The purpose of this study is to examine the marital lifecycle experiences of African American couples. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 6 couples who have been married for 33 years to 50 years. Pre-interview questions were given to each individual for reflection prior to the interview. The couples were asked about their experience as a couple, parenting, launching children into young adulthood, life as a couple again, becoming grandparents, and retirement. Understanding marital success as described by the couples in times of strength and challenge provides important insight to quality relationships. This qualitative data analysis revealed several themes: intimacy, communication, commitment, spirituality, parental role models, and education as keys to marital success.
AN EXAMINATION OF MARITAL LIFECYCLES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN COUPLES

MARRIED TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OR MORE

A Thesis

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, my father, Mr. Taylor J. Wimberly who passed away on February 27, 2004, and to my mother Ms. Creasey Farrar Wimberly who gives me a cup of inspiration whenever I need it. My mother is a phenomenal woman who has overcome many challenges in life, she is truly the wind beneath my wings and I love her very much. …and to my two daughters Crystal and Cherie, and their father Henry who taught me how to love unconditionally. Our daughters are a joy and are beautiful gifts from God almighty. I am proud of the young African American women they have become. Love always and God bless.
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Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.

Psalm 37.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding…In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths. Proverbs 3:5-6
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

This research seeks to provide insight from six unique couples sharing information about their married life with this researcher. Couples in this study articulated the significance and differences associated with their marital reality. All the individuals, however, indicated that it takes work among other things, to endure long-term marriage successfully. The couples indicated that if by telling their stories, it would make a difference for other couples that are planning to marry, or for couples who are on the journey and at different lifecycles in their marriage, then; it would be worth it. The foundation for this research is to consider long-term African American marriage from a position of strength, encouragement, and appreciation, as opposed to a deficit or pathological model of marriage relationships often portrayed in the media and other venues of African American family life. The authors of “Fighting for Your African American Marriage” discuss the special issues and concerns that confront African American marriages, (for example, protecting children, racism, stereotyped views of black women and men, money, accommodating different backgrounds, attitudes about color, in-laws and kin, the church, etc.) Whitfield, Markman, Stanley, Blumberg, 2001).

Theory

Grounded theory was chosen to study a small sample of African American married couples and the attributes of their long-term marriage success, experiences and relationship in their marital lifecycle.

Grounded theory refers to a theory that is inductive in its approach to qualitative research and it uses a systematic set of procedures to arrive at a theory about a basic social process. (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, and Strauss and Corbin, 1990 as cited by Borgatti.) In this study, the long-term African American marriage is the social process and the grounded theory approach allows the data to develop and emerge from the interviews with the couples directly.

Research in the area of African American marriages reveals that it is extremely difficult to understand African American marriages without being aware of the social, economic, racial, and historical factors that have stressed male female relationships beyond those stresses experienced by majority couples (Pinderhughes, 2002). These societal experiences and the ways African
Americans have traditionally responded to them has caused difficulties for marital relationships resulting in a decline of marriages at a rate higher than that of all other racial groups in the U.S. It is further noted by Pinderhuges that the historical perspective of African Americans in the U.S. beginning with their arrival and treatment has influenced all aspects of African American life, especially marriage.

It is important to give voice to African American married couples because limited research has been done to study the experiences of the 43% of black couples who are married. (McKenry & Price, 2000). The authors of this research further state, “…The impact of societal stressors (e.g., racism and discrimination) on black couples’ marital relationships, and how black couples establish marital roles and negotiate the completion of marital tasks has historically been neglected. In addition, those factors that predict long-term marriages, and the processes associated with marital transitions and the adjustment of newlywed couples, have been studied less in black couples and other couples of color than in white couples.” (McKenry & Price, 2000).

While significant research has been done on the quality of long-term marriages in general, what follows are findings of some studies that are not necessarily of African Americans. These findings will be compared with the research from this study of the African American couples. Reports from a study of couples married between 25 and 46 years reveal a number of essential ingredients for long-term satisfying marriage. The common characteristics emerged despite differences in religion, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, geographic locale, and other demographic variables (Kaslow & Robison, 1996). The following represents the theoretical concepts of the healthy family and married couples:

**Characteristics of Healthy Couples/Families.**

1. **Adaptive.** Able to adapt to life cycle changes and to stressful events. Also able to access adequate external resources and use good communication.
2. **Commitment.** Involves recognizing individual’s worth and acceptance of the value of the family.
3. **Communication.** Entails clear, open, and frequent communication.
4. **Encouragement.** Ability to instill a sense of belonging while encouraging individual development, an idea encompassed in Stierlin et al.’s (1987) concept of “co-evolution.”
5. **Appreciation.** The ongoing practice of doing things that are positive for each other, just because with no ulterior motive.
6. **Religion/Spiritual.** Expression of God and going to church or other form of religious expression.

7. **Social.** Connection with the larger society, including extended family, friends, and neighbors, and participation in community/school activities.

8. **Roles.** Flexible role structure and everyone knows and acknowledge their roles and responsibilities which allows for effective functioning as a family during times of crisis and under normal circumstances.

9. **Time.** Sharing both quality and quantity time where family enjoys being together.

Findings from a study of 147 first marriages of over 20 years reported eight characteristics of successful marriages as follows: (Fennell (1987 as cited by Kaslow & Robison 1996);

1. Lifetime commitment to marriage.
2. Respect for one’s spouse as a best friend, including mutual self-disclosure.
3. Loyalty to spouse and the expectation of reciprocity.
4. Strong, shared moral values.
5. Commitment to sexual fidelity.
6. Desire to be a good parent.
7. Faith in God and spiritual commitment.
8. Companionship with spouse, including spending a great deal of enjoyable time together over the course of a lifetime.

Findings from a study by Kaslow and Hammerschmidt (1992 as cited by Kaslow & Robison 1996 p. 155) investigated 20 couples married 25-46 years to elicit ideas as to what made their marriages work well. Their list follows:

1. Trust in each other, which includes fidelity, integrity, and feeling “safe.”
2. Good problem solving and coping skills.
3. Permanent commitment to the marriage.
4. Open, honest, good communication.
5. Enjoy spending time together, have fun together, have good senses of humor—yet appreciate some spaces in togetherness for separate activities.
6. Shared value system, interests, and activities.
7. Consideration, mutual appreciation, and reciprocity—easy give and take.
8. Deep and abiding love for one another, enriched by being dear friends and lovers; continue to find one another attractive, appealing, desirable, and interesting.

Couples married for at least 30 years provided their perceptions of the qualities, which sustained their relationship in time of closeness and relational strain. (Robinson, & Blanton, 1993). The characteristics identified by the couples in this study included: intimacy balanced with
autonomy, commitment communication, religious orientation, and congruent perceptions of the relationship.

According to Glenn, (1990), as cited by Robison & Blanton, (1993) marital success involves marital stability and marital quality. This means it is not enough to identity success with one dimension of time together, but that the quality of that time together over the duration of marriage as perceived by the couple is important. However, Glenn, as cited by Robison & Blanton, 1993) makes the point that marriages may endure or dissolve regardless of the level of quality, and quality may vary within a marriage. Glenn suggests quality should be considered in conjunction with stability in the study of marital success.

The goals of this study are to consider the account of research in this area in general, but more importantly to highlight the diverse views of African American couples for insight and future research. The primary research questions posed to the couples were:

1. Given the high rates of divorce in general and especially, among African American couples what makes their marriage work, and continue to endure successfully despite the statistics?
2. What are the challenges faced during the marriage lifecycle? For example, challenges associated with being a couple, first time parents, adult children leaving home, becoming grandparents, and retirement, etc. How do couples discuss the processes used to handle conflict and differences? Couples were asked about the level of intimacy throughout the life of their marriage as well.

The significance of this study

The study is important because it adds a dimension to the subject that has not been exhausted in the research literature affirming the lifecycles of African American couples who perceived their marriages as satisfying. It is important to learn about the successful strategies, principles and philosophies these long-term couples have employed over the years. The kinds of things that make for success may be taken for granted, but couples on the journey, may find these concepts helpful if they only had the knowledge of what these couples bring to the table of marriage success. It is anticipated that because of this project future research will be an outcome to further our knowledge base, and further advance program opportunities to facilitate and benefit more African American couples.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Research that examines African American marriages of twenty-five to fifty years or more is limited. However, the literature and research concerning African American marriages and families, as well as other long-term marriages will add historical context, perspective and insight to this study. The literature on this topic of long-term African American marriages, marital lifecycles will provide valuable information and insight to newly married African American couples, as well as couples who may be experiencing similar circumstances at the various marital lifecycles, as the couples who will be interviewed in this study.

While there have been few studies of long-term African American marriages, there have been numerous studies on African American families primarily to try and understand the structure, survival, personal relationships, and status of these families. Many of the studies focused on the dysfunctional characteristics of African American family life. (As cited in Journal of Black Studies, 2000, by Billingsley, 1968, 1992; Gaines, 1997; Hill, 1972; McAdoo, 1992b; Mosley-Howard & Evans, 1995; Staples & Johnson, 1993). It is their view that the historical view of the African American family is seen as a deficit-oriented or deficiency-oriented model and not from a more contemporary view of strength. As cited in Journal of Black Studies, 2000, by Billingsley, 1968, 1992; Gaines, 1997; Hill, 1972; McAdoo, 1992b; Mosley-Howard & Evans, 1995; Staples & Johnson, 1993, they discuss African American families from a family systems theory and Africentric worldview as they examine the experiences and status of African American families today. In addition the researchers in that study focused on the cultural aspects of the family such as role flexibility, the extended support systems, and their belief systems. They also examined the structures, roles, strengths, and adaptive characteristics in African American family relationships. As cited in Journal of Black Studies, 2000, by Billingsley, 1968, 1992; Gaines, 1997; Hill, 1972; McAdoo, 1992b; Mosley-Howard & Evans, 1995; Staples & Johnson, 1993, these researchers found in a review of the literature for their study that African American families from the 1960s to the 1990s that family structure was usually examined in terms of marital and parental status with focus on legal and biological connections. The connections influenced the way families problem solved and made decisions and assigned roles. This study pointed out that the positive functions served by marriage and the patterns and connections that go beyond biology and the legal system are rarely examined as strengths in the discussion of African American families. It was noted however “that a study by Hill (1972, 1993) and his associates
found that married-couple families are still a strong feature of African American life and that above the poverty level, they constitute a majority of families. Hill noted that married-couple families are much better able to resist the negative pressures of society and take advantage of its opportunities than other types of families.” (As cited in Journal of Black Studies, 2000, by Mosley-Howard & Evans, P.428-429).

Pinderhughes, (2002) research concerning African Americans indicated that not until the 1960s have scholars been concerned about the rising divorce rate, decrease in marriage, and the high male/female relationship instability rates among African Americans. As found in a study by Pinsof, (2002), the factors responsible for rising divorce rates in the U.S. and elsewhere are the increased human lifespan, the changes in women’s roles, and the shift in values and beliefs about marriage and divorce. The study indicated that divorce among African Americans has been higher than that for other groups—with divorce rates twice that for whites (as cited by Pinderhughes, Tucker & Mitchell-Kerman, 1995). Also, the decline in marriages has been even higher to the point that some experts have expressed fear for the survival of the African American families. In 1960, 78% of African American households included a married couple; this rate decreased to 64% in 1970; and by the late 1980s, only 48% of African American households included both a husband and a wife. The trend reached an all-time low of 39% by 1993 (Billingsley & Morrison-Rodriguez, 1998 as cited by Pinderhughes). According to U.S. Bureau of Census, in 2000, 16% of African American males were married, as compared to 60% of whites; 37% of African American females were married, nearly twice as many unmarried as compared to 57% of white females. The study argues that the contextual conditions and the societal role of African Americans have been responsible for the problems that threaten marital occurrence, quality, and stability. The study also states that limited economic conditions or opportunities, the discrediting of African American identities, and the use of social practices and policies have legitimized inequality (Billingsley& Morrison-Rodriguez, 1988; Lawson & Thompson, 1994 as cited by Pinderhughes).

Further, the significance of slavery, Franklin (1967), Frazier (1966), and Patterson (1998) is cited as the initial factor that sabotaged African American marriages: slaves were forbidden by law to marry in some states, and other states made it difficult for slaves to marry. Any emotional bonds that slaves tried to create were undermined by the beliefs and social structures that viewed African Americans as inferior; males were believed to be oversexed, promiscuous, and incapable
of marital commitment; slave sales separated families and disrupted relationships, and females were sexually exploited (Furstenberg, Hershberg, & Modell, 1979; Jordan, 1971; Stamp, 1956 as cited by Pinderhughes). African American males were invisible, except when perceived as aggressive and out of control—a perception that persists today (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 1999 as cited by Pinderhughes). Further research indicated that African Americans were not considered to be fully human as reflected in the three fifths compromise in the Constitution which states that, in counting the population, five slaves should be considered equal to three person (Article 1, Section 2, The Constitution of the United States of America as cited by Pinderhughes), and slave fathers of children were not named or listed in birth records. Only the slave mother’s name and the name of the mother’s owner were recorded. The researcher concluded that this practice... reflects the long-standing tendency in this country to nullify and neglect maleness in African-American families. For all intent and purposes, the African American male was a zero—he did not exist. (Pinderhughes, 1999, p187).

Pinderhughes’ research in Nigeria in 1974 among the Yoruba tribes where large number of slaves were captured, confirmed that illegitimacy and one-parent families were patterns that developed after the arrival of slaves in the U. S. The research team found no illegitimacy among the traditional tribe members: if a man impregnated a woman, he married her (Pinderhughes, 1978). Although this custom was facilitated by the practice of polygamy, it also meant that, for those natives being taken from Africa, every mother had a husband and every child had a legal father (Pinderhughes, 1999). Patterson describes the most devastating impact of the “holocaust of slavery” as “the ethnocidal assault on gender roles, especially those of father and husband, leaving deep scars in the relations between Afro-American men and women (1998, p.25 as cited by Pinherhughes).

Landry (2000) discuses the two-parent black and white families in a time when so much emphasis is on the single-parent families, the breakup of families through divorce, and many other ills confronting the contemporary family. Landry conducts a study of “intact” black and white families which remain the norm and the statistical majority among white and, until recently black families as well. The discussion and research are focused on the role of black women as pioneers in changing the traditional family from where spousal roles were well defined and segregated from each other to where spouses, wives, share the breadwinner role, even those wives with small children. Also, one where husbands at least to some degree share in the housework
and childrearing responsibilities. The research shows that black and white families played
different roles at different times. The data show that black middle-class wives pioneered an
egalitarian ideology of the family that contrasted sharply with the domesticity prominent among
whites. Black middle-class wives championed a “commitment to family, community and careers
which offered a different perspective to womanhood. White women adopted this perspective
according to Landry in the 60s and 70s; the civil rights movement influenced them.

Landry also discusses how black families challenged the traditional family paradigm as black
wives were exempted from the cult of domesticity and as part of the definition of true
womanhood, white society had made it easier for black families to depart from the 19th century
paradigm and thus developed alternatives. Again the discussion of African Americans and the
impact of slavery and the obstacles to preserving a two-parent family system were discussed.
Freedom from the master-slave relationship, they looked forward to their own strategy for
survival and for the allocation of family roles.

In the book “Fighting for Your Empty Nest Marriage: reinventing your relationship when the
kids leave home,” a survey was conducted of long-term marriages. The research was based on
the PREP program (the Prevention and Relationship enhancement Program). Its aims is the to
help long-term married couples navigate the issues, conflict, associated with marriage typically
discovered after children leave home and the couple are starting what is referred to as the second
part of their marriage.

Kinsel, (1983) researched factors related to the relationships of couples married fifty years or
more. Although this was a quantitative study, the processes, techniques and instrumentation used
will be valuable in this project and study of long-term African American marriages and the family
life cycle investigation.

Marriage Cycle 1: Life as a Newly Marriage Couple

Survival tips for African American couples are discussed by Diggs, & Pastor (1998) for
example, the importance of extended family and in-laws should not be taken for granted! It is
also suggested that investing time in these relationships and supporting a spouse’s bonds to
his/her own family of origin can reinforce the marital relationship.

Secondly, Diggs, & Pastor stress the value of focusing on the relationship, regardless of income
level of either spouse. Furthermore, aspects that contributes to happy marriages such as when
husbands who support their wives’ decision to work assist with household responsibilities.
Moreover, when employed wives are sensitive to their husbands’ need for respect and balance of power in the marital relationship is important. Diggs & Pastor, highlight the importance of building connections to church, neighborhood, and social groups as invaluable resources for friendships that can last for a lifetime, as well as become a buffer and defense for living in a society that still suffers from forms of discrimination. Becoming involved together, as well as having separate interest builds closeness and cooperation in the marriage, as well.

Marriage Cycle 2: Parenting Years

The transition to parenthood has been shown to have an impact on marriages. When couples are in their twenties and become parents for the first time research has shown that these couples are more at risk for marital difficulty and likely divorce. Education levels and marriage expectations are also factors in the quality of the marriage at the time of becoming parents. The manner in which couples negotiate the demands of parenthood will determine the quality and strength of the marriage. (Helms-Erikson, H. 2001.)

Research regarding the type of parenting styles African American parents choose is limited. However, there is considerable research by Baumrind (as cited by Querido, Warner, and Eyberg, 2003 p272) regarding three highly studied parenting styles by mostly European, middle class parents. The three parenting styles defined by Baumrind are authoritarian, authoritative and permissive. Authoritarian parenting is characterized by direct discipline and often physical punishment by one or both parents when children are disobedient or misbehave. The authoritative parenting style is distinguishes parents who provide emotional support, firm limit setting, reasoning and responsiveness to children. The permissive parenting style consists of few demands or restrictions placed on children. There is research that found African American parents are more likely to emphasize shared parenting roles with community members and use of physical punishment more often than European American parents, (Hurd, Moore, & Rogers, 1995 as cited by Querido et al p272.) However the link between physical discipline used by mother’s of European descent and that of African-American mothers showed risk factor for disruptive behavior and antisocial behavior for the children of mothers of European descent but did not show the same result for African American families, (McLeod, Kruttschnitt, Dornfield (1994, as cited by Querido et al p. 272.). Positive outcomes for African American children associated with
the authoritative parenting style is shown evident for children as young as three years. (Tamis-LeMonda, 1999 as cited by Querido et al, p272.).

A study of working-class Black families reported discipline of young children aimed at obedience, which was not viewed as negative but as caring and appropriate. The intent for emphasizing obedience was a way to demonstrate love and respect as well as to make life easier for the child and to help children achieve in school. (as cited by Peters 1981 in McAdoo, 1997).

Marriage and Raising Adolescents

Interestingly, adolescents who describe their mothers as authoritative report better interpersonal relations than adolescents with authoritarian or permissive mothers. While the debate on what parenting style is most effective, evidence points to the authoritative parenting style as having better outcomes and predicts fewer child behavior problems in young African American children.

Marriage Cycle 3 (Empty Nest)

Mackey & O’Brien (1999) completed a study in which a diverse group of couples were interviewed on how their marriage has changed over the years in areas of conflict resolution, sexual relationships, and emotional intimacy. The results from the interview indicated that couples who had launched their children,( also known as empty nesters,) viewed most aspects of their marriage positively except for their sexual relationship. In addition, Mackey & O’Brien found that the couples they interviewed thought conflict was less of a problem in later years of marriage than during the childrearing years. The conflict was more open and direct. Couples appeared to deal with issues in the moment and did not hold back their feelings. In the Mack & O’Brien study it was found that while most aspects of marriage was positive in later years that, however, sexual relationship was found to be less satisfying. What did remain important for the couples who participated in the study was the level of physical contact such as touching without sexual intercourse. This research done by Mackey and O’Brien summarized marriage as a “u shaped” curve where in the beginning of the marriage things are great, but get tough during child rearing years, and after the children leave home their marriage is great again. It appears for some couples that hold on things get better the longer they are married.

In contrast, research has also shown the U-shaped relationship between marital happiness and marital duration not to be necessarily U-shaped. In an analysis based on a fixed-effects pooled
time-series model with multiple-wave panel data, findings show declines in marital happiness at all marital durations and no support for an upturn in marital happiness in the later years. The relationship between marital happiness and marital duration is slightly curvilinear, with the steepest declines in marital happiness occurring during the earliest and latest years of marriage. VanLaningham, J., Johnson, D. R., Amato, P. (2001).

Research studies have shown a link between “stress and marriage that focus on a specific aspect of life stress and marital quality. For example, a number of studies have focused on stress in and from the workplace and marital quality (Meeks et al., 1986; Jenner, 1988; McLaughlin, Cornier, & Cornier, 1988), while others have focused also on stress and sexuality (Morokoff & Gilliland, 1993) or stress and life-stage transitions (Suitor & Pillemer, 1987) and marital quality. Similarly, many of the studies that focus on stress and marital quality in older marriages also focus on specific life events, like the presence of adult children in the home (Aquilino & Supple, 1991) and the division of household labor in later life (Suitor, 1991).” (as cited by Harper, J. M., Schaalie, Bruce, G., Sandberg, J. G. (2000 p2.).

Other studies argue that it is not necessarily the U-shaped relations that sustains long-term marriages but rather the quality of the marriage relationships is more attributed to the way married persons feel about their marriages and the that the marriage is characteristic of the relationship between spouses. (Glen, N. D. (1998).

Marriage and becoming Grandparents:

The study of grandparenthood from the African American perspective has been limited. When studied generally the focus is on the role for grandmothers as a surrogate parent to their grandchildren (Minkler, Roe, and Price, 1992 as cited by Barer, 2001). The surrogate parent role is usually linked to an intervention as a result of substance abuse on the part of the adult children who may produce crack cocaine babies for example ( Burton, 1992. as cited by Barer, 2001). Becoming a grandparent for many African Americas is complex and the result difficult circumstances as revealed in research that shows that Black grandparents are more likely to be active participants in the rearing of their grandchildren. (Taylor, R. J., Chatters, L.M., Tucker, M. B., and Lewis, E. (1990.) Studies show that grandmothers are often available for several reasons such as for the adolescent mother, parental illness, and for parents who are incarcerated (Hunter
Taylor, 1998, as cited by Barer, 2001). The media sometimes refers to these grandmothers as the “silent saviors,” or “second line of defense.”

Because of the changing of our family patterns, grandparents are now taking more active roles in society. For example they are helping raise their grandchildren, in many cases, because of teenage pregnancy, single parenting and divorce (King, 1997.) The research conducted by King, showed that grandparents who have a positive relationship with their grandchildren have had a similar positive relationship with their grandparents when they were young. Those who have not experienced a close-knit bond with their grandparents during childhood do not have a close relationship with their grandchildren as grandparent. Geographical distance of grandparent to grandchild can make it difficult to have a close relationship.

Further research related to the importance of the grandparent role indicates that gender of the grandparent is important and that children report to have “warmer, more expressive relationships with grandmothers” (Eisenberg, 1988 p205). Women typically are socialized toward maintaining family-based relationships which promotes the strongest ties between grandmothers and granddaughters. However, because male and female roles tend to shift after retirement, some researchers believe there is movement toward unisex gender roles for grandparents in now they relate to grandchildren. Spitz & Ward. (1998). The research by Spitz & Ward suggest that the meaning of grandparenthood an be different for grandmothers and grandfathers. Grandmother typically provide more emotional support to their own children and grandchildren. They may also act as a surrogate parent to grandchildren. Grandfathers are more likely to focus on non-personal issues, such as work or school, and are more likely to offer financial support to grandchildren.

Managing Conflict in the Marriage

Conflict is an accepted aspect of life whenever two or more people or joined together, whether in a family, a corporate board room, or a church business meeting. Conflict will occur in most marriages for certain. The effect of conflict between a married couple and the well-being of their children who experience high marital conflict of their parents has often long-term negative impact. Research shows that children who live in high conflict home environments may experience as many issues as parents who are divorced, or parents who never married. (Burg, J.E. 2003).
“The powerful emotional currents of relationship conflict and the cultural pull to give up on the marriage can overwhelm one’s motivation to fight for one’s marriage. A strong commitment to the marriage is an invaluable resource in difficult times.” (Edwards, 2003, p189). In Fighting for Your African American Marriage, discussions about how couples handle conflict is essential because all couples have problems. The manner in which the couples resolve their problems may differ over the life of the marriage depending on the couple. Although some problems are more difficult then others, couples who seem to manage use a common set of skills and attitudes such as working as a team, not rushing to a solution, but taking time to understand the issues together (Whitfield, Markman, Stanley, Blumberg, 2001).

**Factors to consider in Long-term marriage success**

There are likely as many factors that account for the success of long-term marriages as there are for each marriage. One author reveals the power of relationships that endure through extreme hardship. A study of couples who have survived despite the alcoholism of one partner was examined. (Shirely, 2002). The couples in the study revealed the resources and strengths available to them which helped them endure in a complex relationship. The author dealt with the concept and framework of family resiliency in an unique an compelling manner based on the marital relationship rather than individual experience. Shirley discusses couple’s who were interviewed accounts of courage, commitment, and romantic love, as well as resentment, frustration, and difficulty in communication, so as to provide insight into what helps some marriages succeed in the face of considerable obstacles.

In an article that discusses the dilemmas facing Christian marriages, a lack of commitment is said to be the single biggest threat to the institution of marriage. Anything that undermines commitment to marriage as a Divine institution, designed by God to last for a lifetime, is a threat to the institution of marriage.” (Edwards, 2003). Cohabitation and an increase in casual attitude toward intimate relationship and commitment among young singles today is described as seeking “relationships without rings, sex without strings.” (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2001, as cited by Edwards 2003.)

Edwards further states his belief that a society with a pleasure-oriented, individualism; materialism and programs in the media seeks to destroy the value system of commitment to long-term marriage. Edwards believes that the sexual exploitation of our youth has profound undermining impact on the institution of marriage. In addition, Edwards believes partner’s
lasting commitment to the relationship is the essential attitude that underlines each partner’s motivation to invest in the relationship, willingness to give the relationship a high priority in one’s life, and perseverance in working out problems inevitable in intimate relationships.

It is noted that in the Christian community that the divorce rate among Evangelical Christians is about the same as other groups. Barna Research Group reported that the divorce rates for Evangelicals, Born-Again Christians, and other groups were all around 34% (Barna, 2001 as cited by Edwards 2003 p. 1992.) Edwards suggests that a mentoring program for churches in order to support marriages. The program consists of older experienced couples who meet regularly with younger couples to encourage and help with understanding reality including the joy and struggles of maintaining a life-long marriage relationship.

Although the divorce rates for couples with religious beliefs and practices are relatively the same as in the secular community, African Americans find emotional, spiritual, and intellectual support and satisfaction at church. Reaching out to others is a related strength of African Americans; getting involved in a church group provides the opportunity to both give and receive social support. Social support is crucial for marital well-being, (Olson, D. H., & DeFrain, J.,1994).

**Maintaining Intimacy in the marriage**

Factors of attribution for happiness and good communication in marriage were found in emotionally healthy wives who communicate more and tend to be noncomplaining; and in emotionally healthy husbands who tend to play down problems and communicate well with their wives. (Houck & Daniel, 1994.) Most would agree that intimacy is a key element of marital quality.

**Summary of the Literature Review**

While the literature related to long-term marriages provides perspectives based on qualitative, quantitative and some longitudinal studies over the course of many lifetimes (in an attempt to reveal what makes for marital success whether for African Americans or other ethnicity) there still remains a need for further insight. This study attempts to bring additional insight through the stories of a small sample of African American couples.
Assumptions and Rationale for a Qualitative Design

A key assumption of a qualitative study is interest in interpretation of meaning from how people make sense of their lives, and experiences as well as how they relate these realities in the organization of the world. As a qualitative researcher this writer is interested in the richness and meaning that long-term African American married couples give to their lives as a married couple. This exploratory qualitative study was designed to gain this information by personally interviewing six African American couples who have been married for twenty-five years, or more.

Type of Design Used

Grounded theory was chosen to study a small sample of African American married couples and the attributes of their long-term marriage success, experiences and relationship in their marital lifecycle.

Grounded theory refers to a theory that is inductive in its approach to qualitative research and it uses a systematic set of procedures to arrive at a theory about basic social processes. (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, and Strauss and Corbin, 1990 as cited by Borgatti.) There are three basic elements to grounded theory, concepts, categories, and propositions. (Corbin and Strauss (1990, p.7). Strauss and Corbin (1998) state,

The first step is describing, which is depicting, telling a story, sometimes a very graphic detailed one, without stepping back to interpret or explain why certain events occurred and not others. The second step is conceptual ordering, which is classifying events and objects along various explicitly stated dimensions, without necessarily relating the classifications to each other to form an overarching explanatory scheme. The last step is theorizing, which is the act of constructing from data an explanatory scheme that systematically integrates various concepts through statements of relationship. (p.25).

Once a valid theory has been developed it will enable the research to explain and predict events, thereby providing guides to action (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).
In this study, long-term African American marriage is the social process, and the grounded theory approach allows the data to develop and emerge from the interviews with the couples directly. Face-to-face interview approach was used to gain knowledge of the salient principles and characteristics that enable these couples to have enduring marriages across the marital lifecycle in their own voices given no two marriages are alike. This study strives to provide an in-depth and authentic view of how some African American marriages thrive through opportunity and through challenging experiences.

The primary research questions posed to the couples were:

1. Given the high rates of divorce in general and especially, among African American couples what makes your marriage work, and continue to endure successfully despite the statistics?
2. What are the challenges faced during the marriage lifecycles?

PARTICIPANTS

A non-probability sample of six married African American couples was created primarily through recruitment of African American churches, personal contacts, and referrals by faculty, and graduate students in the family studies department of a Midwestern university and surrounding city. Participants ranged in age from 52 to 72 years of age.

The mean for number of years married was 40.8 years, with a range of 33-50 years of marriage. The mean age at time of marriage for husbands was 22.8, with a range of 21-24 years of age. Wives’ mean age at time of marriage was 19.5, with a range from 17-20 years of age.

The education levels for individuals in this sample were varied. All except three, two wives and one husband, graduated from high school, one wife attended vocational school, one wife attended college, one wife had graduated from college, one wife had a post graduate degree, one husband had attended college, two husbands completed at least an undergraduate degree and two husbands had completed a post graduate degree.

All couples who shared income had an income of at least $20,000; four couples had an income of at least 50,000. One couple did not share income information.

Almost all subjects were affiliated to some extent with a specific religious denomination.
All couples had at least one child. The number of children ranged from two – eight. Two couples had at least one adult child living at home. One couple had a child and a grandchild living with them.

Three couples were retired, of three couples one wife was retired, the husband worked outside the home full-time, and one couple had both the husband and the wife working full-time

**INSTRUMENT:**

Unstructured interviews were conducted with husbands and wives together in their home. Couples were encouraged to be open and discuss freely. There were six interview questions to guide participant discussion for telling their stories of the marital lifecycles from their personal perspective. As the couples began answering the guided questions, additional probing questions were used to explore the area in more detail.

The interviews averaged an hour in length and were audiotape-recorded. They were transcribed and coded into analytic memos for each individual and for each of the couples by the interviewer. The memos summarized the salient views raised by the couples.
Chapter 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine the marital lifecycle experiences of African American couples to ascertain those strategies, which allow these couples to endure in times of challenge and adversity as well as in times of joy and happiness. A grounded theory approach was taken to have the data emerge directly from the participant’s experiences through the marital lifecycle, as opposed to developing a hypothesis before hand. Husbands and wives responded to open-ended interview questions, which permitted uninterrupted responses in their own words. However, this researcher did probe responses to some questions for clarity or for further explanation to a question, periodically. Several themes were discovered with the application of this method.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data suggested the following six key elements were associated with the successful journey of their long-term marital lifecycles: communication, intimacy, commitment, parental role models, religion/spirituality, and education. In addition, the marital lifecycles analyzed consisted of life as a couple, married with children, work/careers, empty nest years and retirement.

Themes for Marital Success:

Couple #1. The husband is 71 years old and married at age 24, the wife is 66 years old and married at age 19. They have been married for 47 years and have two adult children and six grandchildren. The husband is retired after working 41 years at a company. The wife was retired after 30 years but she recently returned to work after her husband recovered from a serious health issue. Both are actively involved in church and their spirituality. This couple mentioned five of the six themes (communication, intimacy, commitment, parental role models, and religion/spirituality.) The husband began the interview with an opening comment about his beliefs for a good marriage: “If you love each other, the marriage should last. There are five
things you can go by having a good marriage: caring, commitment, togetherness, you have to be together, trust each other and romance.” This husband indicated he was attracted to his wife when he first saw her. However, the wife indicated, “It was not love at first sight, but that he was driving a very pretty car.” This couple emphasized communication as key to making the marriage work. The wife expressed that they agreed to “never go to bed angry.” They both conveyed the importance of church life in their marriage. The wife said “the main thing is that our parents were in church and kept us in Sunday school, I said “when I get grown I ain’t never going to Sunday school.” Being in church and being a Christian plays a big part in marriage. The husband indicated he had been active in church since the age of 10. They both credit having parents as good role models for having a good marriage. However, the wife who was raised primarily by her mother and stepfather indicated that prior to her mother’s remarriage she had lived in an abusive family environment as a young child and it had an impact on her. She was determined when she did marry to make it a good marriage. The husband earned the respect of his wife’s parents early on by showing respect for their daughter. This couple saw communication and handling conflict or arguments in the proper way as essential. For example, the husband said “it takes two to argue, when you start to argue, one needs to be quite and listen.” As intimacy was one of the themes that most couples discussed, this couple expressed that holding hands and kissing was important as well as saying the words “I love you,” and giving cards, flowers and gifts on special occasions was important.

Couple #2. The husband is 58 years old and married at age 23, the wife is 55 years old and married at age 19. They have been married for 36 years and have two adult children, (one is deceased.) They have eight grandchildren. The husband retired after working 32 years at a company, but is currently working part-time. The wife is and has always been a homemaker. This couple, also, connected with five of the six themes: communication, commitment, church/spirituality, intimacy, and parental role model. This wife indicates that in the beginning, they “never go to bed angry” and that works for her because she came from a broken home and commitment is very important to her. Furthermore, this wife said “I think everybody goes into a marriage with the intent of doing what’s right but sometime you know if you don’t communicate, if you don’t have an understanding of differences you can get yourself in trouble. You have to sit down and discuss things.” The husband indicates that they had some arguments and he won’t
deny that, but we never hit, or nothing like that—"there was never any physical abuse." The wife
talks about the issue of physical abuse and she states that abuse is not going to help the matter at
all. Actually, it makes things worse and it’s not going to help a child because you’re teaching
them physical abuse. She said, “we don’t fight, but I might argue with you all day.” The
husband points out that in his bringing up that my father never hit my mother either; he was really
strict about that with the boys. The husband has seven brothers and one sister, and his father
didn’t tolerate physical abuse. He takes pride in knowing that many of his family and friends say
he is like his father. In addition, his mother was a stay-at-home mom and his father provided for
them and he figure that’s what I am supposed to do, that is how he was raised. Conversely, the
wife comes from a broken family and the two of them bonded around the issue of her staying at
home while he worked. Intimacy was important to this couple as well. The wife expressed that
she and her husband share life, as one and that they are very close. However, she sometimes
 teases her husband and says that he takes her for granted, because he is not an affectionate person.
Affection to her means she would like a Valentine Day card, or better than anything, hearing “I
appreciate you or I love you.” The husband indicates that “I do say I love you, well I don’t say it
all the time, sometime I might say in a joking way. He says he is always touching and hugging
her and she tries to get away from me.” He admits that “maybe I should say it ( I love you) more
because his goal is to be married 50 years. My father and mother had 50 plus years of marriage.”

Couple #3. The husband is 54 years old and married at age 21, the wife is 55 years old and
married at age 22. They have been married for 33 years and have two adult children. They have
one grandchild. The husband is a semi-retired engineer and the wife is a retired educator. This
couple connected to three of six themes: intimacy, communication, education, and commitment.
They met in high school, and they were committed to their education and to each other. They
attended college in different locations and communicated long distance for several years. They
were married two months after the wife’s college graduation. The husband had dropped out after
his sophomore year from a college in northern Ohio because of what he believed was racism. He
was in a freshman class of the first blacks ever to live on campus and there were some racial
incidents. He enlisted in the military and he and his wife would communicate with each other by
sending cassette tapes to each other, writing letters, and telephone calls. This was during the
Vietnam War era. The personal computer technology and e-mail was not available during that
time. The husband completed his college degree after his honorable discharge from the military. As for intimacy in the marriage, the couple expressed having a really good and wonderful sex life for most of the marriage, but have experienced some diminished activity level which they both attribute to lack of privacy because of adult children returning home, and the presence of a grandchild living in the home, as well as other stresses, both physical and emotional. The husband expressed concern that things may not get back to where they were, “sex is important and I don’t want to loose it.” This couple associated the lack of good parental role models for a good marriages as a factor in their being determined to make their marriage successful. They were willing to doing whatever it takes. The husband explained that even as a teenager he knew he “wanted to be married and have children of his own because he grew up without a father.” In addition, this husband wanted to be the kind of parent his mother and father never could be given their situation. So when he met his wife, they fell in love, he saw her as a good person, and he saw her as a good mate; they have become soul mates, as well that what’s kept their relationship together through all the stuff, a tremendous love and a tremendous respect for her. The wife says the same thing applies to her as far as what she wanted in life. However, she came from a nuclear family and her parents were married for more than 50 years, but they have not been in a happy marriage according to her, she feels that her mother regrets some of the choices she has made with regard to marriage.

**Couple #4.** The husband is 68 years old and married at age 23, the wife is 65 years old and married at age 20. They have been married for 45 years and have two adult children. They do not have grandchildren. The husband is an educator, and the wife is currently retired and a homemaker. This couple connected with four of the six themes: parental role models, communication, intimacy and education. This couple married only four months after they met. The husband said they had plenty of time to get to know each other after the fact. What helped their marriage be successful from the wife’s point of view was her husband’s patience. For example, the wife indicated that she needed a lot of work because she made many unreasonable demands when they were first married, but her husband was very patient with her. She said she lacked trust in men because of having come from a broken home. The husband said he was able
to be patient because his parents had a long-term marriage and his father was his role model. His father had his mom on a pedestal and got her whatever...he did his best to try to please her and king of ...said that’s what men were suppose to do. His father never missed a holiday where he didn’t give his mother something; she always had nice things and he thought she should be taken care of. His parents were married for 43 years until his mother’s death. His grandparents also had a long-term marriage of over 65 years.

The husband expressed that he and his wife discovered that 50/50 doesn’t work; most marriages are 90/10, sometimes it flip-flops and takes turn. It’s not evenly balance, so sometimes you give a lot more, and sometimes you get a lot more and I don’t know how we came to that, we just kind of did it. The wife conveyed a time when communication was important for their future in that her husband decided to go to college and work full-time which meant that they would spend very little time together. She said what made it work was that they discussed it, he said it’s not going to be easy, it was going to be tough and he wasn’t sure that she would be able to deal with it, so she said “I guarantee you I can last as long as you do.” She was willing to make the sacrifice for a better future for their family. As for their level of intimacy in the marriage, the husband expressed that he always thought intimacy important and it’s very satisfying in their relationship. The wife expressed that the husband is more touchy feely than she is and she thinks that is because of her background having come from a broken home and the lack of affection shown in her home. She is happy with their level of intimacy. This couple also expressed the importance of having good relationships with their in-laws was key to a good marriage.

**Couple #5.** The husband is 73 years old and married at age 23, the wife is 67 years old and married at age 17. They have been married for 50 years and have eight adult children. They have 25 grandchildren and 10 great grandchildren. The husband is a retire jet engine builder, and the wife is a homemaker. The couple mentioned four of the seven themes: communication, parental role models, religion, and intimacy. For example, the husband indicates that honest communication, being fair, loving and spending time together are all important in making their marriage work. Both the husband and the wife stressed the importance of having strong supportive parents and grandparents who taught them and discussed how to be a good husband and wife. The husband said the training that his parents gave him, for example, his father would say, “Son treat your wife right, now, don’t be fighting her don’t be jumping on her, you treat her
"right now."

He said this training stayed with him. The wife said her grandfather who raised her was a good role model and teacher. For example he taught don’t let the sun go down on your wrath, so if you argue, don’t go to bed angry. The wife said it is important to understand each others likes and dislikes. Religion plays a major part in this couples life. The wife says they tried to live according to the teachings of the Bible even when they were not in church. For example, they would have family prayer at home when unable to attend church.

**Couple #6.** The husband is 57 years old and married at age 23, the wife is 54 years old and married at age 20. They have been married for 34 years and have two adult children. The husband is currently working as a law enforcement and the wife is an educator. This couple mentioned three of the six themes: education, religion and intimacy. The wife communicates that what makes their marriage work is that they give each other space, meaning she and her husband do a lot of things that they really want to do, and they do not have to do things together. They are involved in different activities; for example, she travels extensively alone or with other family members for work, or vacations. The husband said mutual respect, devotion, taking responsibility and his wife being very organized is what helps their marriage succeed. This couple met in college and the wife was able to complete her degree after they were married, while her husband had been drafted into the military during the Vietnam War. He completed his degree after being honorably discharged from the military. Both the husband and wife indicate religious affiliation, however, the wife attends church regularly and the husband does not attend church on a regular basis.

**Marital Lifecycles**

For purpose of this research, the marital lifecycles identified and discussed in the interviews with the six couples were: Married Couple, married with children and parenting, work/careers, empty nest, and retirement years. The findings from this part of the interviews was quite revealing in terms of time of challenge, joy and happiness as described in the interviews.

**Couple #1.**

*As a couple.* This couple communicated that the first four years of marriage were lovely. They lived in a one-room apartment, but it was the best of times. They had to share a bathroom
with the neighbors during this time and were quite happy when they were able to move to a three-
room apartment. They both were establishing their careers and building seniority at their jobs. The wife also attended vocational college during this time and took advantage of her employers tuition reimbursement plan. This time of being married and childfree allowed the wife to advance quickly in her vocation as an electroencephalogram technician. They had agreed to get pregnant after five years of marriage.

*Married with children.* This couple was very happy with the birth of their first child. The wife indicated it was so much fun and that everybody want to help and give advice. She had a supportive network of extended family and friends to help in the beginning as she did return to work soon after the birth. Their second child was born six years later and the birth was difficult where both the mother and child were in serious condition. She and her husband decided not to have any more children as a result. The husband communicated, “I was proud of myself,” after becoming a father.

During the childrearing years, the wife found childcare to be an issue early-on and made arrangements with her employer to change her work hours to night shift so that she and her husband could provide the childcare. The wife said when her husband came in from work, “*she was ready to go out the door; she had everything ready, food cooked, house cleaned.*” The husband said, “*she would go to work and I would take care of the baby.*” When asked how he felt about that, he indicated “*I feel all right, I take care of my kids, I rather take care of them myself because you don’t know how other people are going to take care of your kids.*” The husband and wife were very involved in school activities with their children. The wife said that her husband would always go to the school and the teachers and students all love him. They would work with the school system, the teachers, and PTA involvement as well. The husband indicated that when their children were adolescents they as parents were always in control. They talked with their children and today have a very close relationship with them, as well as with the grandchildren.

*Empty Nest.* This couple experienced their first major challenge in their marriage when the husband became ill with cancer. The wife said it was very stressful. The wife retired early to
provide care giving for her husband. After recovery, they both enjoy spending time together, and working with their hobbies and family business.

Couple #2.

As couple. The wife communicated that for her the first five years were the roughest because they have a lot to get use to and learn about their two personalities. This couple started their marriage with one child. The husband said it was unique because when they first married he had a family, a wife and a son so they were never alone. The wife indicated having responsibility for a child while getting use to each other took some adjustment. She basically raised their son as a single parent early-on. She said “he was away all those years so as a single parent for four years still have to get adjusted…I think everybody goes into a marriage with the intent of doing of doing what’s right but if you don’t communicate and you don’t have an understanding of differences you can get yourself in trouble.” Prior to their marriage the husband was in the military and in the Vietnam War and he said, “I went to Vietnam…and communicated back and forth with her and really didn’t think that I would be home because the area that I was in was pretty rough, and I was fortunate to come back home and she was waiting for me.” So they were married soon after his return from the military.

Married with children. This couple had two children, but they also served as surrogate parents to two nephews over the course of their marriage. The husband shared that they always had someone. The nephews were treated the same as their children. When asked about the additional family responsibilities and the impact on their marriage, the wife indicated she didn’t think it had any negative impact. In fact she thought it made her son happy to have other boys in the home to play with. The husband said as far as food and other necessities he provided what was needed. The wife expressed that their nephews look to her husband as a father figure.

This couple experienced several challenges and personal crises during the parenting years. First, one nephews whom they had helped raised, but had returned to his parents as a young adult, had died through violence, he had been shot and killed. One year later, their son had died in a diabetic coma at the age of 28 years old. Soon after that the wife lost her grandfather who
had raised her, and the husband lost his mother. The wife said that the nineties were very bad years for them. In addition, as it relates to parenting, this couple faced difficulty with their adolescent daughter who had been diagnosed with a serious illness. The wife indicates that her husband was overly protective of their daughter, but they face the difficulty together. This diagnosis put a financial strain on the family as well.

This couple spent some time in the grieving process, to the point where they both drifted away from the church and from each other. For example the husband commented, “When I was hit with all this, I wasn’t as good as Job was. I jus couldn’t take it.” The wife indicated that they were both grieving in the own way.

**Grandparenting.** This couple has eight grandchildren and the wife says her husband has a special love and affection for all the grandchildren. The husband says he loves spending time with the grandchildren. He revealed that, “I just thought about this a few minutes ago, maybe I didn’t spend quite enough time with my kids so I think I am mostly making up for it with the grandkids. When the kids were coming up, when I got married I had a child and I always worked but I love these grandchildren. They all get on my lap.”

**Work/Career.** The husband is the breadwinner in this family. During the early times of their marriage he shares that it was kind of rough, because he was fresh on the job and wasn’t making a lot of money. He had taken an entry level position and it took time to earn seniority. He had saved some money while in the service to help with the finances because it was important to stretch the money. The wife never worked outside the home and she expressed that her husband handles the money and does a good job of it, even though they may disagree about some things. The wife also shared that she never was interested in a career after she was married. She always felt that her child should have a two-parent family, because she didn’t have one. However, this wife felt that her role was that of nurturer and she was very protective of her husband and the children. Because her husband often worked overtime hours and took part-time jobs occasionally, she contributed by taking care of everything at home. For example, she did all the housework, inside and outside. She shoveled snow, cut the grass and did the interior painting on a regular basis. She enjoyed it and felt that was her way of contributing to the family and protecting her husband. In addition, the wife said, “when there was a snow emergency, I would
get up and fix his lunch, and breakfast, no matter what time of day or night...I took care of him, and some people use to ask why do you get? I felt that was what I was suppose to do, I could go back to bed.” She indicated while she felt obligated, but at the same time she wanted to do those things. She expressed that she thinks her role in the family helped their marriage be successful. The husband confirmed that his wife did all those things, and that she is the “glue” that keeps them together. He indicated that his wife was looking out for him and he appreciates her for it.

Couple #3.

As couple. This couple was married soon after the wife had graduated from college in the month of July and were separated the next month, in August, three weeks later because the husband was in the military service. The wife lived near her parents and worked as an educator while her husband was away in the military. She remembers him calling her one Christmas from France. When he returned to the States he would try to visit her as often as possible. They had bought a car just so he could drive several hundred miles, ten hours, to visit his wife when he had time off and on most weekends. The husband was in a serious car accident on one of his trips home when he said, “I woke up off I71 in the middle of the median and had no recollection of how I got there and what woke me up was the State trooper beating on the window of the car.” The wife explained that that weekend, they decided after school was out and she had finished teaching for the term, she would move to where he was stationed. So the day after school was out they move. She was excited because this would be the first time they were going to be together as a married couple and that was after two years. The husband revealed that “those were the best three years of our life, we lived in military housing. we didn’t have nothing, but we had each other, we had friends, the military did provide a lot of things, you could go to the movie for 25 cents. It was the 70’s and you’re talking about first run movies, we use to eat at the restaurants on the base for five dollars or something like that. We had the beach, just a lot of nice stuff…”

Married with children. Their first child was born while they were still in the military; After being honorably discharged from the military, they came back to home, and the husband went
back to school. He communicated, “Oh I always wanted to go back to school. At the time because I had two years in college toward an engineering degree. I said I have a family I have to take care of and I need to find a program that will keep me in the field…”

This couple was challenged during the parenting years when their son was diagnosed with a serious illness at five years old. The couple sought family counseling in order to deal with the issues their son was facing. The issues challenged their marriage and they both expressed that counseling helped the marriage and the family. The couple have two adult children and one grandchild and they have always been very involved and supportive parents. Their children are both college graduates and they are very proud of them.

**Empty Nest.** This couple encountered several challenges as the husband retired and wife had retired early and were looking forward to a different and exciting lifestyle for the two of them, now that their adult children were out on their own. The husband conveyed that both adult children had moved back home for various reasons and he and his wife wanted to be supportive while they worked some of their issues out. This was a time of challenge and personal stress for the couples as these changes in living arrangements put added unanticipated financial burden on the household. At the same time, the wife’s parents became ill and she had the additional responsibility of caring for both parents for a while.

**Work/Career.** As a result of the dynamics in the family, the husband chose to go back to work to relieve some of the financial burden. The wife also chose to accept part-time work in education but before she could get started she found herself providing childcare for her live-in grandchild. Although she and her husband have a wonderful relationship with their grandchild there is strain because of different childcare expectations the mother (daughter) has. The husband communicated that they have come to realized that they cannot expect their children to raise the grandchildren exactly as they did and they need to respect different parenting styles to some degree. *The husband discussed the importance of counseling for the family, “Men don’t seek counseling because it is perceived as a sign of weakness. The times we had, the most problem with our relationship were those times when we didn’t talk. You have to be willing to sit down and talk with your wife no matter how difficult you may think; we’re not perfect because there are still things…”*
**Couple #4.**

**As a couple.** This couple met and married four months after meeting. The husband thought his wife was cute and that they were compatible with common interest. The wife expressed that they did not have a lot of dates because he worked a lot, but he proposed marriage in a round about way, by asking her to leave the state with him. He actually meant that they should get married first. He had a car and the wife thought that was important.

**Married with children.** The wife indicated that when she became pregnant she had done a great thing in the family because she had the first son in the family since her husband was born. The wife conveyed that she has a good relationship with her adult son. The husband indicated that parenting their son had it’s challenges. Because the couple moved around some when their son was pre-teen and teenage and they think that may have impacted the son’s inappropriate behavior. For example, the parents learned that their son was being truant from school at a time when he was two credits from graduating from high school. The son was always a good student, and always done very well until late in his senior year of high school. He did with extra help graduate from high school. Another parenting challenge for the couple was that their son had gotten into some drug use and other inappropriate behavior. The couple sought family counseling and communicated that this adversity strengthen their marriage. Their second child a daughter, presented a series of parenting challenges as well. For example, during his wife’s pregnancy it was found that she had an a topic pregnancy in the fallopian tubes, the baby was never in the womb, so she free floated and it wasn’t realized until time to deliver. The doctors were quite surprised to find the baby behind the uterus. This was a real crisis as she, almost bled to death. The husband always perceived his daughter as very needy and he attributes this to her not be sheltered by the womb. The wife felt that the baby was ok since she had a good weight at birth, over seven pounds. The mother daughter bonding was not there and it is still a difficult relationship. The wife feels her daughter and husband have a better relationship. The husband revealed that there were real challenges with their daughter when she reached late adolescent. For example, their daughter quit high school and ran off to get married. He and his wife did not know where she was for quite sometime. The daughter eventually contacted her mother’s best friend and communicated where she was and that she had gotten married. This couple later learned that their son-in-law had been arrested for drug use and that he had been real abusive to
their daughter. This father believes there was a poor self-esteem issue, which is incomprehensible to him. This couple do not have grandchildren, but they have been providing childcare for a nephew since the baby was about six weeks old, he is now two years old.

**Work/Career.** The husband was the breadwinner for about the first fifteen years of the marriage. There were periods of time when the wife would work only a little and later after about four or five years she worked fulltime in a career. The husband began to perceive his wife differently than when they were first married. For example, “She was no longer his other half, a helpmate…and she said to him one day when I suggested that I wanted her to go somewhere with me, she said I have to go to work and she said to me you have to understand that my job is as important to me as your job is important to you…” The husband communicated that he was somewhat taken back because he had old time views and was just doing what he thought he was suppose to do. He indicated he had some growing to do in terms of letting go and understanding the notion of equal status and sharing responsibility. The wife indicated that her mother taught her to be independent, didn’t matter if you’re married, or not whatever you still need to be independent, you need to be able to take care of yourself. It took her a little longer but she finally went to work full-time. She felt that she needed to establish herself as an independent person, because, if her husband was not there, she would have to do so. She did not want to be in a situation where he was gone and then have to figure it out. She also enjoyed having her own money and not relying on her husband for money for the things she wanted. The husband indicated that they always had our money and her money and they generally lived on his salary for most of the household necessities.

**Couple #5.**

**As a couple.** This couple met the day before the husband left to join the military. Upon his return from basic training, they dated and were soon married. The wife communicated that her husband had earned the respect of her mother and father and because he was being very nice he had won her over.

**Married with children.** This couple became parents one year after they were married and had a total of eight children. The wife felt that being a parent was wonderful even though she didn’t
know what to expect at first from a baby. For example, on the first day home with the baby she laid her down on the bed and went to another room for a moment and came back and the baby was not on the bed. The baby had rolled behind the bed and fortunately was not injured. The husband communicated that his wife was the sergeant of childrearing. He was very happy with his girls but when the fifth child was a boy he was very proud of having a boy child. This husband recalled that when dealing with teenagers and they said they were going to be at a particular place his wife would insist on their being where they should be and if not she would get in the car and go looking for them and find out what was going on in their lives. This couple used prayer a lot to reinforce their parenting styles as well as the teaching from their parents. For example, the wife indicated they never let a New Year come in without the family being on their knees for prayer. In addition the wife used some parenting techniques she learned from her grandfather such as, when one child had a tendency to get loud and have an attitude, she would get the Bible and tell the child the Bible says a soft voice turns away wrath, a harsh voice stirs the wrath. She said “when you talk to me like that I want to get a switch, so you talk to me right,” and that worked. Another technique she used was to get a piece of paper and write a scripture on it and stick it up in the bathroom and the child would realize they were doing wrong when they read it. One of their children used this approach with her children and because she has a computer, she is able to make beautiful scripture signs and she puts them on the wall for her children. This couple always demanded that the children finish high school and several of their children attended college. This couple have very good relationships with their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. Two of their grandsons play professional football and they are very proud of that. The couple have experienced some challenges as parents, for example, one of their daughters became involved with a guy who was involved in drugs, and strung out; they were married with two children. Their son-in-law had been in and out of jail and had tried to get his life together by attending church regularly. Unfortunately, he eventually ended up getting killed. The wife communicated that whenever any of her children would call with a serious problem, no matter the time of day or night she and her husband would respond and try to help. The wife’s parents always encouraged and told her not to put the kids out, she said let them come back home. She would rather have her children and grandchildren at home with them instead of in the streets.
Work/Career. The husband was the primary breadwinner and indicated that he tried to be a good provider, for example he said “I would bring my money home and give it to her, because I knew she knew how to take care of it; she knew how to stretch a dollar.” The wife communicated that her grandfather taught her to save; he would tell her “if you make a dollar, save a dime.” The wife indicated that if the money was a little short she would offer to take a job for a while and her husband was ok with that as long as the children were taken care of. They relied on the extended family for childcare for the times that she was employed outside the home. The husband would provide some childcare if he was not working.

Empty Nest. The couple has two adult children living with them, temporarily. The wife expressed that they did look forward to the thought that they now have problems solved and all the big stuff is out of the way and they can do what they want to do now, but that lasted only about a year. However the two of them get away on vacations more.

Retirement. The husband has been retired since 1993 and he spends his time doing house remodeling and gardening. The wife considers herself retired because she is not currently working outside the home.

Couple #6.

As a couple. This couple met in college and dated about two years, prior to the husband getting drafted into the military and being stationed in Germany for sometime. He came home on leave and they were married and he had to leave again. The wife was a junior in college and stayed and graduated and then she taught school while her husband was in Vietnam.

Married with children. The husband indicated that this was a challenging time for them because he was not sure were they would end up living. The wife indicated their first child was born before they were married and that they got married right after the baby was born. They were newly married, had a baby, while she was still in college and her husband was in Germany and then in Vietnam. Her husband indicated he was gone for a good two years before they actually became a couple. The wife was mom and dad, and a student for sometime. They had the help of their parents for childcare while the wife was finishing school. The husband’s parent cared for the baby at first and then the wife’s parent’s provided childcare; this childcare arrangement was a
big help. The child was three years old when the family relocated to this area. The couple have
two adult children and they both expressed that raising them required an investment of time and
resources to make sure they had what they needed. They spent a lot of quality time with the
children. The husband indicated that his wife handled the primary childcare early on he was on-
call for his career a lot. He also communicated that they tried to do as much as possible together
as a family, such as travel. The wife conveyed that both the children were involved in many
different things; for example, one daughter played the viola and was in the international
orchestra. She shared that her husband would drive their daughter for two years straight once a
month out of town, about a four-hour drive to rehearse. Also, the daughter spent six weeks in
Europe before graduating from high school, and another daughter also involved in music played
the cello and was involved in the youth symphony as well as played soccer for many years. Both
of their daughters are college graduates. The wife expressed that she is particularly happy about
one daughter receiving her doctorate degree because she had been diagnosed with a serious
illness at the beginning and it was a struggle, but she was able to complete her degree in dentistry.
In addition, one daughter is a Captain in the military serving currently in Iraq. The husband
indicated that they invested a lot of in their children but it paid off, and having two beautiful
daughters would be one of the highlights of their marriage. They are looking forward to the birth
of their first grandchild later this year.

Work /career. Both husband and wife are currently working. The husband indicates he would
like to be retired, but he has about seven more years to work before becoming retirement eligible.
He works in the area of law enforcement and expressed that he really hates what he does for his
career. The nature of the work is stressful and he tries not to talk about the details or bring home
some of the issues he deals with on a daily basis, for example, he encounters people who are
HIV-positive. The wife communicated that she thinks her husband is overly concerned about
certain things and that she does not feel impacted negatively by his career issues.

The wife who is currently working as an educator and although she is retirement eligible
expressed that retirement plans are unclear and that is why she is still teaching.

Empty Nest. This couple has been challenge by a major illness as the wife has been a breast
cancer survival for two years. The wife expressed that she was particularly “challenged by the
news of the cancer because she thought she had done everything she could possible do to stay healthy. She said there was no family history of cancer and she was angry. It was a challenge for all of them and it still is a challenge. They dealt with it the best they could.” One daughter came home on leave from the military to spend time with her while she was having chemo, and the other daughter came also to provide support. The husband communicated that “at the time I was upset and thinking the worst could happen and hoping the worst did not happen and just tried to be as sensitive as possible, trying not to upset her. It was the first major illness the family experienced.”

**Summary of Couple Recommendations:**

At the end of the face-to-face interviews each couple was asked, what advice would you give to couples considering marriage for the first time, or to couples on the journey of marriage? Following are some of their comments and advice:

*Wife:* “try to get along, sit around and talk things over is a must. Be in Christ, church is the foundation, stay involved with positive people; it is not easy.”

*Husband:* “don’t run to other people’s house causing confusion.”

*Wife:* “I think young couples need to understand that long-term marriages are not a cakewalk... Work at it, it’s a job, be sincere and work at it be on one accord.”

*Husband:* “must have trust, even if you’re not a real religious person you must include God, you must do that,...”

*Husband:* “make up you mind that after the newness of marriage goes away you are going to work at it and bring it back. You have to be committed, first to your wife, the children, you need to be a father, and you need to be a husband. You make a lifetime commitment, when you say those vows, vows are serious stuff, if you are not 100% sure that you can make that commitment,...you need to think about whether or not to get married.”
Wife: “be committed and be ready and willing to work at it when there’s trouble, so seek
counseling. I think that’s helped us through some of the hard times.” “Some time you have to sit
and think and count your blessings and don’t sweat the small stuff.” “Get away just the two of
us; it was always with the kids except for a couple of special anniversaries, 20 and 25.”

Wife: Communication.

Husband: “be able to receive rather than send, be able to listen and hear what the other
person is saying and not always with your ears—non-verbal communication very important.”

Wife: “go for it don’t be selfish, make every moment count, make your time together special.
Do not talk about each other to families, never put them down.”

Husband: “make sure you share from the heart, let it be known how you feel, lay everything
on the table.”

Wife: “would not advise anybody to get married as young s I did, at 20. Think you need to
mature, need to do some things as a young person before you become involved with someone
else. Don’t see how young people today, the way society I s can make if they get married that
young.”

Husband: “There is no road map, no puzzle pieces, it’s trial and error, it’s not by design,
divine intervention, prayer, love, luck.”
Chapter 5

**DISCUSSION**

This study used the grounded theory approach to focus on two questions to examine the long-term African American marriage experiences: (1) Given the high rates of divorce in general and especially, among African American couples, what makes your marriage work and continue to endure successfully despite the statistics? (2) What are the challenges faced during the marital lifecycles? The literature review showed that historically, the African American family has been studied from a deficit oriented or deficiency-oriented model and not from a more contemporary view of strength. (As cited in Journal of Black Studies, 2000, by Billingsley, 1968, 1992, Gaines, 1997 Hill, 1972; McAdoo, 1992b; Mosley –Howard & Evans, 1995; Staples & Johnson, 1993). A number of issues and key themes emerged from the face-to-face interviews with the sample of diverse African American couples. These themes and the examples of some of their life experiences contribute to a better understanding of couple and family relationships, and challenges associated with an enduring and successful long-term marriage. Many of the key themes from this study are represented in the literature as characteristics of healthy couples. For example, research by Kaslow & Robison, 1996, identified commitment, communication, and religion/spiritual as characteristics for healthy couples. Three of these themes also emerged from the current study. Other research showed similar responses to characteristics of successful marriages. Conversely, this current study identified two additional areas of importance, which were not necessarily found in previous research such as parental role models and education. Several couples mentioned the importance of completing their own education, and or making sure that their children were educated. From the examples by some of the couples in the study, persons went to extraordinary means and personal sacrifice to ensure that educational goals were attained. The emphasis that several couples place on getting an education speaks to the value system of wanting to be prepared for whatever life experiences one may be faced with and the desire to be the best person they can be for themselves and for their families.

From an African American cultural perspective the emphasis on education as a key value to success including marital success in my opinion, stems from the Brown v. Board of Education of
Topeka Kansas historic Supreme Court ruling. This historic ruling 50 years ago, declared "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. This along with other civil rights movements and issues of the day remain engrained in the couples in this study who were raised during this time in history. For some of the couples they were the first in their families to graduate from high school and college and this reality allowed them to place a high valued on education for themselves and their children. These couples, even the ones who did not graduated high school knew the value of getting an education regardless of the choices they made, personally. A study about socioeconomic characteristics of middle-class black families indicates that one member of the marital couple almost always has attended college. The study further states that the husband and wife struggled and made great sacrifices to complete their formal education. As was exhibited by one of the couples in this study, college and graduate school are completed after adulthood and while the husband or wife, who also may be a parent, is employed fulltime. Also, it is noted according to one study that parents who experience struggles and hardships know that their status is directly correlated with their increased education (Willie, 1976).

In addition, research showed that long-term marriages highlighted characteristics such as appreciation, companionship, and sexual fidelity as important, Fennell 1987 as cited by Kaslow & Robison, 1996.) In this study, couples described intimacy as important and indicated a variety of ways to demonstrate intimacy, which can be interpreted within the definitions of previous research. This study found that nearly all of the couples reported having good intimate relationship with their husband or with their wife. Intimacy was described in a variety of ways, but all agreed that intimacy was important to the long-term success of their marriage. Some couples expressed that depending on what was happening in the marriage there may have been highs and lows of intimate expression, for example during times of stress when a couple was dealing with death, financial problems, and parenting issues.

Key to intimacy and marital success would be the removal of some stressors, in particular financial stress. At the time that the couples in this study were starting out as newly married, for example in the 1960s and 1970s, because of racial discrimination and income limitations of the kinds of jobs available to most African Americans it was necessary for both the husband and the wife to work. This has been historically the situation among African American marriages. For that reason, most husbands and wives act as partners out of necessity and have an equalitarian
approach to the marriage, where neither husband nor wife has ultimate authority. African American husbands and wives work together to achieve a comfortable life style (Staples, 1986, p. 225). However, when one person in the marriage is the sole breadwinner, for example, the husband, the stress associated with striving to build a career, or maintain a technical trade as some couples in this study did; they were often at risk of experiencing economic hardship because of loss or the threat of loss of job, or career. This reality may have played a role in the level of intimacy and marital success. Research suggests that economic stress and its negative impact, for example, lack of employment, not having enough money to pay the bills are associated with depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, lower marital quality and authoritative parenting. (Conger et al., 1990; Elder, Conger, Foster, & Ardelt, 1992; McLoyd, 189, cited by Murry, McKenry & Price 2000, p.341).

The additional themes expressed by the husbands and wives in this study, communication, commitment, parental role models, religion/spirituality, and education provide insight and perspective into the myriad of differences and similarities that African American couples in long-term marriages face on a regular basis. It became obvious from the findings that many couples are faced with some difficult challenges as they pursue and endure the marital lifecycles. It was pointed out by one of the husbands that somehow the adversity they have endured has strengthened their marriage and brought them closer together. It is apparent that these couples have effective coping mechanisms to see them through the difficult circumstances.

**Other factors contributing to the success of these marriages**

When couples who have a long history of working outside the home, it was stated that having a spouse who helped with the housework was very much appreciated. Several husbands and wives share the housework including grocery shopping, lawn care, laundry, and childcare. The division of labor was shared equally among most of the couples when possible. African American women have historically been responsible for setting and crafting the various roles in the family. Role flexibility is expected from everyone in the household, including the husbands, and children especially when both parents work outside the home.

The majority of these couples handled conflict and problem solving by discussing their issues in ways that allowed both the husband the wife an opportunity to be heard. One or two of the couples would openly argue, but not in front of their children. All of the couples indicated that physical abuse was not used or tolerated within the marriage.
Theory Development

From the analysis, an overall finding was that these individuals and couples are highly involved and committed to their marriages. They all believe their marriages are successful not only based on the themes that emerged from the data and the experiences they had during the marital lifecycle but in my opinion, there is something more. Unique characteristics emerged from this sample, for example one of the wives dealt with the difficulty of her husband away in military service which often meant long periods of separation requiring role flexibility on the part of the couples. This wife was being a single parent to their infant child, and at the same time, completing her college degree, working and taking care of the home while her husband was in the Vietnam War. This couple as well as some of the others have demonstrated resiliency to hold on to each other and to maintain their families as best they could even under some extreme adversity. For example several of the couples have experienced very difficult parenting and grand parenting issues, major illness of a spouse, death of a child and, or beloved parents. In spite of these life challenges they responded to the difficult times in a manner that allowed them to grieve and heal to some extent in their own way and at the same time keep their marriages intact.

Another interesting discovery from the data analysis was the number of husbands who served in the military, in both the Korean War and the Vietnam War. Of the six husbands, two served in the Korean War and four served in the Vietnam War. This was a pivotal time in the history of this country and particularly for African Americans as this was also the time when the Civil Rights Movement was at its peak. Major change was occurring in the nation at the time that many of these couples were starting their marriages and families. For this generation of African Americans there was a unique view of marriage compared with a more contemporary view. These couples faced racism within the social context of that time in history. There were social differences and perceptions that impacted wives whose husbands were dealing with the war experience.

Of interest also, was the number of husbands who had fathers in the home as they grew up during this historic time. Several of the husbands mentioned with pride the benefit of having a father that taught them how to be good husbands by role modeling good behavior with their mothers, as well as directly given them instructions on how to treat their wives.

While it was a time of change and growth, these families were dealing with life in the context of the larger society. For example they maneuvered through difficulty, fighting racism and
segregation to complete their education, and for some who were likely first generation sons and daughters to attend college, and complete their degrees. Other participants were dealing with the employment situations at the time and possibly being some of the first African Americans hired in the companies they worked for which must have been challenging. In addition several of the couples mentioned the separation from their wives, and at least one child that was necessary during the times of war. This reality alone had to be extremely challenging for these young couples during that time. That period in our history is similar to the situation in our country today as many young couples are separated from loved ones, now because of the war in Iraq, for example.

While the analysis from the findings showed some similarities between the experiences of the some of the couples, clearly there were some differences as well. There were barriers that all the couples experienced but in spite of them, they were able to maintain healthy relationships with each other and with their children and grandchildren. Several of the couples indicated that their church involvement and their spirituality was key to sustaining them in times of trouble as well as being connected to a church family for support. Faith in God and having spirituality was convey by some participants who admitted they were not currently connected to a particular church, they were very connected with knowing that they have been very blessed. The literature review has found that in African American marriages that are successful that religion and spirituality are key factors. Diggs, & Pastor (1998). However, the divorce rate for those involved in church is about the same as for couples who are not in church. Obviously these couples have as the findings show many other characteristics that make for success in their marriages. These couples have demonstrated that marriage is a responsibility, an obligation and a lifelong commitment worth enduring in faith and in love.

The marital lifecycles of these couples also indicate a level of maturity, supportive extended family, and other resources in addition to pure determination. Given the young ages of all the couples at the point of marriage, the research would suggest these marriages would not last. The transition to parenthood has been shown to have an impact on marriages. Research suggests that when couples are in their twenties and become parents for the first time that these couples are more at risk for marital difficulty and likely divorce. Education levels and marriage expectations are also factors in the quality of the marriage at the time of becoming parents. The manner in
which couples negotiate the demands of parenthood will determine the quality and strength of the marriage (Helms-Erikson, 2001.)

Although the couples who are empty nesters appear to have found ways to transition to this stage of the marital lifecycle without too much difficulty. Although one couple did express some disappointment with the level of intimacy or sexual activity, as a result of adult children and grandchildren returning home. This phenomena is established in the research as well, for example research indicates that couples who had launched their children, also known as empty nesters, viewed most aspects of their marriage positively except for sexual relationship (Mackey & O’Brien 1999).

In the study all except two couples have grandchildren. I thought it interesting how involved the grandfathers are with their grandchildren. Further research related to the importance of the grandparent role indicates that gender of the grandparent is important and that children report to have “warmer, more expressive relationships with grandmothers” (Eisenberg (988, p.205). Women typically are socialized toward maintaining family-based relationships which promotes the strongest ties between grandmothers and granddaughters. However, because male and female roles tend to shift after retirement, some researchers believe there is movement toward unisex gender roles for grandparents in how they relate to grandchildren (Spitz & Ward 1998). The research by Spitz & Ward suggest that the meaning of grandparenthood may be different for grandmothers and grandfathers.

**Implications of the Study**

The findings from this study lead to several implications for family life educators, social workers, church leaders and other professionals concerned about the African American marriage. Participants identified key themes of communication, parental role modeling, and spirituality, as the top reasons for the success of their marriages during the marital lifecycles.

Equally important is the high degree of resiliency demonstrated by participants in this study as well. Research on resiliency in African-American families shows that many of the themes identified by couples in this study are representative. “Family resiliency is defined as the capacity to cultivate strengths to positively meet the challenges of life.” (McCubbin, Hamilton; Thompson; Thompson; Futrell (1998.)
These couples having demonstrated the ability to adapt to most any situation put before them in the marriage. They have established roles, rules, goals and patterns of interactions that work for the marriage. Couples in this study have found that communication is very important to the marriage. One couple was clear about the value of non-verbal communication. Research by McCubbin et al. suggest that non-verbal interactions are more frequent and often more critical for relationship maintenance than verbal.

Spirituality and regular church attendance was instrumental in the marriages of most of the couples in this study. McCubbin (1998) indicates the family is really the context in which religious practice or cultural values are played out. Rituals and traditions gain meaning and emphasis in the context of family interaction and participation in the community. Religion and spirituality in the African American community play a key role in family life and raising children. The couples in this study are no exception. Spirituality is a central component in close personal relationships among individual members of the community. The roots of spirituality stem from the African, Caribbean, South American and Southern U. S. roots of most African Americans (McAdoo, 2003.) Because African American families tend to be multigenerational, the extended family support system is an on-going pattern in the family. The church family is an extension of the family consisting of non-relatives as well as blood relatives.

With this knowledge, individuals concerned with working with couples to strengthen marriages and families, could invest resources, and programs aimed at developing enhanced communication skills, coping skills for dealing with marital difficulties, and parenting challenges from pregnancy and child development through the adolescent years. Particular focus could be aimed at providing support to couples who are going through major illness such as cancer, as well as support for families who are grieving. Many African American families are stretched, and stressed, yet they are also resilient as these couples have demonstrated.

**Strengths**

One aspect of this study that was a strength was the couples themselves. These couples were very open with the researcher and all the couples appeared to enjoy the process. We all laughed a lot at some of the information as they shared. There were also some somber moments as some of the information they shared was sad, difficult and disappointing to them. I had the feeling that for several of the couples if not all, that this interview was the first opportunity the couples had to
reflect on the journey of their marriage, and how much they had endured and enjoyed in a long time if ever. I found a richness in the deepness, and complexity of their stories.

Weaknesses

The participant sample size of six couples is relatively small. A larger participant sample perhaps from a broader geographical area could reveal even more insight to marital success in long-term married African American couples.

Conclusion

Future research aimed at transferability and further data analysis of what emerges from interviews with a larger sample may be beneficial. Also, additional theoretical frameworks, such as system theory, and exchange theory may provide even more specific knowledge of couple experiences. While in this study couples were interviewed together in their homes, consideration for interviewing the couple separately may provide a more in depth look at certain aspects of the marriage.

Given the divorce statistics and remarriage statistics in the general population and more specifically the African American population, additional study in this area could lend itself to supporting the creation of more marriages of strength and endurance for generations to come.
APPENDIX A

Recruitment Letter
Dear Rev. Dr. Harry L. White,

My name is Annie Rivers. I am a full time graduate student at Miami University, Ohio. I am pursuing a master’s degree in Family and Child Studies. I will be completing a thesis project as part of my graduation requirement. I am requesting your assistance in providing referrals of potential participants for my research study on or before January 15, 2004.

I have selected as a thesis topic, “An Examination of Lifecycles of African American Couples Married 25 years or More.” I am interested in learning about the experience of African American Couples who believe they have healthy and thriving long-term marriages. I want to investigate the various marriage lifecycles, (e.g. life as a couple, after children, raising children, teenagers, empty-nesting, and life as a couple again, etc.) Those who participate in this study will play a role in helping to provide perspective to other couples building on the strengths of these participants’ marriage and life cycle realities.

The number of participants will be approximately six to eight African American married couples. I would appreciate referrals of married couples you think would be interested in participating. Persons interested may contact me for more information at 513-529-2151, or 513-858-6819, riversam@muohio.edu, or Dr. Cheryl Burgan Evans, 513-529-4125.

Sincerely,

Annie Rivers
APPENDIX
B

Informed Consent
Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Annie Rivers. I am a full time graduate student at Miami University, Ohio. I am pursuing a master’s degree in Family and Child Studies. I will be completing a thesis project as part of my graduation requirement.

I have selected as a thesis topic, “An Examination of Lifecycles of African American Couples Married 25 years or More.” I am interested in learning about the experience of African American Couples who believe they have healthy and thriving long-term marriages. I want to investigate the various marriage lifecycles, (e.g. life as a couple, after children, raising children, teenagers, empty-nesting, and life as a couple again, etc.) Those who participate in this study will play a role in helping to provide perspective to other couples building on the strengths of these participants’ marriage and life cycle realities.

If you agree to participate in this study please read the information and sign the bottom of this paper and return the bottom portion to the researcher.

In order for me to gain this knowledge;
1. You will be asked to participate in a face-to-face in-depth interview, which will last approximately forty-five to sixty minutes, and a follow up interview will be scheduled if necessary.
2. The interviews will take place at a location and date/time of your choice.
3. At the interview, you will be asked to talk about your individual and joint marriage experiences.
4. You will receive a pre-interview form in the mail prior to the actual interview for your reflection and assistance during the interview.
5. Each of the interviews will be audiotape recorded and then later typed in their entirety. I Annie Rivers, will be the only person who will know your identity and all identifying information will be kept confidential and in a locked filing cabinet. All audiotapes will be destroyed.
6. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can withdraw at any time or stop at any time during the interview. You can refuse to answer any question. Participation will be based on a selection of not more than 10 couples.

For questions about the study, contact:
Annie Rivers - (513) 529-2151 or (513) 858-6819 or
Dr. Cheryl Burgan Evans – (513) 529-4125

For questions concerning your rights as a subject, feel free to contact:
Office for the Advancement of Scholarship and Teaching – (513) 529-3734
By signing this form, I give my permission to participate in this study.

Signature _____________________________ Date _______________________

By signing this form I give my permission to audiotape record the interview.

Signature___________________________________ Date___________________

I MAY BE CONTACTED AT ______________________
    PHONE NUMBER
APPENDIX C

BACKGROUND DEMOGRAPHIC SHEET
BACKGROUND DEMOGRAPHIC SHEET

Code: ________________________________________________

Sex:   Male____ Female_______

Race:  African American _________ Other ________________

Age at time of marriage _________________

Is this your first and only marriage?  Yes___ No___

How long have you been married? ___________

Highest Level of Education (circle one) 8  9  10  11  12  13 14 15
16 or more

Your Profession________________________________________

Number children if any: _________   Ages__________________

Number of grandchildren if any: _________________________

Your Household Income (Annual): (check one)
___ 20,000 – 30,000, ___31,000 - 40,000; ___41,000 – 50,000;
___ 51,000 – 60,000+

Are you retired? __________
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
PRE-INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

These pre-interview questions are designed to be reflective in nature, and to give you an opportunity to recall significant aspects of your marriage. I look forward to our face-to-face interview in the near future.

PLEASE BRING THIS SHEET WITH YOU TO OUR INTERVIEW. PLEASE DO NOT SHARE THESE REFLECTIONS WITH YOUR SPOUSE BEFORE OUR INTERVIEW.

1. What first attracted you to your spouse?

2. How did you meet?

3. Given the high divorce rate among African American couples today, what makes your marriage work?

4. What have been your most challenging times during your marriage? Come to the interview prepared to discuss the following:
   - Married with children, e.g. Parenting years, raising adolescents, young adults
   - Children leaving home; becoming grandparents
   - Conflict management as a couple
   - Retirement

5. What have been the highlights, or best times of your marriage?
Reference:


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