued:

> When he said he was going to do something, he did it. It was basically him honoring his word because I didn't have that with other guys. Even with being faithful, I have no worries with him as far as cheating. I know how he talks to me and just kisses on the forehead. I know he loves and cares for me and will protect me no matter what

Her husband's behavior illustrated, for her, that he placed importance on his word and his consistency, commitment, and loyalty to her and the relationship. She then reflected on the security that comes from his behavior and how it counteracts childhood relationships that were unstable:

> It's just I feel secure. I feel that security with him that I didn't have before. Even though my dad was there, and he's still there now. Even though he's there now, there's still not that security. My dad had a drinking problem. He still hits the bottle now and I have to get on him about it. I love my dad to death and he's my best friend. We've always been best friends and he's not that security blanket. I found that security in my husband

These behaviors increased her desire to be with her husband long-term. Likewise, Brandy, a 47 year old married woman, excitedly listed the characteristics that drew her to her partner, focusing specifically on his commitment to his family and to her:

> His heart. I met a man that really and truly cared about his children; that was really and truly plugged in and really involved with his kids. Not just "*Here's the TV, it's my weekend, and you just watch TV*." I'm talking about from going to doctor's appointments, to all the conferences, to sitting down and just listening…His devotion to family. His [speaking as if

she were him] "*okay, we are in this and its work and we just have to keep working at it*."

And, his desire to always ask me "*well, what is it that you need*?"

Desiree, a 68-year old married woman, shared the value of committing to the relationship and to her husband:

> I think that a lot gets lost in relationships when couples don't nurture the relationship… If we are just not embracing our relationship… At the top of that his needs. Obviously, putting him before - often times, because that is what women do. He has always known that he was important, he has always been important. I think that is why the relationship has always been strong and has gotten stronger through the years

Desiree's description of the meaning of commitment to nurturing the relationship and ensuring her husband understands his importance and value to her, from her perspective, contributes to their marital happiness and health.

Participants placed significant value on the demonstration of commitment by their partners and, maybe more importantly, themselves. Illustrated committed was reportedly valuable in increasing well-being and longevity as Desiree affirms. And, this commitment manifested itself in loyal behaviors.

Loyalty. George, a 25-year old married man, provided this comment about his courtship with his partner:

> I think it was loyalty and diligence. I think we were very loyal to each other and we were diligent in just working together. It's funny how, when I think about it now, just how loyal and diligent we were before we even were married. We like committed to each other before we were even legally committed to each other…I think we started relying on each other for different things so it kind of made me feel responsible for her and I never had that before; in

> the sense of being responsible for her and really…like she was mine…even though she wasn't mine.

George discussed the specific characteristics implemented to reach marriage and found commitment and loyalty as partners made it increasingly easier to establish a long-lasting relationship. Renisha, a 26 year old married woman, reflected on the development of her courtship and marriage and found that spirituality and caring behavior were essential to her attraction to her husband. She stated:

> There were some things that I personally asked [prayed] for that I wanted in a husband that played a major part in me feeling safe to move forward. Of course I wanted my husband to be saved; to be kind; to be gentle; to be willing to work with me through all of this 'stuff' that I had. Nothing that carried a lot of baggage…just how I grew up because I had no reference point, I knew it would be difficult and I didn't want to be with someone who would throw me away because this [relationships] was hard for me.

Renisha placed value on having a loyal partner, specifically underscoring someone who "would not throw me away because this [relationships] was hard for me", was evidence of the significance of having a partner who understands and empathizes, while also being faithful to the long haul of the relationship.

Commitment, support, and loyalty were evidenced to provide emotional protection and shelter from outside threats to the relationship and intimacy therein. For this sample, this experience significantly augmented the relationship and the level of vulnerability by each partner.

Finding Middle Ground

Individuals within relationships often underline the magnitude of meeting in the middle through shared interaction and dialog, which contribute to creating and maintaining a healthy relationship. This is especially imperative for African American couples given research highlighting a power discrepancy between male and female partners and a strong preference for egalitarian relationships for this population (see Birditt et al., 2010; Stanik, McHale, & Crouter, 2013). Three subthemes were similarly identified for this population: collaboration, compromise, and shared communication.

Brandon, a 40-year old married man, noted how compromise and communication were established in the relationship with his wife:

> So, we tried to compromise in a lot of ways. When things were on her mind, she felt like she didn't always have to bring it up [learned he believed constant communication about an issue was arguing]. And I felt like I would be more open to communicate rather than keeping things to myself

Finding ways to connect on issues of difference is reported to be very important to participants. Brandon reported differences between him and his partner and how they worked through it:

> You may want it on your terms, but this is a different person and we are not the same; we don't have the same mind. You can't like I want little pieces of it, I don't want the whole thing', but we are people. We can't control [how much support is given]….How we deal with things as far as, like I am more laid back about stuff and she is more uptight about things. Like things she gets worked up over, I don't. So it's almost like I'm thinking "why are you tripping" and she's like "why don't you care" and I think that's just kind of a reoccurring thing…It's funny because we have kind of helped each other. I have helped her chill out a

little and she's helped me…for her…to come more….When we go on vacation or something, she has to have our itinerary of everything we are going to do on vacation, whereas I just fly by the seat of my pants…if I want to do this today, that's fine. If I don't, I don't. It's funny because we kind of like joke about it

Jeremy, a 55-year old married man, expressed his thoughts on learning to compromise and to communicate with his wife through debating rather than arguments:

We talk. Sometimes we say things that the other doesn't want to hear but we say it. We don't always agree but we'll agree to disagree… We can come back and visit this later on. We can see if we can make any sense of it and solve it. If we can't then it's back under the rug. I'll leave it alone and won't worry about it… In an argument it's just a loss of control, you just want to be heard and you're not listening to the other person. Your view is the only view that counts in an argument. In a debate you listen to both sides and then you go back and forth. You listen to each other in a debate not in an argument

Tasha, also identified the role of communication and willingness to communicate in her relationship and her husband's attunement to this stating "We talk about it. Like I said I he made me weak because I want to talk about stuff and that's normally didn't want to do it. He knows if I come down where he's watching TV or something that we need to talk. He knows when I come down there it's going to be an all-nighter. Brandy, a 47 year old married woman supported this thought highlighting her husband's intentionality in working things out, stating

Him. He is a stickler for working problems out and not running from them, whereas though I am. And with support groups, friends, and colleagues who have experienced these things sharing with me that it's going to get better and that our issues are just seasonal, makes me more optimistic about our marriage working

Her husband's commitment and willingness to engage in discussion to work through issues provided her with encouragement to seek support externally from others so she could lean into the relationship as well.

Married versus Divorced Couples

The study found major differences between married and divorced couples. First and foremost, married couples' motivations to marry were based on interpersonal connections and desire. Married couples were able to marry for connection namely because of their use of buffers and protective factors prior to marriage. Successful couples engaged in self-evaluation and examination through connections to spirituality and religion, family factors, exploration of ethnic and racial identity and caution when pursuing long-term relationships. Contrastingly, divorced couples identified marriage as a way to escape negative realities, using the relationship itself as the buffer prior to working through emotional issues prior to marriage. Secondly, safety and security—defined by support, commitment, and loyalty, were present in the relationship of enduring couples, whereas divorced couples struggled to maintain emotional safety and security relationally. To ascertain the major differences between married and divorced couples, the following inquiries drove the discussion: 1) what strategies did married couples use in comparison to divorced couples, 2) what were major contributors to relationship demise for divorced couples, and 3) what behaviors did married couples engage in that divorced coupled did not.

Motivation to Marry

Another evident reason why relationships eventually failed for divorced couples was due to the relationship being sought after for reasons that were adverse to relationship longevity; with

the wrong motivations. In several cases, divorcees discussed seeking marriage to *escape* their unstable and dangerous home lives. This is due to their experience with abuse at the hands of their fathers or male figures in the home. By identifying a mate, each believed that they would be able find refuge in the relationship, which allowed them to put an end to the violent transgressions in their home life, both sexually and emotionally. While this strategy to survive is understandable and appreciated considering the significant trauma that these individuals were experiencing, escape as a motivation to commit to another person long term is not a healthy foundation. Alixandria identified her motivation in this way, "He had dreams; he had goals. I needed to get away and because of his goals and dreams, I felt that he would be the person to take me away from everything at home." Kesha described her interest in being with her partner in this way:

> And then I met him…it was kind of 'rescue'… He was living in an apartment. He had his own apartment; had his own car. So, we started going out. He took me over to his apartment and we started talking. Southern—southern; big family—big family; runaway—runaway. We had all those things in common…We had a lot in common. Easy; safe

When asked what made her want to be with her partner, she responded:

> I couldn't stand [names college]. I couldn't stand that dorm life, I didn't fit. I couldn't stand it. I got disillusioned with 'being smart'. I was a fish out of water and I had…this is many years of self analysis…I had nobody to really say that 'this is okay...this is okay, you'll be alright'. I didn't have a support system, I just didn't

Kesha went on to describe what drew her in to her partner as an escape:

> He had a place. I started spending more and more time over his place…more and more time over his place…more and more time over his place until it didn't make sense to go back [to

> school]…So we played house. I cooked. I cleaned. It was normal. Fixed his plate and tried to be a good 'wife' and he was *supportive.* Now thinking back, I don't think I thought much. I think inside, most of me was just me…Tried to ask questions, but he was not communicative in any way. So, we did. We ended up going together, living together until he decided he was going to do something different

Consistent with the other reports, Trina described the development of her courtship as motivated by her desire to remove herself from the hands of her father. She indicated that her fear of continued sexual abuse increased her desire to marry her partner. Specifically, she stated her desire to marry was "to get away from my Dad. Once my Dad realized my interest in him, he became more aggressive and that increased my want to marry and get away." As she continued to pursue the relationship, she noted her father became increasingly angry and hated her partner for the fear of losing her.

In each case of relationship development on sinking foundation, the female participants found refuge in their romantic partner and used this refuge as the foundational glue to initiate the romantic long-term relationship. Overtime, the foundation of the relationship began to crumble under them, eventually ending in behaviors of infidelity, forms of domestic violence, and in some cases, realizing who the partner actually was in contrast to who they were thought to be—ending result, divorce.

Despite barriers to relationships and marriage, individuals were able to seek after and identify emotional resources that might contribute to providing an alternate message and the sense of security and belonging. Each couple described finding security and safety in the partners during the courtship and into the marital relationship. However, divorced couples began with feelings of safety and security, but ended with insecurity and a lack of safety (i.e. infidelity and

abuse).Insecure foundations of relationship and permeable motivations for long-term commitment may result in divorce.

The belief of protection appears to stem from a gender role expectation within the patriarchal system that a man is to provide protection and safety for the woman. In cases where safety in several areas is not provided, female partners begin to feel insecure and unsafe, thereby exploring options and alternatives that represent safety and security, as identified by the option and choice to divorce. In all cases, the decision to divorce was regrettable, yet necessary. In one instance, Trina reflected on her choice to divorce and highlighted the many attempts to salvage the relationship, though unsuccessfully. She highlighted attempts at counseling, pleading with her husband, seeking spiritual counsel, and seeking opportunities to talk. In her case, after thirty years of making these efforts, even after enduring multiple issues with infidelity on the part of her husband, she saw his unwillingness to get help and to change as permission for her to pursue divorce.

For participants with divorced parents in study one, the mother was the initiator of the divorce. This was also true for the participants who were divorcees in study two—the woman initiated the divorce. The reason for initiating the divorce was primarily *safety*, either emotional or physical. Safety included protection of self, children, or both for most of the divorced women.

Infidelity. Infidelity has significant implications on marriage. It represents betrayal and significantly damages trust and intimacy within couple relationships, infringing on any ability to move forward healthily. Infidelity is often motivated by lust, the absence of intimacy and closeness, or anger or hurt and is the ultimate form of relational selfishness in romantic relationships. For divorced couples, infidelity was reported as a significant contributor to the demise of the marital relationship.

Monique, a 56-year old divorced woman, described and instance when her ex-husband was spending inordinate amounts of time at his ex-wife's home with his children. She wanted to believe that he was there to provide some resemblance of family for the children living with their mom. In this way, she supported his effort. Overtime, she noticed the frequency of his visits beginning to increase. Soon, an argument ensued between her ex-husband and his ex-wife (In the home of the ex-wife):

> One of the times he went to see his ex-wife. Evidently they had gotten into a confrontation together, so she [the ex-wife] called the police…He got arrested for domestic violence. Of course, he had needed somebody to bail him out, so who does he call to bail him out, his current wife. And that's when I found out that he was over there and they had words… He had to go to court. And I just remember him having to tell the truth in front of the judge and of course, I heard all of this

Monique's experience with her husband cheating created an emotional reaction that left her without any option outside of divorce. She made attempts to learn of her husband's emotional feelings toward her husband before they married. The betrayal left her motionless. Alixandria, a 50-year old divorced woman, had a similar reaction to betrayal following infidelity. Alixandria was cheated on by husband who was not able to commit following an affair. She shared the detail of her husband cheating in this way:

> When I found out he cheated the first time in '07. I actually went through the entire process of divorce. Then it was because I found out and I was angry. Not knowing his feelings for her. I was angry and disappointed so I reacted. Just before we went to court, he told me that he would stop seeing her and he wanted his family and would go to counseling. That was our first time going to counseling. Going to counseling was only to pacify me because after the

second month we discovered that he was still seeing her. He was just a little clever with it. I hung in there a little longer thinking things would change. It didn't change, he just got more attached to her and we became more detached

Alixandria's reaction speaks to her desire to want to love and forgive to move past broken trust. Counseling was attempted to work through the relational problems, however, Shawn was unwilling to end the affair. Alixandria indicated that she believed he was in love with the other woman, and thus unwilling or unable to recommit to the relationship. Her husband's behavior made it too difficult for her to overcome, especially considering her childhood experience with abandonment and neglect.

Trina, a 52-year old divorced woman, discussed experiencing infidelity on two separate occasions by her husband. She recalled one instance where he was contacted in the middle of the night by his mistress with an emergency. In response to this emergency, he left the home to provide support and she [Trina] stayed on the phone with the mistress until he arrived to her rescue.

Participants discussed the role of infidelity on the demise of their marriages. In particular, infidelity became an option when happiness was not present in the relationship. Generally, spouses sought emotional connection and intimacy in the arms of others when it was not present in their own relationship. Kesha discussed the buildup of her troubles in her marriage and how it led to infidelity, ultimately, for both individuals:

As our differences became more exacerbated, it was going to be some fighting or I was going to have to swallow. And I swallowed and swallowed because I didn't want to fight…He was searching [for] things; he was looking for things. Infidelity became an issue for both of us…We both [explored], yes, yes, yes… I told him, "I said look, dude, we need to do

something because this isn't working and we both need to do something

Violence. Violence was prevalent in the divorced couples. Emotional, physical, and psychological forms of abuse were described as experienced, which influenced later separation and divorce. Alixandria talked about her lashing out toward her husband when she became upset, stating, "to handle problems sometimes, I guess, I would lash out. He never lashed out at me, but I lashed out at him. It didn't help the problem, but yeah. It didn't help at all." When reminded about her experience in her childhood with her mother engaging in the same behaviors, Alixandria indicated this was a learned behavior from her mother [embarrassingly chuckling]. To determine the motivation for "lashing out", I inquired "what were your intentions when you lashed out". She responded, "I guess I was trying to feel better and trying to get my point over… [I never felt better] It still bothers me to this day." In this case, Alixandria was the abuser and more violence partner—her anger often stemming from the infidelity of her husband. On another hand, Samantha, a 47-year old divorced woman, offered her experience with abuse from her husband exclaiming:

> He was mentally and emotionally abusive. I went to the hospital a few times, I was gone. It was alcohol and marijuana. His behaviors were based on that. I tried suicide twice and that's how I ended up in the hospital. My father and stepfather stepped in and said that was enough

Samantha's experience of abuse was a direct result of the alcohol and substance abuse of her husband. The abuse took a toll on her self-esteem, emotional confidence, and feelings of worth and eventually led to considerations and attempts at suicide. Later, she described her husband's behavior stemming from the environment from which he came stating, "He came from that background though. His father was an alcoholic", indirectly suggesting learned behavior.

Conflict Strategies

Working through conflict is very challenging for couples and one of the most difficult tasks for any relationship. Findings support this as well. However, married couples were able to engage in healthy communication and compromise practices, while respecting the personality of the other. In contrast, divorced couples dealt with conflict in more unhealthy ways. Alixandria, a divorced woman, stated, “I am pretty sure I played a part in those things changing. When he wanted things to be a certain way, I didn’t always agree. I wanted things to go my way and he wouldn’t like that.” Shawn, a divorced man, said:

> My wife was dealing with some things that I was not privy to....so it took its toll because it was all about her…When people have issues that they've never really dealt with, it's all about them. Because they are trying to figure out...they're just dealing with what they got to deal with...because they haven't dealt with the issue at first hand [past experiences], it's all about them. So, that's a degree of selfishness. And, when you are in a relationship, when you are in a union, it can't just be about you. And if you don't understand what's going on and there is no counseling or there's no direct communication about what's going on, then the problem never gets resolved

Alixandria shared this:

> We communicated, but we didn’t communicate like we should have been communicating…If there was a problem between us, instead of talking it out, we let it build up before we worked through it; before we could talk about it…I don’t know. When we first started dating, I always saw him as being an honest man. I guess somewhere down the road, he felt that I didn’t communicate enough. I wasn’t the person that he expected me to be (shouldering some of the blame)

Gwen, a divorced woman, confirmed the absence of appropriate strategies for conflict as she shared:

> We handled problems like kids. We were used to having a parent to mediate and there was no mediator…When you are older, you learn not to fight over every single thing. You learn to choose your battles and the things that we were fighting over were not important…We just kind of fussed our way through. It never yielded any results. There was never a conclusion to anything…There was never any resolution

Gwen highlights an inability to communicate effectively to resolve problems when she was married. Though she attributes much of this absence of skills to youthfulness and age at marriage, her perspective is an undercurrent for the importance of effective communication as a conflict strategy between intimate partners. Russell noted similar conflict strategies, specifically engaging in a conflict strategy that included avoidance:

> Really I didn't [implement any strategies]. I pretty much made it her choice to decide what she wanted to do. I told her the issue and it was for her to decide if she wanted to adhere to a solution…I have always been and will continue to be someone who allows his female partner to come and go and do what they want to do and not really say "you can't do that; no I want you to stay home".

Russell's statement seems to come from a place of a desire to not want to control his female partner. However, in instances where he desires intimacy, connection, and quality time, Russell avoided conflict as a strategy rather than sharing his authentic feelings with his wife.

From each case of divorce, ineffective conflict strategies were obvious, thus leading to relationship demise over time.

Discussion

The intended purpose of this study was to delve deeper into the specific characteristics inherent in the built relationships of African American couples who were successfully able to reach marriage. More specifically, the study aimed to better understand the differences between the constructed relationships of currently married couples compared to divorced couples to determine the differences between behaviors in marriage. The findings of this study center around descriptions of experiences of couples and the processes by which they overcame barriers in their relationships.

African American couples have more to endure that impacts their relationships than other racial groups, thus contributing to lower marriage rates and higher marital dissolution rates. Considering the uniqueness of coupling for African Americans and the socio-historical context, added relational stressors were present. A few themes were identified in the study that were unique to this population, which informed their marital behaviors: 1) *marginalized as an outsider, 2) being prepared and prideful, race matters, 3) safety and security, and 4) finding middle ground*. The following discussion highlights the necessary elements for an African American relationship to survive and thrive. In particular, the discussion notes strategies used by successful couples to navigate in comparison to divorced couples. This data adds additional knowledge to current literature on African American couples and supports the increase of culturally relevant and effective interventions to supplemental premarital, married, and couples considering divorce.

Marginalized as an Outsider

Racism and prejudice, particularly in this country, has been shown to be pervasive and insidious (Burton et all, 2010; Collins, 1989; 1996), interpersonally and systemically, (see

Pouissant 2002; Pouissant & Alexander, 2000), with severe impacts on mental health for African Americans (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; 2006; Okazaki, 2009), social adjustment (see McAdoo, 1990) and education (Calabrese & Underwood, 1994; Orfield, 1996) and physical health (Krieger, 2000; McFayden Jr., 2009; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003). Racism and prejudice experiences have significant negative outcomes for minority members, especially African Americans (see Franklin, Boyd-Franklin & Kelly, 2006). Several researchers have worked to illuminate the effects of racism and prejudice (Allen, 1995; Billingsley & Billingsley, 1968; Bivens, 2005), particularly linking these experiences to the legacy of slavery (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Boyd-Franklin, 2006; LaTaillade, 2006; Pinderhughes, 2002; Pouissant, 2006; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Studies have offered significant results. Experiences of racism and prejudice are found to create anxiety; depression, low self-esteem, and internalized oppression (see Bell, 1992; Brown-Rice, 2013; Carter, 2007; Clark, Anderson, Clark & Williams, 1999; Tull, Sheu, Butler, & Cornelious, 2005) potentially leading to generational and intergenerational transmissions of replicated symptoms (Leary, 2005; McAdoo, 1990; Pouissant, 2006). As well, discrimination was found to be a stressor that impacts maternal psychological functioning and family relationships (Murry et al., 2001), also impacting mental health (Okazaki, 2009). Participants in this study shared several instances of racism and prejudicial treatment during childhood and into adulthood. The implications of these experiences are tremendous for relationships (Kelly & Floyd, 2006a; 2006b). Relationally, research shows individuals who experience racism and prejudice experience long-term effects, including relational dysfunction (Murry, Harrell, Brody, Chen, Simons, Black, Gibbons, 2008). Other research suggests slavery, discrimination and racism have created a caution for being taken advantage of in relationships (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011). Thus, it is acceptable to infer that the effect of marginalization, as a byproduct of

slavery, is particularly impactful on relational behaviors, indirectly disrupting sustainability of relationships over time (Chapman, 2007). However, research also suggests the presence of buffers such as spirituality (Bowen & Harrell, 2002) and family connection, including socialization (Stevenson & Arrington, 2009) and partner support/peer support (DeGarmo & Martinez, 2006). Several participants highlighted and confirmed these effects.

Being Prepared and Prideful, Race Matters

Findings support the importance of racial socialization in the preparedness of minorities, namely African Americans, to effectively navigate social settings and relationships (see Coard & Sellers, 2005; Crouter et al., 2008; Hughes, Rodriguez, Smith, Johnson, & Stevenson, 2006; Stevenson & Arrington, 2009). It has been well established that parenting in ethnic minority families is only understood and conceptualized in relation to the larger socioeconomic and political milieu, including family positioning in the social hierarchy (García Coll et al, 1996). Crouter, Baril, Davis, and McHale (2008) describe two aspects of racial socialization that were effectively implemented in families of color, *cultural socialization* (defined as "parents practices that teach children about their racial or ethnic heritage and history; that promote cultural customs and traditions; and that promote children's cultural, racial, and ethnic pride, either deliberately or implicitly" (Hughes et al., p. 749) and *preparation for bias* (defined as "parents efforts to promote children's awareness of discrimination and prepare them to cope with it" (Hughes et al., p 756)). African American couples in this study suggest the *grounding* experienced by their parents' socialization was helpful in preparing them to understand and effectively contextualize social stratification and racialization, supporting their efforts to maintain positive self-image, indirectly affecting future suitor. Moreover, research finds parents who are more educated are more likely to engage in racial socialization (Thornton et al., 1990). In the case of this study,

parent education was not observed directly. However, many parents were either educated or couples recalled a strong parental value in education. For this subsample, racial socialization had implications on their desire to identify romantic partners who also understood the impact of marginalization and discrimination—similar ethnic background (King & Allen, 2009). Furthermore, participants were responsive to partners who provided safety and security (Kelly & Floyd, 2001; Kelly & Floyd, 2006a; 2006b).

Safety and Security

Safety and security are essential in any relationship, especially for African American couples. Safety includes emotional freedom, openness, acceptance, a partner knowing who you are, and vulnerability. Security includes trust, commitment, loyalty, and honesty. Together, safety and security support a relationship's long term health and longevity. Consistent with several studies on the development of healthy relationships for African American couples (Chaney, 2014; Marks, Hopkins, Chaney, Monroe, Nesteruk, & Sasser, 2008) spirituality (Ellison, Burdette, & Wilcox, 2010), loyalty, commitment and caring behavior (Curran, Utley, & Muraco, 2010; Marks et al, 2008) were paramount in building a trusting relationship. Commitment and loyalty, in this case, were an essential factor in relationship development and maintenance, including moral values and fidelity. Initially, in the construction of the relationship and consistent with Chaney (2014), individuals, both married and divorced, saw the commitment of their partner as invariably contributing to feelings of safety and predictability, particularly in knowing what their partner said that he or she would do. Confirming studies suggesting the importance of relationship skills in the development and maintenance of relationships (Allen & Olson, 2001; Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Brooks, 2007; Bryant, Taylor, Lincoln, Chatters, & Jackson, 2008), African American individuals and couples made clear the necessary role of a

partner being willing to communicate, to compromise, to demonstrate helpfulness and support (Chaney, 2014; Lebow, 2001; Marks et al, 2008;), to show commitment (Curan, Utley, & Muraco, 2010), and a respect for differences and collaboration. In particular, having a supportive and helpful partner who would contribute to helping one reach his or her goals and making them the *best they can be* was noted, which Chaney (2010) calls mutual dependence.

Likewise and although more ancillary, relationship behaviors such as spending time together (Chaney, 2010), problem solving, communicating intimately (Marks et al, 2008), attending church together (Phillips, Wilmoth, & Marks, 2012), spirituality (Brown et al., 2008; Ellison et al., 2010), receiving or providing special treatment, and listening were necessary deeds by partners during courtship and expected behaviors for sustaining the relationship moving forward. Behaviors consisted of acts and practices that facilitated relationship sustainability (Marks et al., 2008).

Still, for African Americans, the importance of safety and security is more pronounced (Chaney, 2010; Chambers & Kravitz, 2011; Chapman, 2007; Curran, Utley, & Muraco, 2010; Phillips, Wilmoth, & Marks, 2012). The evident and often-cited effects of historical trauma and contemporary marginalization include distrust, cultural paranoia, hyper-vigilance, and self-protection (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; 2006; LaTaillade, 2006; Leary, 2005). Therefore, safety and security in a relationship is increasingly important for this population, not only as a resource, but also to contrast daily reminders of insecurity and to moderate the effects of existing at the margins of society (Boyd-Franklin, 2006; Kelly, 2006; Marks, et al., 2006; Pinderhughes, 2002; Reid, Mims, & Higgenbottom, 2004).

Finding Middle Ground

An abundance of statements suggesting the magnitude of finding middle ground through compromise and *understanding* was present for African American couples. Regardless of age, education level, background, experience with racism and prejudice, successful couples and even divorcees highlighted the value of compromise, collaboration and shared communication. In a study of newlyweds in their first year of marriage, Chadiha, Veroff, and Leber (1998) found urban African American newlyweds placed greater emphasis on couple relations, including working together and sharing communicatively, than their white counterparts. Other studies highlight partnership and friendship as important features in marriage for African American couples (Curran, Utley, Muraco, 2010), while others noted the significance of unity in a relationship (Marks et al., 2008). Shared communication (Phillips et al., 2012) was observed to be a vital skill in helping to work through problems to find solutions. Even creating levity in situations that generally cause marital conflict was identified as a healthy strategy for thriving couples. Studying egalitarian gender role dynamics, Stanik and Bryant (2012) found couples saw working together equally as useful for their marriage, particularly African American couples, supporting the notion that compromise and collaboration are key factors of marital success for this population, especially given the socio-historical context (Boyd-Franklin, 2006: LaTaillade, 2006; Pinderhughes, 2002; Wilkins et al., 2013).

Married versus Divorced Couples

Marriage has more benefits than divorce, including better outcomes for mental and physical health, disease contraction, and mortality (see Canady & Broman, 2003). However, African American couples continue to be among the highest in divorce rates and the lowest in marital rates (see Dixon, 2007; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995; Whelan, 2011). Thirty-three percent of

the sample of this study was divorced allowing for a comparison between groups to determine differences in marital behaviors.

There are obvious differences in behavior between married and divorced couples. Perry (2013) found that African American individuals who were able to reach and maintain marriage were more committed, trusting and more egalitarian. Likewise, there was no concern for infidelity in the relationship, which is a proven predictor of marital disruption, in addition to domestic violence and frequent conflict (see Amato, 2010). African American divorced and married individuals spoke at length about the role of these behaviors in helping to facilitate a strong companionship (Chaney, 2010; Curan, Utley, & Muraco, 2010; Marks, et al, 2008). Both married and divorced couples found value in these behaviors during the courtship. However, for divorced couples over time, they began to discontinue behaviors conducive to partnership and intimacy. Instead, these couples began engaging in destructive behaviors (Birditt, Brown, Orbuch, & McIlvane, 2010) eventually creating barriers in the relationships too difficult to overcome. It is common knowledge that couples who are unable to maintain marriage have high levels of stress, economic strain and insecurity, work related stress, divorced or never married peers, or the presence of alternatives to marriage (see Perry, 2013). In the case of divorced couples, high levels of stress and forms of insecurity were present in this study and further exacerbated by spousal behaviors (Broman, 2005)

On the contrary, successful couples were able to identify and implement productive strategies to work through difficulties and challenges in marital relationships (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011). Strategies include communication and problem-solving, compromise, spending time together, praying together, attending church together, and pursuing counseling/therapy when appropriate or necessary. For successful couples in this study, these strategies and others were used

effectively to work through relational hindrances and obstacles. In particular, thriving couples chose to use their partners as a resource, buffering the initial risk stemming from childhood.

In comparison, for divorced couples, the same positive strategies were present during the courtship in most cases. However, there were clear red flags that were ignored due to other motivations to marry, including finding freedom from the home life, having someone pay attention, pregnancy and the responsibility of co-parenting, similar pain and identified support, or rushed decisions. These non-concrete and unstable motivations were unhealthy foundations from which to build a relationship, eventually ending in separation and divorce (Dixon, 2007). Although divorcees desired commitment and long-term companionship, they were without the proper infrastructure to build a relationship that would survive external challenges. As well, the individuals who eventually divorced, were less spiritual or religious over time in comparison to enduring couples, began to engage in behaviors that were not conducive to marital health, such as infidelity, abuse, selfish decision-making, or failure to ask input from partners as a form of collaboration and compromise (Broman, 2005).

Also, reasons for couple dissolution included transgression of violence, emotional abuse, the absent of support and vulnerability, inconsistency, or infidelity (Cherlin, 1992; 1998; Cutrona et al., 2011; Broman, 2007). In the case of divorced couples, loyalty and commitment shifted at some point in the marriage, creating an insurmountable impediment for the connection to endure. Chambers and Kravitz (2011) attribute relationship demise to the following:

> "Given the legacy of slavery, discrimination, and racism, African Americans understandably have a strong sense of justice and fairness. Thus, we a partner has broken trust in the relationship, he or she has activated that sense of justice and the desire to mask vulnerability, which constrains the necessary process of forgiveness in order for the relationship to survive"

(p. 654).

Infidelity, violence, and relationship skill scarcity (ability to work through problems, selfishness), are major differences between married and divorced couples. However the motivation to engage in these behaviors has historical implications for African Americans. I am not suggesting a predisposition to cheating and abuse. I am suggesting that without resources during marriage such as spirituality, communication, positive interactions with spouses, relationship behaviors conducive to relational health and growth, and relationship skills (all of which promote resilience in spite of historical trauma and transmissions of trauma), African American Couples may struggle to survive.

Men engaged in infidelity and abuse due to unaddressed emotional issues stemming from childhood. In all instances of divorce, abuse, infidelity, or emotional immaturity were present in one or both of the individuals in the dyad. Forty percent involved infidelity, forty percent included both infidelity and abuse, and twenty percent of couples dissolved due to relational immaturity. In each case, one or both of the partners engaged in detrimental behaviors to the relationship as a result of transmitted messages from childhood.

Uniqueness of African American Marriages

Scholars have suggested “marital relationships do not exist in a vacuum; they are imbedded within social contexts that have the ability to influence them" (Goodwin, 2003, p. 552). Indeed, African American couples simultaneously face historical and contemporary challenges. Accordingly, Degruy Leary (2005) asserts:

> Black couple bears the same burdens that any other couple bears: finding gainful employment to support themselves; establishing a strong base from which to raise healthy children; carving out time to escape life’s daily hassles and rekindle tender bonds of

> affection; time to simply 'do life' in the best possible way…Nowadays it seems as though black couples are fighting to stay afloat. Like salmon, we battle against incredible odds to survive and to grow. Regardless of whoever it is we choose as mates to accompany us on our journey, anyone black will be swimming upstream" (p. 158-159).

The same characteristics of any healthy relationship are present. But, for African American couples, the socio-historical reality of being 'Black' in America carries with it added stress, including considerations on employment rates and challenges with identifying gainful employment, histories of abuse and abandonment, the absence of healthy models, imprisonment rates for African American males, economic stress and access to financial freedom, access to educational attainment, and racialized experiences. Together, these stressors create a more nuanced process of navigation to find ways to cope, while negotiating the romantic relationship and responsibilities therein.

For this population, the construction of a healthy relationship cannot ignore the sociological context wherein the marriage is built and the uniqueness of being African American contains significant implications (Marks et al., 2006). The historical and contextual influences on blackness infringes on relationship development and long-term health in significant ways (Boyd-Franklin, 2006). This reality must be considered and appreciated by couples who seek long-term commitment. Without paying attention to these influences in the work place, the absence of blue prints and working models of healthy relationships, healthy ways to discuss stressors that are not relationally based, and readiness to provide needful support as a partner, relationship maintenance may be increasingly difficult to navigate successfully.

There are obvious differences between African American couples and their racial counterparts (Boyd-Franklin, 2006; LaTaillade, 2006; Pinderhughes, 2002). One difference

includes the historical experiences of slavery and contemporary transgressions of marginalization and prejudice toward African Americans. Existing at the margins of society was a constant reminder for this subgroup through experiences of racism and prejudice. Participants were transparent concerning their reality with being targeted as minorities, underscoring numerous instances of prejudicial treatment by racial others and members of their own community. As well, they highlighted the useful benefit of having a supportive partner who could empathize and provide reprieve.

Significance of Findings in the Study

Need for Emotional Support and Healing

Research studies have long argued about the marginalization of African Americans. While research continues to discuss the varying implications on the self-esteem and confidence of African Americans, in particular men, many continue to internalize negative messages, often transferring these emotions into their family relationships. Several studies have suggested there is a subconscious effect of prejudice and racism on the psyche of minority groups. It is logical to assume an indirect effect on relationship functioning and interactions.

Be Prepared and Prideful—Racial Socialization

Ethnic socialization, strong sense of self, positive view of culture, spirituality, and strong connection to partner appears to ward against external marital challenges. As well, these characteristics are indicated to be positive resources for couples who are able to maintain healthy relationships. Ethnic and racial socialization are proven moderators of racism and prejudice for minority groups, in particular, African Americans, especially males. African American parents who choose to prepare their children for external societal pressures do so with intention to set their children up for successful navigation, in spite of the existing barriers to upward mobility

and racial equity.

As a minority, especially an African American, the value of racial socialization has numerous benefits for overall health and well-being for children, including establishing a foundational resource from which to view the world and the behaviors of others. Parental socialization supports the ability of individuals to contextualize and conceptualize experiences, helping to compartmentalize racialized moments. Research shows adults who received parental socialization are able to adjust more readily to adversity, in particular, racism and prejudice. This translates into relationship and long-term commitments given the insidious and pervasive racism and prejudice African Americans experience daily. Parental socialization provides a foundation for navigating the effects of racism. Racial pride and working harder than others yields a sense of equity and equality for African Americans, offering an opportunity to justify acceptance.

Emotional Safety and Security

Emotional safety and security are vital to relational health and wellness for any couple. The presence of these characteristics encourages vulnerability, emotional connection and intimacy. Couples who are able to develop and cultivate safety and security often reap the benefit of longevity and relationship endurance. For African Americans, these characteristics are paramount, perhaps more importantly so. Safety includes emotional freedom, openness, acceptance, a partner knowing who you are, and vulnerability. Security includes trust, commitment, loyalty, and honesty. Together, safety and security support a relationships long term health and longevity. Still, for African Americans, the importance of safety and security is more pronounced. It is evident and often cited the effects of historical trauma and contemporary marginalization--distrust, cultural paranoia, hyper-vigilance, and self-protection (Boyd-Franklin, 2006; LaTaillade, 2006). Therefore, safety and security in a relationship is increasingly

important for this population, not only as a resource, but also to contrast daily reminders of a lack of safety and insecurity and to moderate the effects of existing at the margins of society (Boyd-Franklin, 2006; Kelly, 2006; Pinderhughes, 2002)

This study underscores the importance of using romantic partners as a resource for healing and reconstructing relational narratives, especially for African Americans. There is value, according to the data, in having a like-minded and like-experienced partner who can empathize with racial tensions experienced outside the home. As well, given historical trauma, trust and vulnerability are more sacred for African Americans, particularly when childhood experiences include forms of trauma. Infidelity, abuse, emotional instability, and other behaviors that create insecurity become toxic and insurmountable--eventually leading to divorce inevitably.

Compromise and Collaboration

Working together to identify common ground that benefits each person in the relationship, and ultimately the relationship or marriage, is an invaluable strategy for relational health and survival (Chaney, 2010). This is especially accurate for African Americans are a found to prefer more egalitarian gender roles (Stanik & Bryant, 2012), which is positively associated with marital love (Stanik, McHale, & Crouter, 2013). In particular for African American couples, finding ways to appreciate the needs and perspectives of a partner to ensure he/she views spouse behavior positively (Broman, 2005), is essential when building a fortified couple relationship. This is especially relevant given the socio-historical social positioning of this population.

The absence of resources, power, and influence makes the idea of compromise and collaboration complicated. In the context of society, African Americans are often found to be the lowest recipients of the distribution of power and influence. When resources are inequitable, struggles for survival often ensue, having implications on relationships. Research shows,

however, lasting couples are able to exercise compromising behaviors through a more egalitarian approach to partnership (Birditt et al., 2010). This suggests an important consideration for aspiring marriages to seek refuge in equity inside the relationship to ensure long-term thriving (Stanik, McHale, Crouter, 2013).

The ability to work through varying degrees of expression, expectations, behaviors (Broman, 2005), and personalities (Wamboldt, 1999), to find ways to compromise and collaborate is a strong predictor of relationship compatibility and maintenance (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011; Fincham & Beach, 2010). What is clear, if African American couples construct their relationship with specific factors that purport to assist longevity, while continuing to work intentionally on maintaining these characteristics, relationships may sustain. According to Chambers and Kravitz (2011),

> Couples who are able to manage differences effectively tend to have higher relationship satisfaction than those who are not able to do this. Being able to manage differences may give couples confidence they may be compatible, thus increasing the likelihood the couple will marry (p. 650).

Limitations of the Study

The current study, while providing rich, in-depth description, only provides a snapshot of the experience for African American couples, both divorced and married, with a small sample size (N=30), with only five divorced dyads to compare to 10 married dyads. The small sample size and lack of a strong comparative sample for the married couples is an important limitation of this study. Future research must include a mixed-methods analysis of the construction and maintenance of healthy, rewarding relationships for this population to provide more comparable, generalizable findings. Furthermore, the interview questions solicited the hindsight perspective

of couples concerning the construction of their romantic relationship.

Future Directions of Research

For a stronger study, a longitudinal analysis with data collection at several time points across a 10-year period would provide a more robust illustrative picture of the process of development of a romantic relationship for African Americans. Future research might also compare other ethnic groups with African Americans in their construction of healthy relationships to assess the uniqueness of the experience of African Americans, considering socio-historical experiences of this population.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the specific characteristics inherent in the construction of a romantic, long-term relationship for African American heterosexual couples to facilitate great knowledge and to enhance current treatment models for African American premarital and currently married couples. There continues to be a need for additional studies to investigate this phenomenon as to provide new ideas and context for aiding successful maintenance of marital relationships for this population.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Contributions of Studies to Existing Research

Extant literature posits the many variables contributing to low marriage rates and marital dissolution for African American individuals and couples. Several studies have positioned causes for low marriage rates as a consequence of several factors (interpersonal and systemic), including gender ratio imbalances, a contrast of marriageable men in comparison to marriageable women, socioeconomic issues that contribute to low desirability for marriage for men who cannot financially support the family, and so on. Generally, research takes a pessimistic stance on the marital condition of African American couples and limited studies have observed the resilience in enduring couples that might be replicable for future African American couple dyads (Phillips, Wilmoth, & Mark, 2012). To consider the diversity within the African American population, it is important to also identify and investigate successful couples to learn more about their process from a strengths-based perspective. By highlighting those couples who are able to seek and obtain a marital partner successfully, it may be possible to identify specific characteristics inherent in the fabric of these couples as to replicate these variables clinically, to support additional examples of positive relationships.

For example, for couples who are able to identify a partner for a marital relationship in spite of the highlighted barriers, research has discussed specific desirable characteristics in partners for both African American men and women (King & Allen, 2009). Cleanliness, fidelity and faithfulness, being responsible, and attractiveness were identified as highly desirable variables that Black men found attractive in future marital partners. On the other hand, Black women were interested in well-educated, financially stable, physically attractive, independent, monogamous men who are faithful and respect women. Other research studies (Fairchild, 1985) found women

identified three most important qualities for their Black male partners: fidelity, common sense, and a sense of responsibility (Chapman, 2007; Edin, 2000; Fairchild, 1985; Hutchinson, 1999; Staples & Johnson-Boulin, 1993; Tucker & Mitchell- Kernan, 1995).

This dissertation focused in on African American individuals and couples to delve into this population's experience developing and maintaining healthy, rewarding romantic heterosexual relationships. This study provides a more robust understanding of the process and necessary characteristics involved in this development to provide a blue print for replication. However, this study asserts the importance of understanding, first, the childhood experiences of African American individuals and the impact of adverse experiences, in particular, on individuals' perceptions and its impact on future relationships. It is vital that research begins to investigate childhood experiences to better understand behaviors and expectations in relationships during adulthood. Several studies have asserted the role of childhood and the experiences therein in future relationships, previously discussed. However, limited knowledge exists on the impact of childhood on marital relationships for African Americans, specifically.

In addition to childhood experiences for this population, a consideration for the adverse effects of historical trauma transmission and systemic racism, and an appreciation for the unique experience of African American individuals are essential to any research and clinical intervention programs. From this study, it is evident that the effects of historical trauma can be identified as an historical trauma response and this trauma response can be passed down generationally and often manifested in relationship interactions with shared and opposite genders.

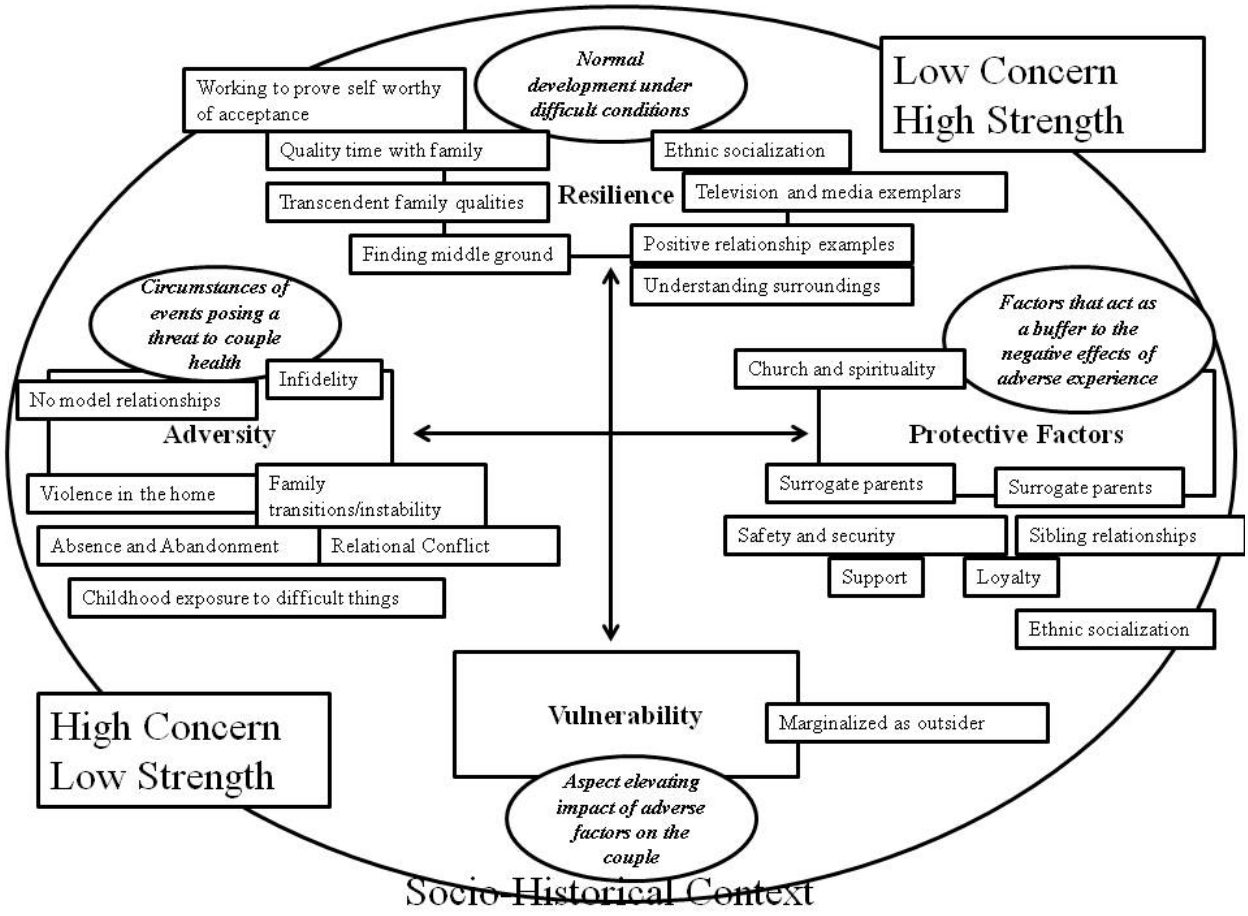
Study one looked into the childhood of thirty-one African American individuals who were able to reach marriage to learn about their narrative as it relates to childhood relationships and

experiences that influence perceptions of relationships. Results from this study illustrate three emergent themes for this subgroup of African Americans: 1) *relationships are unstable and leave holes in my life, 2) I do not have a blue print,* and *3) maybe I can have one [a relationship] anyway.* The adverse experiences of instability and a lack of blue prints created perceptions of uncertainty in relationships, with instances of fear of abandonment, hyper-vigilance in self-protection, feelings of not being lovable, and expressions of insecurity. However, given the resilience of African Americans and the significant value in and desire for long-term romantic commitment, individuals were able to identify surrogate relationships which counteracted the adverse effects and messages received during childhood. Instead, individuals learned to believe in the possibility of maybe having a healthy relationship in spite of the negative messages received during childhood.

Study Two investigated the needed ingredients in creating a strong, impermeable marital relationship for African American couples in lieu of associated risk such as marginalization and racial prejudice experiences. Ten married and five divorced couples were interviewed for this study to identify the strategies used by enduring couples in contrast to unsuccessful couples to support the development of clinical interventions for premarital and struggling couples. Results for this interpretive phenomenological study illuminate the necessary components for developing rewarding relationships, particularly for African American couples, despite experiences of marginalization and considering the socio-historical context wherein this population exists. Specifically, several themes emerged as factors of risk and resilience for enduring couples. The primary risk for African American couples included being *marginalized as an outsider*. On the other hand, resiliency factors involved: 1) *being prepared and prideful*, 2) *safety and security* and 3) *finding middle ground*. Enduring couples maintained these variables in the

construction of and within their marriage, while unsuccessful couples were without essential components over time, resulting in relationship dissolution. These findings suggest the benefit of ethnic socialization and culturally sensitive premarital counseling for couples to work on identifying the essential variables for the relationship to survive, teasing apart the particular ingredients involved in a healthy, enduring relationship for African American couples particularly, while highlighting the unique variables for the existing couple. Figure 5.1 illustrates findings from the two studies combined in this dissertation in a *risk and resilience model*, using an ecological framework, couched in a socio-historical context.

Figure 5.1: *Adapted Risk and Resilience Model for African American Couples-Childhood Influences*



Contribution to Current Knowledge

Taken together, each study provides deeper considerations for the impact of adverse experiences in childhood on perceptions of relationships in adulthood and the important factors involved in the construction of a marital relationship for African Americans in spite of adverse experiences. The findings from these studies have implications for the transmission of trauma and the trauma response inherit in the experience for many African Americans, and how relationships are viewed in the future for these individuals. Individuals spoke at length about the negative moments in their lives as children and the impact of these occurrences on relationships

during adolescence with implications on adulthood. Without addressing the impact of childhood experiences, individuals found it difficult to engage in the necessary behaviors in their marriage to ensure a long-term endurance and sustainability as a unit. In particular, individuals with adverse childhood experiences were more likely to create marital relationships with unstable foundations. Unstable foundations included the absence of positive behaviors such as fidelity, commitment, and caring behavior. These same individuals were more apt to engage in the necessary supportive behaviors to create a relationship, and eventually waver in these behaviors over the course of the marriage. Furthermore, divorced couples were more likely to be without relationship skills necessary to sustain a healthy, long-lasting relationship. In contrast, currently married individuals who experienced adverse childhood occurrences were able to build a healthy foundation, using their partner as a resource.

Moreover, the study identifies specific resources and buffers used by these individuals to counter the negative messages received during childhood. Counter messages above all, help to reshape their concept of long-term romantic connections and ethnic socialization helps to moderate the effects of racialization. These findings suggest that those who have enduring relationships use strategies to produce positive outcomes.

Clinical Implications

The maintenance of healthy and secure relationships is among the most important values within the African culture

---Joy Degruy Leary, Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome

There are several clinical implications for working with African American couples. The study supports the need for individual treatment that is culturally relevant and responsive, with forms of racial socialization and skills-building. The study implies a need for African American

individuals to engage in therapy sessions that discuss childhood experiences and their impact on views of relationships prior to marriage, suggesting a transmission of trauma through passed down messages.

Transmission of Trauma

Transmitted trauma, characterized in the form of negative examples of romantic relationships, i.e. infidelity, domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse, or the absence of role models has significant effects on an individual's belief and ability to provide comfort in relationships. Exposure to trauma limits vulnerability in relationships as a result of fear of possible future traumatic events. As a result of not working through trauma and the impact of trauma, individuals may be hesitant to become vulnerable, thereby possibly not allowing the relationship to progress. Yet, individuals who are traumatized continue to yearn for and seek out romantic relationships as a form of attachment. This continual cycle, without intervention, may continue to result in relationship trauma and emotional injury, yielding confirming beliefs about the safety of relationships, replicating experiences that we may have had in childhood for our children and those who are observing our relationships as models.

For African Americans, it is increasingly difficult to avoid the transmission of trauma. In particular, when working with this population, it is vital for clinicians to understand the nuanced reality of being African American in this country. In every instance there was the presence of past experiences for the participants. Many of the behaviors and expectations in marriage were tied directly to childhood. Though this can be explained as similar to any other child from other ethnic groups who grows up with similar experiences, positive or negative, the socio-historical context of African Americans contains greater implications. In particular, a consideration of the presence of historical transmission in the lives of adults who are seeking long-term romantic

commitment must take into account family history and intergenerational messages. Several examples of the reality of transmission were prevalent through this study. Some individuals were very aware of this transmission, hoping to find ways to avoid replication, while others were not privy to the impact of transmission on their relational behaviors in adulthood. This lack of awareness could be due to a coping mechanism or strategy to subtly bury past experiences that are too harmful to address openly. Yet, we know by doing so, we are subjugated to unconscious behaviors when moments are at their highest level of stress in relationships (Perry, 2013), consequently replicating the negative experiences of the past. Considering transmitted trauma through childhood messages and relationships, premarital counseling is suggested.

Premarital Counseling

Findings from study one suggests some African American individuals experience instability in relationships and lack healthy model relationships during childhood. Instability in childhood is evidenced to produce many adverse outcomes as identified in the study, including emotional insecurity and feelings of being unlovable. In many cases, however, individuals were able to identify buffers which provided counter-narratives, suggesting instead that they were lovable and cared for, thus, leading to increased comfort to pursue marital connection and long-term commitment. Unfortunately, some couples were unsuccessful in maintaining the marital relationship. Given childhood exposure to trauma, the absence of healthy model relationships, and the inability of some couples to develop sustainable commitment, clinical support for premarital counseling would be practical, especially to help resolve the emotional impact of childhood, while providing an opportunity for couples to construct an enduring infrastructure for the relationship to last. Research studies assert the value of premarital counseling for couples seeking long-term commitment (Stanley, 1997; 2001). Specifically, premarital therapy: 1) slows

couples down to foster deliberation, 2) sends a message that marriage matters, 3) helps couples to learn of options if help is needed, and 4) lowers the risk of subsequent marital distress or termination in some couples (Stanley, 2001).

Premarital counseling generally focuses on major issues in relationships that may create conflict between partners (e.g. infidelity, finances, parenting, life stressors, and communication). These topics are considerably important when moving toward marital health and well-being and are vital to developing a strong interaction process between two committed partners. However, current models of premarital counseling exclude the role of childhood experiences on relationship behaviors and health (Allen & Mitchell, 2005). For African American individuals, childhood experiences are significant. Given socio-historical experiences, there is high potential that many issues of transmission have not been acknowledged or addressed within family life. This, in large part, may be due to forms of resilience and survival (Boyd-Franklin, 2006; LaTaillade, 2006; Pinderhughes, 2002; Pouissant, 2002). The premarital therapeutic process highlights specific characteristics important to individuals when seeking a romantic companion, particularly through the identification of five important factors in a viable partner and the relationship itself. However, without considering the past, its impact on perceptions and therefore, marital behaviors and beliefs about relationships (King & Mitchell, 2015; Perry, 2013), individuals are at risk for constructing a relationship that may not withstand relationship challenges. Premarital counseling for African American individuals must investigate childhood experiences relating to relationships, particularly to gain insight and to assess the degree to which premarital couples may be carrying unconscious thoughts or behaviors into their marriage that can be replicated and harmful to the relationship.

Cultural Considerations for Premarital Counseling. Still, premarital therapy alone is not sufficient for this population considering its potential uniqueness as an ethnic group. In particular, findings support the need for the creation of culturally sensitive and adapted models of treatment (Parra-Cardona et al 2008) that privileges the narrative of clients concerning their childhood experiences, the relationships therein, and the impact on future marital relationships (Allen & Mitchell, 2015). Cultural relevance of theoretical models is not apparent in traditional models used in mental health services. Traditional models, according to researchers (Parra-Cardona et al., 2008), privilege the emotional expression of Eurocentric groups as ideal and standard for healthy expression. Current models ignore cultural practices that privilege other forms of expression as normal and functional for survival and resiliency. Certain concepts like racism and prejudice (interpersonal and structural) strongly mitigate "normal" emotional expression. Emotionally focused therapy is an existing treatment model that allows an individual to address attachment injuries in a healthy emotional way. Several studies have established Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) as an evidence-based treatment (Halchuk, Makinen, & Johnson, 2010; Johnson, 2002; 2004; Johnson, Hunsley, Greenberg, & Schindler, 1999; Johnson, Makinen, & Millikin, 2001; Johnson & Williams-Keeler, 1998; Makinen & Johnson, 2006). Unfortunately, these studies do not include many ethnic minority populations and therefore cannot be generalized without some level of cultural adaptation and implementation. In theory, with an emphasis on contextual factors and historical experiences illustrated by contemporary systemic inequalities, black couples would engage an intervention that is relevant and responsive to their unique cultural needs, while founded on evidenced based principles and emotionality (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; 2006).

Based on findings and the potential uniqueness of this population, a strengths-based

approach that involves engaging in shared discussion about childhood experiences, with a significant focus on the impact of childhood on perceptions of relationships and expectations from romantic partners would be useful. A trained therapist would need to focus on the learned beliefs and viewpoints of clients and how these experiences may translate into romantic relationships.

Relationship Genogram. For counseling to be most effective, couples may consider investigating their experiences of relationships by implementing a relationship genogram. The genogram will illustrate relationships, past and present, the status of those relationships, positives and negatives of the relationship, possible harm in the relationship (i.e. infidelity, betrayal, broken trust, abuse or violence, alcohol or drug abuse, abandonment or neglect), to allow dialog about the impact of these behaviors and experiences on an individual's belief about romantic relationships. Therapists should explore any counter-narratives or messages received by the individual, highlighting resources available to the individual that has allowed him/her to see relationships differently. The genogram may also allow the partner to observe the nuances of their future spouse's family history and its impact on their feelings on relationships. As well, the process may extract an openness to discuss each partner's level of commitment and desire to collaborate and compromise. In addition to allowing couples to process childhood experiences, therapists must facilitate the identification of mentor relationships with thriving couples who can provide feedback and advice on marital strategies that might help to overcome difficulties inherent in marital relationships. For premarital therapy to work effectively, the therapist must:

1. allow opportunities to discuss the importance of race/ethnicity for each individual and how this might impact the relationship with validation and empathic attunement
2. ensure the marriage is happening for reasons that heighten marital stability and longevity

3. aid to create a secure base for each partner
4. aid the couple in developing a communication style and expectations for moments of racism and prejudice
5. provide opportunities for individuals to heal from childhood pain and to receive support from their partners in the moment
6. help individuals to identify emotional resources in fictive kinships and maintain surrogates
7. aid couples to create and maintain stability in their relationship
8. assist couples to develop a shared identity for the relationship that privileges compromise and collaboration
9. facilitate couples to identify model mentor relationships for support

Prevention for Married Couples

Additionally, findings from study two indicate a need to help struggling couples foster compromise and collaboration as modeled by successful couples. Generally, unsuccessful couples tended to engage in strategies that were not helpful to the relationship (e.g. infidelity, violence, selfish behavior, failure to work together). In order to intervene with couples considering divorce, a therapist must create opportunities for healing and the provision of emotional support to recreate a marital dance that contributes to longevity. This would include a culturally adapted model of Emotionally Focused Therapy (Johnson, 2004; Parra-Cardona et al., 2008), which privileges the emotional expression of attachment injuries in intimate relationships. In order for marital counseling to work effectively, the therapist must:

1. complete discernment counseling

2. allow opportunities to discuss the importance of race/ethnicity for each individual and how this might impact the relationship with validation and empathic attunement
3. provide opportunities to heal from relationship trauma to redevelop trust and commitment
4. re-create a shared identity for the relationship (EFT)
5. re-organize and re-evaluate compromise and collaboration skills
6. help couples identify a model mentor relationship for support

Treatment Approaches

Specific treatment modalities would be useful to African American couples, particularly approaches that are sensitive to the culture of this population (Boy-Franklin, 1989). Narrative therapy is a proven model which allows clients to process their truth through engaging in story-telling, sharing the impact of their lived experiences outwardly. The process of outward expression is beneficial as an experiential process of healing (Leiblich, McAdams, & Josselson, 2004). Furthermore, narrative based therapy is particularly culturally relevant to African Americans given the cultural value in story-telling and language (Griner & Smith, 2006). Narrative therapy as a foundational tool for initial processing of stories, with empathic and culturally sensitive narration is appropriate. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy has been evidenced to be effective in changing automatic cognitions and thoughts surrounding previous experience. More specifically, CBT is evidenced to create significant outcomes in changing perceptions for clients who have understandable, however unhealthy beliefs about past experiences and the likelihood that the world around them will recreate such injury. CBT operates with the following theoretical assumptions: 1) a situation creates an automatic thought, 2) an automatic thought creates an emotion, 3) the emotion creates the reaction, and 4) the reaction creates the behavior

(Epstein & Baucom, 2002). CBT would be useful in helping to reshape cognitions surrounding childhood relationships and the benefits therein, while positively influencing commitment and engagement in romantic relationships. However, CBT alone does not adequately consider and address childhood trauma and its effect on future relationships. In instances where trauma is present, both in childhood and during a marital relationship, trauma-informed cognitive behavioral therapy is more useful as an evidence-based model of treatment (Black, Woodworth, Tremblay, & Carpenter, 2012). Trauma informed CBT not only addressed the automatic thoughts, emotions, and reactions, but rather uses the lens of trauma and its impact on behavior to guide the intervention. Adequate and intentional time is spent processing the trauma exposure and its impact on automatic thoughts and behaviors.

Implications for the Field of Couple and Family Therapy

Wilkins et al (2013) assert a need for the field of Marriage and Family Therapy or (CFT) to "begin developing a cadre of literature that ascertains the ways in which clients' cultural histories inform their presenting problems" (pg. 15). This assertion underscores an important need in our field to amplify current research addressing the relational and historical histories of African American individuals, particularly with regard to relationship development and the influence of histories on the phenomenon of disproportionate divorce rates and inordinately high cohabitation rates. Without research that investigates the experiences of African Americans in general, and more specific to coupling relationships, current therapies and therapists will continue to potentially provide ineffective treatment. Established cultural adaptation research has concluded an important need for treatment models to consider and include the cultural background of clients (Bernal & Saenz-Santiago, 2006, Parra Cardona et al, 2012; Smith et al, 2011).

However, African Americans, in general, maintain a cultural paranoia toward therapy (Grier & Cobbs, 1968) and are often incredulous about seeking mental health support (Nagayama Hall, 2001). This population is among the most absent ethnic groups in seeking mental health services and support. Reasons for this absence include: negative systemic experiences, the social stigma associated with mental health, a desire to maintain personal privacy, or inaccessibility of services (Tichenor & Blow, 2016, in review) and differences in perceptions of therapists or as Boyd-Franklin labels, "the vibe". Together, these motivations work to increase resistance and distrust in mental health services (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). Consequently, many African Americans elect to seek other forms of support when they are in need, including clergymen, family members, friends, and fictive kin (Boyd-Franklin, 1989) and community resources. In response to this avoidance, the field of Couple and Family Therapy must increase its intention to focus on underserved populations, especially African Americans.

Currently, the field is limited, especially in its use of more common treatment modalities that ignore cultural factors. For African Americans, cultural relevant treatment involves, first, being more engaged in and connected to the issues of the African American community and the creation of therapeutic models that speak to the uniqueness of the issues within this population. Therapists may need to think outside the normal paradigm of hanging shingles, expecting clients to come when they are ready. Instead, the field and the professionals within must begin to provide services that are at reduced cost, including free community-based seminars and workshops, the provision of training to clergy in areas of mental health specific to minority groups, collaboration with community organizations and childcare facilities to spread research-based information to couples and families, and building strong relationships with important community stakeholders.

Once African American couples are able to see the benefit of mental health services and its connection to the community, engagement in therapy and the process becomes increasingly paramount. Research shows the importance of the therapeutic alliance and having an intentional focus on this relationship is evident. In particular, African Americans are shown to be more engaged in therapeutic services or services of any kind when there is a relationship with the service provider that is sincere and sensitive to their experiences (Tichenor & Blow, 2016, in review). Research shows the importance of the therapeutic alliance and having an intentional focus on this relationship is evident. Training programs must provide students with learning opportunities to increase their ability to work with diverse groups, especially African Americans, through focus on the therapeutic alliance and the barriers associated with seeking mental health services for this population.

Implications for Research and Future Considerations

Future research should further investigate childhood experiences of African American couples and their perceptions of relationships on a larger scale. Though this study provides further understanding, we remain limited in our knowledge of the phenomenon of African American marital dissolution, the choice not to marry, and the increased rates of cohabitation. Due to the limitations of this study, it would be important to increase the number of participants involved in the research to confirm and to better generalize the findings of this study.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Advertisement for Research Study

Figure 5.2: *Advertisement for Research Study*

Advertisement for Research Study

African American Couples: It Is Time to Heal OUR Families and Your Story Must Be Heard.

If you are currently married or divorced and your marriage lasted for at least six month, your story can help others better understand the challenges of developing a healthy, rewarding long-term relationship, while being African American in a racialized society. *Your story* will support the development of programming and interventions for struggling couples, while providing continual assistance to thriving couples.

Couples participating in the study will be asked to participate in two 45-60 minute interviews--one individually and one together. These interviews will be conducted at locations convenient to couples, and all individual participants ***will receive a $40 Visa Gift Card at the conclusion of all steps of the study.***

If you or someone you know would be interested in participating in this interview study, **please contact Karlin J. Tichenor by phone at Google Voice or by email at ticheno1@msu.edu**. for more information.

Researchers from Michigan State University are conducting this study.

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent

Research Participant Information and Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Researchers are required to provide a consent form to inform you about the research stud, to convey that participation is voluntary, to explain risks and benefits of participation, and to empower you to make an informed decision. You should feel free to ask the researchers any questions you may have.

Study Title: The Socio-historical Influences on Coupling: The Barriers to Developing and Maintaining a Healthy and Rewarding Romantic Relationship for African American Heterosexual Couples

Researcher and Title: Dr. Adrian Blow, Principle Investigator

Department and Institution: Human Development and Family Studies, Michigan State University

Address and Contact Information: Dr. Blow can be reached by telephone: (517) 432-7092, e-mail: blowa@msu.edu, or regular mail: 552 W. Circle Drive, 3B Human Ecology, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824.

Purpose of Research:
Michigan State University researchers are interested in your experience as an African American individual in a long-term romantic relationship, legally committed through marriage. From this study, we hope to learn how African American couples develop and maintain healthy and rewarding marital relationships by understanding childhood experiences and family life, racially and prejudicially charged experiences due to being African American, and how those experiences have impacted and informed your expectations for romantic relationships. It is necessary to discover how particular ethnic/racial demographics develop expectations for long-term romantic relationships and how those expectations are carried out, how positive strategies to endure might be replicated, and what resources are most helpful to support struggling couples. We also seek to understand the ways couples define, perceive, understand, or make meaning of themselves as African Americans, their partners and his/her roles, and their racial demographic and how these concepts impact a couple's ability to adapt and develop a healthy and rewarding marriage.

1. **What You Will Do:**
   If you decide to participate in this study, the interview will take approximately forty-five minutes to one hour and will be audiotaped. Interviews must be audiotaped for data analysis purposes. Following data analysis, you are invited to a meeting with all participants of the study. The meeting will include all married and divorced couples coming together at one location to learn about and discuss the results of the study. If you would like to participate, please give your contact information to the researcher who will contact you at a later date to schedule this meeting. You are not required to participate in this meeting.

2. **Potential Benefits:**
   You will not directly benefit from your participation in this study, other than having the opportunity to share your experiences. However, your participation in this study may contribute to the understanding about how African American couples experience their romantic relationship and the effect of racialization and generational messages on healthy maintenance, and ways couples can develop coping strategies to endure contextual challenges to develop and maintain a healthy and rewarding romantic relationship.

3. **Potential Risks:**
   There are no physical, legal, or economic risks to participating in the study. However, the discussion may elicit some content that could cause emotional distress or discomfort. If you would like referrals to counseling or support groups in your area, please ask the researcher for these referrals and they will provided to you at your request.

4. **Privacy and Confidentiality:**
   Your confidentiality will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. The only exceptions to confidentiality are in circumstances of suspected child abuse, elder or dependent adult abuse, potential harm to others, or potential harm to self. In these circumstances the researcher is a mandated reported and is required to breach confidentiality for your safety and/or the safety of others.

   Your responses will remain confidential. Your name will be replaced with a number corresponding with your name. Responses will remain confidential by replacing any identifying information with that number. Audiotapes will be destroyed immediately after being transcribed.

   I agree to allow audio recording of the interview. _____ Yes ____ No Initials _____

   All transcribed interviews will be stored in password protected computer files for up to three (3) years. All other records will be kept for at least three (3) years after the project closes. Only members of the Michigan State University research team, the University Institutional Review Board, or the Human Research Protection Program will be able to access your records. This study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but the identities of all research participants will remain anonymous.

5. **Your Rights to Participate, Say No, or Withdraw:**
   Your participation is strictly voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits, to which are you otherwise entitled. You have the right to say no. You may change your mind at any time and withdraw. You may choose not to answer specific questions or to stop participating at any time

6. **Costs and Compensation for the Study:**
   The only costs associated with this study will be your time. You will be provided with a $40 gift card after completion of the interview.

7. **Contact Information for Questions and Concerns:**
If you have concerns or questions about this study, such as scientific issues, how to do any part of it, or to report an injury (i.e. physical, psychological, social, financial, or otherwise), please contact the researcher, Dr. Adrian Blow who can be reached by telephone: (517) 432-7092, e-mail: blowa@msu.edu, or regular mail: 552 W. Circle Drive, 3B Human Ecology, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824.

If you have any questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at (517) 355-2180, Fax (517) 432-4503, or e-mail irb@msu.edu, or regular mail at 207 Olds Hall, MSU, East Lansing, MI 48824.

8. **Documentation of Informed Consent:**
Your signature below means that you voluntarily agree to participate in the research study.

Signature _____ Date _____

You will be given a copy of this form to keep

APPENDIX C

Guiding Research Questions

1. How do African American couples (married or divorced) describe their family life growing up?
    a. What are the positives about family life growing up?
    b. What are the negatives about family life growing up?
    c. How important was race in their upbringing and how did it shape perceptions about themselves and the world around them, including relationships?
    d. What are motivating factors to marriage for African American couples?
    e. What are the mitigating factors to marriage for African American couples?
2. What messages do African Americans adults report receiving about long-term relationships and marriage during childhood?
    a. What messages do they receive about their gender-counterparts? From where do these messages come? What is the effect of these messages?
    b. What messages do they receive about themselves in relation to their gender counterparts? From where do these messages come? What is the effect of these messages?
    c. How are these messages played out in individual expectations about and behaviors within romantic relationships?
3. What resources utilized by couples lead to developing and maintaining successful and rewarding relationships?
    a. What are the sociological challenges to developing a healthy and rewarding long-term romantic relationship for African American heterosexuals?

b. What factors of resiliency do African American couples use to overcome racialization and social disparities?
c. Can successful factors of resilience be replicated for struggling or divorcing couples?
d. What therapeutic approaches can be developed to strengthen struggling couples and provide continued support for successful, enduring couples?

4. What meaning-making processes utilized by couples lead to developing and maintaining successful and rewarding relationships?
5. What coping strategies utilized by couples lead to developing and maintaining successful and rewarding relationships?

APPENDIX D

Interview Guide

Interview Guide for African American Couples (Married or Divorced)

Thank you for helping me with my study about the challenges on how African American heterosexual couples develop and maintain long-term healthy and rewarding romantic relationships. I would like to begin by hearing about your childhood and family life.

1. Could you describe some of your family experiences, both positive and negative?
2. What types of relationships and interactions did you have with family members growing up? Can you describe in detail.
3. What types of challenges did your family experience (if any) when you were a child or adolescent? Can you describe in detail.
4. What types of successes did your family experience (if any) when you were a child or adolescent? Can you describe in detail.
5. Was race a factor for your family as you grew up?
    a. If so, how so? How did you parents talk about race
    b. If not, why not?
6. What type of relationship did your parents have as you grew up? Can you describe in detail.
    a. How were their interactions? (Were they close, intimate, friendly, romantic, etc.)
    b. How did they talk about one another?
    c. How did this talk affect you?
7. What type of environment did you grow up in?
    a. What was your SES?
    b. Was your neighborhood rural, urban, or suburban?
    c. What was the racial climate of your neighborhood, town, or city?
    d. What did you learn most from growing up in your environment?

Next, I would like to ask you some questions about your experiences with racism and prejudice and how you endured, if they occurred.

1. Have you ever witnessed or directly experienced racially charged or prejudicial occurrences as a child or adolescent? Can you describe a few of these experiences, if so?
    a. If not, what do you think were the reasons you were able to avoid these occurrences?
2. How do you think those experiences affected you?
    a. How did you respond when those occurrences happened?
    b. How long did it take for you to get over the experience?
    c. Why do you think it took as long as it did?
    d. To whom did you go for support?
    e. What did your parents or supporters say in response to your story?
3. As an adult, have you ever witnessed or directly experienced racially charged or prejudicial occurrences as a child or adolescent? Can you describe a few of these experiences, if so?
    a. How did you respond when those occurrences happened?

b. How long did it take for you to get over the experience?
c. Why do you think it took as long as it did?
d. To whom did you go for support?
e. How did the support person(s) respond to your story?

I would now like to ask you about the development of your romantic relationship and the reasons why you were able to maintain the relationship to the point of marriage.

1. Can you describe the process of development for your courtship?
    a. What was your view about the opposite gender when you were an adolescent to teenager?
    b. What types of things did you hear people say about the opposite gender as an adolescent or teenager?
    c. When did you first start dating?
    d. What were your parent's or family members' reactions to dating generally?
    e. Where did these reactions come from, do you think?
    f. How did these reactions affect your thoughts and feelings about the opposite gender?
    g. When did you meet your current partner?
    h. What prompted you to meet one another?
        i. What were you attracted to about the other person?
    i. How long did you date before engagement?
    j. What are some particular experiences you remember that increased your desire to be with this person? Why did it increase?
    k. What are some particular experiences you remember that decreased your desire to be with this person? Why did it decrease?
    l. How did your relationship survive the challenges to reach marriage?

Next, I would like to ask you about challenges within your relationship and how you handled those challenges.

1. What do you think the primary role of your partner should be in relationship to you?
    a. Does your partner fulfill that role in your life?
    b. How does your partner respond to your needs? Please describe.
2. What are/were some reoccurring challenges in your relationship presently?
    a. Does being African American in this country have an impact on you?
    b. If so, how does being African American in this country impact your relationship?
3. What are/were some previous challenges that you have overcome as a couple?
4. What are/were the ways you and your partner work(ed) through these challenges?
    a. Are/were your strategies helpful?
        i. If so, how so.
        ii. If not, why do you think this is the case?
5. (Married) Have you ever considering separation or divorce?
    a. What is your belief about divorce?
    b. What kept or keeps you committed?
6. (Divorced) What was your belief about divorce before you were married?
    a. When did you start considering divorce?
    b. What are some of the primary reasons for considering divorce?

c. Was there a last straw? What was it?
d. What prevented you from deciding to work it out?

Finally, I would like you to reflect on how your childhood experiences, your racial identity, and your racial experiences contributed to your expectations and behaviors in your marriage.

Thank you very much for giving me time for this interview.

Announcement: One of the ways I am recruiting participants for this research study is through word of mouth (WOM). If there are any couples, both married and divorced, you can think of who may be interested in participating in this study, would you be willing to give me the name and possibly the contact information of one or both of the individuals in the marital/divorced relationship that might be able to share their story as well?

Name:

Telephone Number:

Please tell me the address where I should send your gift card for participating in this study.

APPENDIX E

Referral List

Table 5.1: *Referral List*

List of Local Counseling and Support Groups

Website of Resources:

Counselors/Therapists	Support Groups/Other Family Resources
Perspectives Therapy Services 908 East Mount Hope Avenue Lansing MI 48910 810-494-7180	**Ele's Place – Grief and Loss for Teens** 1145 W. Oakland Ave. Lansing MI 48915 517-482-1315
MSU Couple and Family Therapy Clinic 138 Service Road East Lansing MI 48824 517-432-2272	**Child and Family Charities** 4287 Five Oaks Dr. Lansing MI 48911 517-882-4000
Delta-Waverly Psychology and Counseling Associates 5123 W. St. Joseph Hwy Suite 103 Lansing MI 48917 517-323-4099	**St. Vincent's Catholic Charities** 2800 West Willow St. Lansing MI 48917 517-323-4734
Assessment and Relationship Center 1905 Abbot Rd., Suite 1 East Lansing MI 48823 517-282-8249	**MSU Psychological Clinic** 316 Physics Rd. East Lansing, MI 48824 517-355-9564
Sara Dupuis Private Practice – East Lansing 517-944-44232 or rudolp21@msu.edu	
David LaCharite **Integrity Counseling Services** Okemos MI 517347-0988 or drlacharite@hotmail.com	
Diversity Psychological Services **Lansing Office** 1310 Turner St., Suite A Lansing MI 48906 **East Lansing Office** 601 Abbott Rd., Suite 103 East Lansing, MI 48823	

http://therapists.psychologytoday.com/rms/prof_results.php?city=Lansing&county=Ingham&state=MI&spec=334

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