BLACK MARRIAGE, ATTACHMENT AND CONNECTING IN RELATIONSHIPS:
AN OBSERVATIONAL MULTI-METHOD STUDY INVESTIGATING THE EFFECTS OF THE GETTING
THE LOVE YOU WANT WORKSHOP ON BLACK COUPLES' IN-SESSION ATTACHMENT,
INTERACTIONS, MARITAL SATISFACTION AND COMMUNICATION

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of Antioch University New England

In partial fulfillment for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

Paula M. Smith

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This dissertation, by Paula M. Smith, has
been approved by the committee members signed below who recommend that it be accepted
by the faculty of Antioch University New England
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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By

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The focus of this dissertation is examining the impact of Imago Relationship Therapy

(IRT), more specifically the "Getting the Love You Want" workshop (GTLYW), on five

Black/African American couples' attachment, interactions, marital satisfaction and

communication. This study examines Black couples' lived experiences through a modified

version of a quantitative measure, called the Patient Attachment Client System (PACS), the

Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire-Revised (MSQ-R), semi-structured questionnaires to

measure qualitative data as well as direct observation of participants' interactions. PACS

analyzes how patients' in-session discourse enables them to share present experiences and link

these processes with their attachment structure. In this view, attachment was assessed by

delineating distinctive acts regarding how participants communicated their internal moment-

to-moment experiences. Qualitative findings reveal a majority of study participants reported an

improvement in their overall ability to communicate with their partner, an increase in their ability to communicate about race and racial distress, and an increase in their understanding and ability to deal with conflict and frustrations as a result of participating in the GTLYW workshop. Qualitative findings also showed that the structure of the Imago couples dialogue itself provided the conditions necessary for secure attachment, as measured utilizing PACS discursive markers, to occur between partners who are attachment figures to each other. Quantitative results in this study revealed that frequency of participants' secure attachment discursive markers (PACS) increased over the length of the GTLYW workshop, and that the secure attachment discursive markers were highest in the racial distress dialogue. While participation in the GTLYW increased Black couples' perception of their own marital satisfaction, it provided less strong support for an increase in their perception of their partner's marital satisfaction. The underestimation of the partner's view of marital satisfaction might be due to the differences in a subjective post-analysis self/other measure and an in-the-moment dialogic combined view measure. Educational workshops such as GTLYW may be a valuable prevention tool for couples and an efficient adjunct to therapy for clinicians who are trying to help couples struggling to remain in their marital relationship. Implications of the aforementioned findings, study limitations, recommendations and future directions are also discussed. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA (https://aura.antioch.edu) and OhioLINK ETD Center (https://etd.ohiolink.edu).

Keywords: Black marriage, attachment, racism, Imago relationship therapy, communication, marital satisfaction, multi-method analysis, dialogue, GTLYW

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Dedication Page

I dedicate this dissertation to my loving wife and best friend, Yael Shifra Bat-Shimon.

You are a continual source of joy and support in all of my endeavors. Thanks for being prepared

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Chapter I: Introduction

Black Marital Crisis

A structural fissure in Black marriage today has led to a crisis in attachment and intimacy. Little is known about the processes that promote marital intimacy and attachment within this group, and even less research has been devoted to how Black couples interact around race and the stereotypes resulting from a shared context of historical stigma (Moses, 2016). In order to understand Black couples, one must understand the historical and current events that this population has endured and continues to endure. Distrust and conflict in Black couples trace back to three and a half centuries of slavery, its historical lineaments in the peonage of share-cropping, the neoslavery of Jim Crow, racial-segregation eras, and remnants of institutional racism observed in society today (Bethea & Allen, 2013; Watson, 2013). During slavery, Black American couples were prohibited from marrying and Black American children were separated from their parents, siblings, and biological families and treated in inhumane ways. Beginning with slavery and continuing until today, racism, instability and economic hardship have affected intimacy, creating a Black marriage crisis (Helm & Carlson, 2013).

Racist stereotypes which inform politics, policing and psychology depict African American men and women as untrustworthy, dangerous, and not measuring up (Guillory, 2022, p. 5). The impact of these representations may be active in the perceptions of African Americans' view of self and view of others and also potentially add stress to their relationships. Black men and Black women who are hypervigilant to White oppression have difficulty displaying vulnerable emotions that are essential to relationship success, even when they are in relationship with Black partners (Nightingale et al., 2019). Black women, subject to the

intersection of both racism and sexism, are equally guarded, and both partners are reacting to

an oppressive culture where displaying emotional vulnerability can be dangerous or even fatal

(Nightingale et al., 2019).

Historically, Black people have been forced to suppress their emotions as a survival tool

during various articulations of White terrorism (e.g., slavery, Jim Crow, and now White

supremacists and police violence) (Causadias et al., 2021). The psychological, emotional, and

relational trauma endured during slavery and the coping mechanisms used to survive the

shame and humiliation of the practices and attitudes that Black men and women, less than

human have transmitted from one generation to another (De Gruy, 2005). These guarded

postures organized and perpetuated by compounded racial stressors operate to make

relational closeness difficult, if not impossible, without disentangling their racial origins

(Nightingale et al., 2019). Daily experiences of racism and negative racial stereotypes generate

race-based trauma and stressors of devaluation, assaulted sense of self, internalized

oppression, disappointment, hostility, and alienation between Black men and women (Browne,

2014; Hardy, 2016; Watson, 2013). The negative racial stereotypes, among others, serve to

maintain and justify racist practice against African Americans including slavery and

discrimination, promoting an overall myth of inferiority that persists into the present (Boyd-

Franklin, 2003).

In 1970, about 56% of 15 million Black American census participants were married,

while in 2019, only 35% of the almost 34 million recorded were married (United States Census

Bureau, 2018a). Black couples have the highest rates of partner distress, the highest rates of

divorce, and the lowest levels of relational satisfaction as compared to all other racial groups

(Bryant et al., 2010). For example, fifty percent of Black couples divorce within the first ten

years of marriage compared to about one-third of White couples (Helms & Carlson, 2013).

Research findings indicate improved mental health, decreased financial strain, and an increase

in mutual support around experiences of oppression and racism for married Black couples

compared with unmarried Blacks (Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Nonetheless, Black marriages are

ending in divorce at higher rates than other cultural groups (Price et al., 2017).

Historically, little research has focused on African American couples and marriages

(Bryant et al., 2010; Marks et al., 2008; Helm & Carlson, 2013, McAdoo, 2007; Helm & Carlson,

2013). Couple relationships are profoundly affected by experiences of racism (Boyd-Franklin,

2003, Kelly, 2003). Boyd-Franklin (2006) writes that racism and sexism have placed a burden on

African American gender roles and male-female relationships. African Americans continuously

experience, perceive, and respond to racism, and may project the negative feelings resulting

from racism onto their partners, as a safer target (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). Within the past two

decades, theorists have adhered to recommendations by renowned Black scholars Boyd-

Franklin (2003), Hill, (1999) by examining the inherent strengths of the African American family.

Boyd-Franklin's foundational work on African-American families and couples provides a critical

groundwork for study; however, there remains a paucity of literature that focuses on African

American couples independent of the Black family (Helm & Carlson, 2013). Despite the paucity

of research, the literature has long recognized the unique struggles that African American

couples face because of historical and racial oppression and discrimination; the negative impact

of racial stereotypes of Black men and women; gender inequality; higher rates of incarceration;

and greater financial strain than any other social groups (Dew et al., 2017; Hardy & Awosan,

2019; Helm & Carlson, 2013). Moreover, Black couples struggle to maintain their marriages in a systemically racist society, suggesting that Black couples face both internal and external threats (Bell, 2005; Seponski et al., 2013).

Couple and family therapy (CFT) has a great deal of research on couples but lacks a specific focus on African American couples. This suggests that marriage and family therapy (MFT) reflects a bias toward the dominant European American culture in its history, theories, and membership (McDowell et al., 2003). For decades, couples research focused on the experiences of White couples and used their relational patterns as a standard with which to compare the relational patterns of all other couples (Awosan & Opara, 2016). Ultimately, these standards rendered White couples functional and normal, a gold standard by which non-White couples are measured, judged, and othered. These comparative analyses pathologize African American couples when they fail to meet this standard (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011). Recently, scholars have rejected these comparative analyses, and a growing body of literature argues that for Black American couples, race and culture do matter and must be addressed in research (Bent-Goodley, 2017; Bryant et al., 2010).

Therefore, it is important for Black couples to discuss their reactions to racial discrimination and racism, racial identity and the influence of the majority culture (Parham et al., 2000) as well as the health of Black relationships. In this regard, Black love, as writer hooks (2001) suggests, is revolutionary to racism and is both wonderful, spiritual, and larger than the couple.

A Brief History of Marriage in the United States

It is important to situate the history of Black marriage and its attendant crisis in attachment and intimacy within the context of the broader history of marriage's decline in the United States, as Black couples are impacted both by changes and trends in the general population of the country and by stressors and challenges unique to African Americans. Although getting married is no longer a requirement for social acceptance, most people do marry in their lifetimes, and couples across the socioeconomic spectrum wish their marriages to be satisfying and long-lasting (Karney & Bradbury, 2020). Marriage has cycled through trends and there have been dramatic changes in how society views marriage and intimate relationships. Marriage is viewed as a partnership that helps coordinate and facilitate production, investment, and consumption activities, including raising children (Lehrer & Son, 2017). More of the population of the United States is currently unmarried than ever before (United States Census Bureau, 2017) because people have been living together more frequently (Rosenfeld & Roesler, 2019), marrying later (Kreider & Ellis, 2011; Rotz, 2016), and getting divorced at similar rates (Cohen, 2016). Despite these trends, the majority of people across all levels of socioeconomic status still desire to marry (Kuo & Raley, 2016; McDonald et al., 2011), and more than 90% of people do in fact get married in their lifetime (Kiersz, 2017).

Yet, as the goals and benefits of a happy marriage endure, so do the challenges, reflected in the fact that almost 50% of first marriages end in divorce (Kreider & Ellis, 2011). The frequency of divorce suggests that the initial connection and optimism that characterizes spouses on their wedding day is hard for many couples to maintain (Karney & Bradbury, 2020). It has been theorized that U.S. culture has shifted from child-centered families to adult-

centered families, where the focus is placed on individualism (Cherlin, 2010; Dixon, 2009).

The *Me Generation* beginning in the 1980's, promoted an emphasis on self and less on marriage

and family (Dixon, 2009, p. 34). The model emphasizes personal happiness and includes the

concept that if people are unsatisfied with their marriage, they are justified in seeking a divorce

(Lehrer & Son, 2017).

Married couples now want greater freedom for personal development and self-

expression, as eminent sociologist Andrew Cherlin (2010) explicated in *The Marriage-Go-Round:*

The State of Marriage and the Family in America. The persistence of marriage makes sense

considering that the intimate relationship enshrined by marriage continues to be vital to well-

being (Karney & Bradbury, 2020). When marriages are stable and fulfilling, spouses are

healthier (Robles et al., 2014), happier (Be et al., 2013), and live longer (Whisman et al., 2018).

When the relationship falters, other pillars of well-being are also at risk (Holt-Lunstad et al.,

2015).

History of Black Marriage in the United States

Institutional chattel slavery remains a significant untold story of African Americans and,

as such, has placed extremely destructive demands on families, disrupting the stability of

marriage and committed couples (Hardy, 1996). Slave codes existed that prohibited African

Americans from marrying without their slave owners' consent and they were forced to

cohabitate, which has a residual effect on current African American marital stability rates (St.

Vil, 2019; Turner, 2017). As African Americans were slowly integrating into mainstream

American society, interpersonal cross-cultural experiences led to comparisons to the dominant

culture (Kuo & Raley, 2016). American culture had been primed to believe that disparities

between Whites and African Americans were a sign of African Americans' personal deficits—

intrapsychic deficiency and competency failures, as well as family dysfunction and by extension,

couple failings (Guillory, 2022). This history is the backdrop against which modern Black

marriages and families are formed. *Systematic exclusion from the basic building blocks for a*

typical or healthy marriage means that Black marriages could never quite measure up.

In 1925, 85% of Black households were headed by a husband or father, and up until the

1960's, 78% of Black families included a married couple (Franklin, 2007). In the 1970's, 64% of

African Americans were married couples, followed by a downward spiral of marriage for Black

families (Pinderhughes, 2002). There are a number of explanations for this downward spiral

over the decades: increased lynching, re-enslavement of African American men through prison

work camps, destruction of Black towns and neo-slavery laws in the South (Blackmon, 2009),

and biased public policies which left African Americans increasingly isolated-politically, socially,

economically and geographically from the main currents of the American political economies

(Schram et al., 2003).

From the 1980's to today, one of the most influential factors on the quality of Black life

in America has been the War on Drugs (Perry & Bright, 2012). In the poverty-stricken, racially

segregated neighborhoods where the War on Poverty has been abandoned and factory jobs

have disappeared, the drug war has been waged with ferocity (Alexander, 2010). Harsh

sentencing for low-level crack offenses in comparison to powder cocaine and increased racial

profiling, increased the likelihood of prison arrests among African American men (Perry &

Bright, 2012) directly resulting from slavery and Jim Crow laws. People charged with drug

offenses are disproportionately poor people of color and typically charged with felonies and

sentenced to prison. In her book *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander (2010) documents the impact of mass incarceration of African American men and their male family members in the later part of the 20th century. She states, "If and when they are released, they become members of the under-caste, no longer locked up, but locked out—for the rest of their lives" (p. 38). Given the societal ramifications of major shifts in marital relationships, African-American marital quality and stability have not received sufficient empirical scrutiny (Allen & Olson, 2001).

The institution of marriage among African American households looks different today than in years past (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). In 2019, 30% of African Americans were married, compared to 48% of European Americans. African Americans, as well as Americans in general, are experiencing fewer marriages and an uptick in divorce rates between 2010 to 2019 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Although the rates of non-married African Americans continue to increase, the desire for marriage also remains for African Americans (Hardy & Boyd-Franklin, 1989). Despite reports of declining marriage rates, Lee et al. (2010) and Marks et al. (2008) emphasized the benefits of marriage and found that the desire to marry actually had not diminished over time.

Historically, our understanding of African American marriages is profoundly affected by disadvantages brought on by discrimination, marginalization, oppressive public policies, and mass incarceration (Perry et al., 2018). Partners may carry their individual experiences of racism home to the couple's relationship (Oggins et al., 1993), and displace their racism-related anger and frustration onto each other, increasing relationship conflict and distress (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 1998). It is important, however, to note that despite the brutality of slavery and the

intentional destruction of slave family life and intimate relationships, at the legal end of slavery in 1865, families demonstrated incredible perseverance in reuniting. Turner (2017) observed that African American marriages and families have persisted despite two and a half centuries of captivity and racial oppression.

Conceptual Framework

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory has been a widely accepted analytic paradigm that guides both researchers and clinicians as they work to understand the nature of relationships over the life course (Ainsworth, 1969; Bowlby, 1969, 1982). Building on Bowby's attachment work, Ainsworth et al. (1969) constructed the strange situation classification to assess the type of attachment that infants made to their caregivers. Based on this research, three attachment styles were identified: secure, insecure avoidant and insecure ambivalent (anxious) (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). Disorganized attachment was later added as a fourth attachment style (Main & Solomon, 1990). These four attachment styles are believed to play an important role not only in childhood but also in adulthood (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

One of the core assumptions of attachment theory is that humans are born with an innate need for safety and security within their relationships, a criterion that continues in adult relationships (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012). According to Shaver and Mikulincer (2014), sustained romantic love in adulthood involves an emotional attachment conceptually parallel to an infant's emotional bond with the primary caregivers. Attachment theory helps clarify needs and the types of beliefs couples hold about relationships (Hall, 2015). The most significant components of attachment theory are establishing a sense of security and the capacity for

effective mentalization (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2012). Wallin (2007) defines a felt sense of security as a "subjective state that hinges not on the caregiver alone, but on the internal experience as well, including the person's mood, physical condition, imaginings, and so on" (Wallin, 2007, p. 13). Strengthening attachment in Black couples is not merely about establishing security at the moment. Rather, it is about enabling children and adults to navigate and negotiate the terrain of racism in a society that threatens their sense of security on a daily basis (Coard, 2022).

Dogan et al. (2018) stated that research relating to Black American couples utilizes a deficiency-oriented model, which reinforces negative stereotypes about Black couples. Thus, in addressing the Black marriage crisis, it is critical to explore factors of context and culture that affect Black couples' felt sense of security and attachment. Wampler et al. (2004) report that only a small proportion of research on adult attachment in either the developmental or close relationships traditions has included observational measures of the interaction of adults with an attachment figure where the two adults are attachment figures to each other. Observational measures offer a unique opportunity to collect the in-depth, detailed data required to understand the lived experiences of under-studied populations. This study intends to gather observational data to identify the specific attachment discourse and interactions exhibited by Black couples that create and strengthen attachment, marital stability, and satisfaction.

Black Lives Matter and Underrepresentation of Black Lives in Attachment Literature

The Black Lives Matter movement was a clarion call for racial justice, racial equality, and active engagement in antiracist work (Watson et al., 2020). Black Lives Matter is aimed at fixing the racist system that targets Black people and treating them as if their lives do matter

(Watson, et al., 2020). Since the advent of the *Black Lives Matter* movement protesting the murders of George Floyd Jr. and Breonna Taylor, a racial reckoning has been happening in academia, driven by Black and Brown scholars countering the dominant narratives portraying Black families and attachment patterns as pathological (Causadias et al., 2021). Research illustrates that African Americans, Latin Americans, and Caribbean Americans have been underrepresented in attachment literature and that "from 2010 to 2020, there were no articles focused on attachment theory in the *Journal of Black Psychology* and only 2.29% of articles published in the journal of *Latinx Psychology* focused on attachment theory" (Causadias et al., 2021). Instead of drawing on strengths to document the link between secure attachment and a range of positive well-being indicators, some studies using attachment theory among people of African descent focus exclusively on experiences of risk and poverty, reinforcing deficit models (Dexter et al., 2013; Tyrell et al., 2023). This is unfortunate, given the potential of attachment theory to illuminate relational dynamics and their developmental legacy to promote positive development within Black and Brown communities (Sroufe et al., 2009). In addition to addressing issues of underrepresentation in academic literature, it is essential to approach the Black marriage crisis using an attachment lens with the goal of creating a safe haven for Black couples, fostering a sense of safety within contexts that threaten their survival (Causadias et al., 2021).

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) informs this study's emphasis on African Americans' experiences. CRT was first introduced in the 1970s due to the work of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman to determine the lingering effects of racism and oppression of minority ethnic groups

post-Civil War ((Bell, 1995; Delgado et al., 2017; Constance-Huggins, 2019). CRT is concerned

with transforming the relationship between race, racism and power by examining it across

dominant modes of cultural expression (Delgado, 1993). CRT not only examines how society

categorizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies, but also how transform it for the better

(Delgado 1993). In their influential book, *Critical race theory: An Introduction*, Delgado and

Stefencic (2001) introduce CRT to the social sciences more broadly. Delgado and Stefencic

(2001) claim that critical race theory is based on the following premise: Racism is ordinary, not

aberrational, and serves important purposes. "Race and racism are products of social thought

and relations [and] categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient"

(Delgado & Stefencic, 2001 p. 7).

More recently, Bonila-Silva (2015) has redeveloped the tenets of CRT to the following:

Racism is embedded in the structure of society and has a material foundation. "Racism changes

and develops over different times, is ascribed a degree of rationality, and has a contemporary

basis" (Bonila-Silva 2015, p. 74). Central to CRT is that racism is more than individual prejudice

and bigotry; rather, racism is a systemic feature of the social structure. CRT addresses the many

challenges that are unique to Black marriages. Brinks and Chambers (2019) submit that

therapists who counsel Black people should be aware of the complexities of their means of

survival and adaptation under a system of racial, sexual and economic domination and hostility.

Therapists should focus on the historical background of Blacks and access these societal,

structural and cultural factors without blaming or pathologizing. It is also crucial for therapists

to embrace the couple and help them mediate negative perceptions of themselves and their

partner. Most importantly, they should help Black couples understand these contextual factors and how they manifest in the couple's relationship.

There are many benefits to better understanding the racial and ethnic differences that affect Black couples' experiences in therapy. McDowell et al. (2017) emphasized the importance of diversity, equality, and inclusion within the clinical practice of marriage and family therapy. Humility, cultural competence and knowledge of intersectionality to further inclusion and social justice have proven beneficial to the field of marriage and family therapy (Gutierrez, 2018). Furthermore, Gaztambide (2022) posits that, in recontextualizing attachment theory through a critical race theory lens, it is crucial that psychotherapy address anti-Blackness and redefine therapeutic action as a means of repairing interpersonal ruptures and mentalizing about socio-historical ruptures.

Marital Satisfaction

Marital satisfaction is a multidimensional concept comprising different marital relationship aspects, such as education, socioeconomic status, love, commitment, marital communication, conflict, gender, marriage duration, the presence of children, sexual relationships, personality and division of labor (Delatorre & Wagner, 2020, Kamal et al., 2018; Sayehmiri et al., 2020). There is growing evidence that each partner can conceptualize marital satisfaction differently measuring the quality of a couple's relationship as assessed by subjective evaluation (Kama et al., 2018; Sayehmiri et al., 2020).

Karney and Bradbury (2020) reviewed the determinants of satisfaction and stability in marriage and the impact on individual and family well-being when strong marriages are formed and maintained. Surprisingly, this 10-year review revealed that couples' marital satisfaction

does not decline over time and remains relatively stable over long periods. The review also

revealed that dyadic processes found that were reliable and adaptive for middle-class, affluent

couples may not operate the same for lower-income couples (Karney & Bradbury, 2020).

Researchers have suggested that romantic relationship longevity and satisfaction predictors

stem from the family connection (Dixon, 2009), spirituality, and egalitarianism within the

relationship (Fincham, 2011; Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Further, these particular traits are well

represented in the lineage of African American marriages (Hardy & Boyd-Franklin, 1989).

Additionally, the value of friendships and extended family has been shown to positively impact

individual well-being among African Americans (Broman, 2005). Social networks offer positive

supports which can increase married individuals' self-esteem and self-worth (Lesane-Brown,

2006) and increase marital satisfaction by validating the marriage (Bryant & Conger, 1999).

Research identifying the specific factors determining marital satisfaction has produced

empirical breakthroughs in predicting and theoretical understanding of marriages for White

America. However, research has neglected to examine the specific relational processes and

interactions that create marital satisfaction among Black couples. Most studies focus primarily

on non-Black Americans and, assuming universality, overlook the cultural awareness required

to understand the African American relationship experience. This assumption of universality

and lack of cultural awareness have inhibited the field of CFT's ability to provide efficient

programs, clinical interventions, support, information, and resources that can guide Black

couples toward greater marital satisfaction. Neighborhood level economic disadvantage

predicted lower warmth, but surprisingly higher marital quality (Cutrona et al., 2003). Taken

together, neighborhood factors may uniquely impact relationship quality and also interact with

other dyadic behaviors to impact relationship quality (Wesley, 2017).

If the field of CFT is to provide appropriate, culturally-relevant treatment and programs

for Black couples, it is an ethical imperative to explore marital satisfaction among African

Americans. Furthermore, treatment must be strength-based and accompanied by research on

African American couples conducted with the same level of intensity provided in previous

studies where scholars sought to understand the context of marital adjustment and optimal

satisfaction, with respect given to social, psychological, and cultural factors that influence the

couple's interactional patterns and perceptions of behavior. This observational study intends to

explore marital satisfaction within the context of Black marital relationships to identify

discourse and interactions strengthening marital satisfaction outcomes.

Racial Socialization in Black/African American Families

Racial socialization research over the past 40 years has revealed that racial socialization

constructs are associated with well-being indicators across domains of psychosocial

development, identity, and coping (Evans et al., 2012; Gaylord-Harden et al., 2012; Neblett et

al., 2009; Seaton, 2020). Studies show that it is crucial for Black families to socialize their

children about their racial and ethnic identity (Davis et al., 2017). Most parents socialize

children explicitly or implicitly preparing and protecting them through regular transmission

messages regarding what it means to be Black and how to recognize and cope at the individual,

cultural, and institutional levels (Hughes et al., 2006; Lesane-Brown, 2006). This socialization

may also include messages and practices attributed to their group identity and position in the

social hierarchy, which shape beliefs and attitudes about their race and ability to fit in (Brown, 2008).

Similar to general coping socialization tasks performed by parents, experiences of discrimination may trigger specific coping strategies, such as, infusing cultural pride, preparation for bias, generalizing experiences to everyone with that characteristic, or attributing incidents as inherently racist (Anderson et al., 2020; Hughes et al., 2006). Concerning racial socialization, Black parents are essential socializing agents for their children transmitting beliefs and values about social inequity and fostering critical consciousness development.

Turner (2017) states that Bowen's theory on multi-generational transmission highlights how a family's history shapes its values, thoughts, and experiences from one generation to the next. Bowen's theory posits that it is essential to know one's family history to address life's risks through the differentiation of self, which encourages the individual to overcome negative family dynamics (Turner, 2017). Brown (2008) conducted a study to understand how social support and racial socialization impact African American adults' resiliency levels. Examining the messages received provides "insight into how some African Americans have processed the racial socialization messages, the impact the messages have had on their development, and how they have processed information they received from society" (Brown, 2008, p. 36). The study indicated a positive correlation between racial socialization messages and resiliency and perceived support serves as protective factors for this population (Brown, 2008).

It is important to understand the resiliency of African American couples, since they are more at risk of facing poverty, have fewer financial resources, and have higher mortality rates

than their Caucasian counterparts (Brown, 2008). Brown (2008) writes that some individuals

are nurtured in environments that foster resilience because they are taught to overcome

adversity; therefore, it is essential to explore how African American life and culture are

protective factors. Research shows that role sharing, the division of household labor, strong

kinship bonds, and solid religious orientation are protective factors for African Americans

(Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Brown (2008) indicates that studies have determined that the extended

family, the community, the church and fictive kin are social support networks for African

Americans and serve as the first line of defense, contributing to their ability to cope and

overcome adversity. Turner (2017) writes that African Americans have found great strength in a

loving God as their means of overcoming suffering, which is a source of comfort to successive

generations. Research is needed to expand the existing articulation of racial socialization

processes to address not only individual socialization, but also the effects of racial socialization

on adult relationships.

Imago Relationship Therapy

Imago relationship therapy (IRT) is a theoretical and applied methodology created by

Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt for working with couples in committed relationships

(Martin & Bielawski, 2011). One of the methods for delivering IRT is the 2-3-day relationship

seminar called Getting the Love You Want (GTLYW). Details of the GTLYW workshop will be

discussed in the design section. A contemporary model of couples counseling, IRT has had

widespread use and is considered a well-established model of couple therapy (Helmeke, Prouty,

& Bischof, 2015). Based in the relational paradigm, IRT is a synthesis of several theoretical

approaches, including psychoanalysis, self-psychology, behaviorism, attachment theory,

transactional analysis, gestalt therapy, object relations, and systems theory (McMahon, 1999; Zielinski, 1999; Luquet, 2000). The main thesis of IRT is:

> The basic thesis of Imago Relationship Therapy is that each person is a creation and function of relationship and in turn is a creator of a relationship in which they function. Each person begins life essentially connected to all aspects of himself and to his physical, social and cosmic context. He is whole and experiences a oneness with everything. The human problem results from a rupture of this essential connection, a rupture caused by unconscious parenting which does not support the maintenance of original connection. This results in separation from self-parts and alienation from others which creates the problematic character of the social context in which we live–flawed mental health, interpersonal tension, and social ills. The fundamental human yearning is to restore this original connection. (Hendrix in the foreword of Luquet, 1996, p. ix).

> IRT processes recreate the connection that is lost in childhood, severed in the couple's power struggle, and guide couples in using the partnership as a resource for healing, problem-solving, enabling greater personal fulfillment as partners deepen their connection (Luquet, 1998).

While research has been conducted on several facets of IRT's effectiveness for a variety of challenges couples face, this research is based predominantly on White couples and minimal attention has been given to the ways in which IRT might meet or fail to meet the unique needs of African American couples. At first glance, IRT appears to complement African American culture with its emphasis on empowerment and interpersonal connection, situating the responsibility for healing in the hands of the couple. For African Americans, connecting and

reconnecting play a central role in their spirituality, relationships, and lives. IRT methods might also play a significant role in African American couples' emotional, spiritual, and psychological growth by encouraging open communication and empathy and integrating ways to communicate about and resolve conflict (Weiser & Thompson, 1998). Hendrix's (1988) concept of the "journey of the self" (p. 101) provides an empathic lens to view the unique conflicts, courage, and spirituality of Black couples as they integrate therapeutic services into their culture. Strengthening attachment behaviors and interactions is a viable path for Black couples to reclaim their worth and heal. Furthermore, IRT's commitment to maintaining relationships characterizes the position of the African tradition shattered by slavery.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify specific attachment behaviors and communication processes that indicate secure attachment in Black couples and explore the effects of IRT through a GTLYW workshop on Black couples' understanding of conflict and ability to communicate effectively about race and racial distress. GTLYW is a 20-hour educational program delivered worldwide by trained and certified facilitators (Schmidt et al., 2016). The current study builds on a pilot study I conducted in Spring 2022 to explore the effects of IRT via a Getting the Love You Want (GTLYW) weekend workshop on Black couples' marital satisfaction, communication, empathy, race/racial identity, and vulnerability. The pilot study emerged out of my confusion and frustration as a Black IRT therapist working with Black couples in the tumultuous atmosphere of the nascent COVID pandemic.

Covid-19 brought on a surge of loss, anxiety, stress, fear, economic instability and isolation across the country, creating a mental health crisis within the pandemic and opening

up the question: Is Imago sufficient to address the complexity of Black relational experiences? Is pre-work necessary in order to help decrease their protective suspicions and enter into Imago dialogical structure in which vulnerability is implicit? To answer this question, I needed to wrestle with the complexity of Black marriage and Black attachment at both the systemic and dyadic levels.

Imago's theory claims roots in attachment and various systems theories (Hendrix, 1996), but appears to fall short in accounting for differences in attachment development and the effect of context and cultural messaging toward African Americans from birth to death. Borrowing from attachment theory, IRT assumes attachment needs can be met through parental emotional attunement and availability in a safe and secure family environment (Hendrix, 1996). However, this view fails to account for the reality of a world that depends on:

> Anti-Black instrumental violence where between the propositions '*if* I encounter an obstacle' and '*then* I can overcome it by drawing on my loved ones' exists a rupture signifying the non-contingent proposition 'I will die because Black life does not matter…" (Gaztambide, 2022, p. 355).

How, then, can I help Black couples obtain secure attachment in the ways IRT and traditional attachment theory propose? Because the Black couples in my practice were experiencing such terror and trauma, both internally and externally, the traditional delivery of Imago therapy overlooked the experiences of the living Black bodies sitting in front of me and left me with a deep knowing that something had to change in my work with Black couples. Secure attachment "can do a great many salubrious things—except buffer against bullets or gratuitous cruelty. In this light, what does secure attachment mean for Black people against the

backdrop of this anti-Black world?" (Gaztambide, 2022, p. 355). How can I, as a therapist, work effectively and comprehensively to address the systemic complexities and struggles that envelop the life of Black coupledom on every level of human involvement?

In an effort to explore these questions, I recruited five self-identified Black, American-born married couples for my pilot study. As I watched the videos and read the transcripts of the couples' dyadic work as well as of the group processing of couples' experiences of their dyadic work, I realized that I had accumulated a wealth of data beyond the specific pen and paper measures the couples completed before and after the workshop. In these tapes and transcripts I had stumbled upon a unique opportunity to observe important data on Black couples' processes and lived experiences of attachment as it emerged in their dialogic communication and interactions. This marked a shift from the original goal and perspective of my pilot investigation. It became critical for me to focus on observing these couples within an interactional context utilizing an attachment lens.

There is an impressive quantity of literature and data gathered about the effects of individual differences in adult attachment on clinical variables. Clear evidence has been established that differences in adult attachment are significantly related to both the therapeutic alliance and psychotherapy outcome (Bernecker et al., 2014; Mikulincer et al., 2013). The ways in which attachment actually manifest in therapy merits further study (Obegi & Berant, 2009). However, there is little research about measures linking attachment categories to the specific attachment-related interactions between adults.

As such, I was skeptical about the clinical utility of attachment categories being used as indices for assessing and evaluating the couple processes in this particular study. At the same

time, I was excited to discover that there is a need for measures that translate attachment

theory into observable behaviors between adults who are attachment figures to each other

(Wampler et al., 1996). As a consequence, this study seeks to address several new research

questions: *What are the observable attachment-related interactions and behaviors that create*

secure attachment in Black couple relationships? Does the GTLYW workshop increase

attachment security? Does IRT enable Black couples to communicate effectively about race and

racial distress?

Defining and giving language to observable attachment behavior in couple interaction

can be very useful to clinicians to guide interventions and to assess progress (Deal et al., (1986).

Much of the existing literature on African American marriage reflects a deficit-based model,

focusing on what is wrong with Black marriages relative to the larger population (Phillips et al.,

2012). "While it is well understood that families were broken up and sometimes destroyed

during slavery, what is not appreciated is the strength of the attachment bonds that remained

connected between the hearts and souls of the enslaved people," (Guillory, 2022 p. 23).

Observation of dyadic interactions is essential for understanding and naming the attachment

behaviors and communication processes that indicate secure attachment in Black couples.

This research study uses a "broaden and build upon cycle of attachment security"

(Mikulincer & Shaver, 2023, p. 261) and seeks to identify and describe the ways in which secure

attachment and safety emerges in Black couples' interactions that promote connecting, worth,

empathy, and resilience in the face of adversity. The current study focuses on observations of in

vivo adult attachment behaviors and dynamics in Black couples' discourse. Observing and

naming these attachment behaviors and dynamics represents an important step toward

addressing the Black marital crisis and identifying a road map towards instituting the marital as

a safe refuge for Black couples. In the following chapter, I provide an overview of current

literature relevant to this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Since the 1960's African American marriages have been depicted as dysfunctional and less satisfying by non-African American scholars without locating them within the most relevant historical, social, political, and cultural contexts that have strained male-female relationships beyond the strains experienced by majority couples (Brown & Tylka, 2011; Letiecq, 2019; McNeil-Smith et al., 2020; Pinderhughes, 2002). Scholarly research on Black couples must inherently wrestle with the protracted history of American racism and the unremitting effects on Black socialization and attachment processes. However, in the 21st century this should not be an end in and of itself. Rather, it should serve as a launching pad towards developing a clear and meaningful passageway forward towards reclaiming Black marriage as a right and safe refuge for Black couples and the cornerstone of a strong, resilient Black family. In order to paint a clear picture of the current landscape of literature pertaining to Black couples and the need for a strengths-based, culturally-relevant, attachment-informed approach to address the current Black marriage crisis, I review the relevant research in several domains. These domains are all interrelated and act as building blocks of the current research study.

Marital Satisfaction

Marriage satisfaction has been the topic of research for many decades (Keizer, 2014). Marital satisfaction is defined as the subjective evaluation of how each partner experiences the marriage (Keizer, 2014); and a state of contentment, satisfaction and pleasure that each member of a married couple enjoys mutually when all aspects of living together are considered (Bilah & Rasool, 2020). Marital satisfaction refers to a global assessment of the quality of an individual's marriage according to one's internal chosen criteria (St. Vil, 2014). According to

Sayehmiri et al. (2020), marital satisfaction is a multidimensional concept that comprises

different aspects of the marital relationship, and it is a measure of the quality of the couple's

relationship as assessed by subjective evaluation (Sayehmiri et al., 2020). Various demographic

variables such as gender of partner, time married, age, age at the time of marriage, number of

marriages, the number of children, socioeconomics, employment status, and education, also

have an effect on marital satisfaction (Bilal & Rasool, 2020).

Studies pertaining to marriage satisfaction have increased since the 1970's. Researchers

have explored the perception couples have of their relationship (Halford et al., 2016), and how

couples engage each other to make the relationship work (Gottman & Silver, 1994; Gubbins et

al., 2010; Lavner et al., 2018; Marks et al., 2008). Theorists wanted to answer the question: why

do some couples experience satisfaction and others do not? Gottman et al. (1977) were among

the first theorists to observe the process of the couples' interaction in real-time, observing

couples' interactional patterns and asking couples to describe their behavior and perceptions.

Gottman and Krokoff (1989) observed hundreds of couples' facial expressions, heart rates,

blood pressure, skin conductivity, and the words they used in conversation with their partners.

Results revealed that low-risk couples maintained a ratio of five positive interactions to every

one negative interaction during conflict.

Unlike most studies that rely on the self-report of men and women, Gottman and

Krokoff's (1989) innovative work involved observations of couples' interactions, further

highlighting the importance of dynamic affective processes in marriages and closely examined

potential mechanisms of relationship maladjustment (Gottman & Silver, 1994). As a leading

theorist in the field of relationship distress and satisfaction, Gottman made significant

contributions to the field. Although his data is reported to be diverse, results focused on gender

diversity, but lacked a focus on diversity among different races (Kim et al., 2007).

In an effort to predict marriage satisfaction, Karney and Bradbury (2020) conducted a

review of determinants of satisfaction and the impact on individual and family well-being when

strong marriages are formed and maintained. The 2020 study revealed that marital satisfaction

increases over time and remains relatively stable for long periods. It also found that, contrary to

behavioral models of marriage, negative communication patterns can be a challenge for the

couple's relationship. However, a change in the pattern does not necessarily lead to increased

satisfaction, nor does it automatically mean the couple is distressed. Finally, the dyadic

processes found to be reliable and adaptive for middle-class, affluent couples may not operate

the same for lower-income couples.

There appears to be a lack of research related to predictors of relationship stability in

African American couples (Bryant et al., 2010) as well as few observational studies that have

examined marital interaction among such couples (Cutrona et al., 2003). Observational studies

are especially important when exploring the lived experiences of under-researched

populations, as they allow for direct, in-depth data collection. African Americans report lower

marital quality and think about divorce more often compared to European Americans (Broman,

1993, 2005; Bulanda & Brown, 2007; Faulkner et al., 2005). This suggests the importance of

considering how unique life experiences and cultural norms in addition to structural factors

affect romantic relationship dynamics and outcomes in Black couples.

Research related to marital satisfaction is central to working with families. The stability

of the family structure depends on the quality of the couple's relationship (Sayehmiri et al.,

2020). Understanding the factors underlying satisfaction in relationships and marriages is important and can contribute to the general well-being of individuals and families (Kamal et al., 2018). Because racial differences in levels of marital satisfaction are unexplained (Trent & South, 1992), it is important to identify specific factors that have an effect on Black marital satisfaction in order to promote sustainable and healthy marriages in this population.

A majority of studies have focused on non-Black Americans and there is a need for more cultural awareness to understand the African American relationship experience and provide program interventions, support, information, and resources that will replicate and enhance marital satisfaction for this population. Despite the attention given to the influences of subculture and economic factors that hinder marital formation and subsequent satisfaction, only a part of the marriage shift can be associated with these factors (Broman, 2005). Therefore, it is an ethical imperative to explore marital satisfaction among African Americans from a strength-based perspective and conduct research with African American couples with the same level of intensity provided in previous studies where scholars sought to understand the context of marital adjustment and optimal satisfaction; with respect given to social, psychological, and cultural factors that influence the couple's interactional pattern and perception of behavior.

Marital Satisfaction Among Black Couples

Researchers have explored and analyzed couple satisfaction among Black American couples. Within the last decade, researchers have focused on factors associated with high-quality relationships, specifically regarding African American couples. Factors that influence couple satisfaction include spirituality, social support and racial discrimination. According to

Fincham et al., (2011), spirituality and religion were associated with couple satisfaction among Black American couples. Taylor et al., (2012) found that social support from extended family was positively associated with couples satisfaction for Black Americans.

Marks et al., (2008) utilized a strengths-based perspective when studying 30 African American couples who reported happy, strong, and enduring marriages. Outcomes of this study concluded that there are specific relationship processes that serve as strengths in African American marriages. These strengths include egalitarian role sharing among couples and division of labor, strong kinship bonds, and strong religious orientation (Marks et al., 2008). The benchmark for marital satisfaction requires further examination to include race and culture to fully understand what factors influence the sustainability of Black marital satisfaction.

The stability and quality of African American marriages have been among the least studied relationships in research (McAdoo, 2007; Stanik & Bryant, 2012). In addition, the literature on contributing factors associated with relationship satisfaction for African American couples is scant (McGoldrick & Hardy, 2008). The lack of research on African Americans and marital quality is a barrier to understanding African American marriages. Additionally, this hinders clinical development and raises questions about the cultural relevancy of therapy interventions and relationship education programs designed to enhance marriage satisfaction (Broman, 2005). Due to the limited literature specifically involving African Americans who report high relationship satisfaction, it is important to consider the context in which satisfaction is achieved.

Scholars have typically viewed African American marriages from a deficit perspective— highlighting problems within African American marriages (Connor & White, 2006; Billingsley,

2016; Chambers & Kravitz, 2011). Research shows that the marriage rate for African Americans is lower in comparison to White Americans and has declined in the past few decades (McAdoo 2007; Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan 1998). Examining this literature has become a priority based on a decrease in long-term marriages and rate of increase in single or cohabiting couples (Neblett et al., 2010).

To date, there are few empirical studies that focus on the differences or similarities that minority couples face in their marriages (Allen & Olson, 2001). Married adults are more likely to have their marriages end in divorce if their parents were divorced (Bengtson, 2001; Benson et al., 1993). One barrier that was taken into consideration in African American couples was the stressors of being married. When adults develop ineffective communication patterns and unrealistic views about emotional intimacy and how to resolve conflict, these stressors are important factors in explaining reasons that marriages end in divorce quickly (Ottaway, 2010). Understanding marital satisfaction is at the root of examining Black couples' coupling processes.

Divorce in the United States

The United States has had an unusually high rate of divorce throughout its history (Amato, 2012). Following WWI, divorce emerged as a major social issue. In the first half of the 20th century, social scientists saw the rising levels of marital disruption as a serious problem (Amato & Irving, 2005) due to the assumption based in Freudian theory that children need to grow up with two parents in order to develop normally. By the end of the 1970's, a great majority of Americans viewed divorce as an unfortunate but common event, and the stigma of divorce, although still present, was weaker than in earlier years (Amato & Irving, 2005, p. 52).

No-fault divorce laws played a role in the increasing divorce in the United States in the

1970's (Pinsof, 2002). The law gave couples the option to divorce, citing irreconcilable

differences as the reason to terminate their marriage, making divorces easier to obtain, more

culturally acceptable, and less psychologically distressing (Pinsof, 2002). A trend worth noting is

the tendency for wives to initiate divorce more often than husbands. The feminist perspective,

which argues marriage provides substantially greater benefits to husbands than to wives,

provides another explanation for wives to initiate divorce (Amato & Irving, 2005, p. 53).

Since there was less of a stigma and it became more culturally acceptable to get a

divorce, attitudes began to change, and more couples chose this option (Campbell & Wright,

2010). Although attempts to scale back no-fault divorce during the 1990's were unsuccessful,

legislative efforts to strengthen marriage (rather than restrict access to divorce) met some

success (Amato & Irving, 2005, p. 53).

Divorce in Black American Couples

The divorce rate for Black couples went from 2.2% in 1960 to 5.2% (Amato & Irving,

2005). In 1970, out of 15 million Black Americans that participated in the census, about 56% of

them were married; however out of the almost 34 million recorded in 2019, only 35% were

married (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018a). According to Carlson and Helm (2013), fifty percent of

Black couples divorce within the first 10 years of marriage compared to about one-third of

white couples.

Research also demonstrates that Black American couples have the highest rates of

divorce and the lowest level of relational satisfaction as compared to all other racial groups

(Bryant et al., 2011). Perry et al., (2018) studied African Americans' perspectives on marriage

and romantic relationship dissolution. The authors found that participants cited economic

disadvantage, previous negative relationships, gender mistrust, and a fear of commitment as

the factors contributing the dissolution of African American marriages and romantic

relationships (Perry et al., 2018). The few studies that have examined divorce among African

Americans rarely go beyond a mere description of differences between African Americans and

White Americans (Orbuch & Brown, 2008). According to Billingsley (1992), this is due to the

researchers' inability to go beyond the pathological approach to African American families.

The literature on marital stability and quality has been quite comprehensive in nature

and scope, but it has primarily emphasized White marriage. Little research attention has been

given to African Americans marriages and even less to divorce within the African American

community (Orbuch et al., 2002). Orbuch et al. (2002) argue, that the structural context and

environment within which relationships reside is critical to the behaviors and interactions

within those relationships; the norms and meanings surrounding relationships and relational

processes also are important to the study of marriage and divorce among African Americans.

The assumption is that people who are in lower positions in society are confronted with

challenges that make them less able to fulfill marital roles (Orbuch, 2002, et al., p. 180). Chaney

(2016) indicated that not only do Blacks have the lowest rate of marriage and the highest rate

of divorce, they are more likely to raise children in single parent households. African Americans

report lower marital quality, which influences their decision to contemplate divorce (Burdette

et al., 2012; Ellison et al., 2010). In this light, any study investigating marital stability and quality

among African Americans must consider the distinct rather than the universal processes that

underlie divorce (Orbach et al., 1999).

Attachment Theory

Attachment is widely recognized and applied by scholars in industries such as social work, education, communication, and psychology as a means of explaining the rationale for mutual emotional dependency and psychological connection that develops between married individuals (Sesemann et al., 2017). Active attachment researchers and critics are increasingly lamenting that the conceptualization of attachment-related differences has remained impermeable to progress in evolutionary biology, behavioral genetics, and cultural anthropology (Fonagy et al., 2017; Grangvist, 2020, Simpson & Belsky, 2016). Given how comprehensive attachment dynamics are, attachment theory allows a wide range of treatment in several areas of human experience, including issues of social justice. Attachment theorists have not adequately considered the impact of wider societal dynamics, such as racism, and the development of capacities for secure attachment, mentalization, and nonviolent thinking and behavior (Thomas, et al., 2022). Attachment theory is simplified and fails to capture and reflect adequately the subtle nuances in relationship quality and the meanings of behavior that come to light when racism, discrimination and culture are considered (Coard, 2021). Context is important and of value for attachment theory in recognizing that its conceptual and observable findings have been generated and interpreted within a specific sociocultural framework (Coard, 2021).

Attachment theory has been criticized for its lack of cross-cultural validity, its overreliance on assessment instruments centered on the experience of Europeans and European Americans, and its disregard for cultural variation (Keller, 2018). In response, Mikulincer and Shaver (2023) have introduced a "broad and built" (p. 261) cycle of attachment

security to overcome prejudice, discrimination, and racism. Causadias et al. (2021) posit that

sense of safety and security emerges from interactions with sensitive caregivers (and later,

relationship partners), and promotes emotion regulation, resilience in the face of adversity, and

empathy with others. Attachment security can help decrease and overcome prejudice,

discrimination, and racism by diminishing biased attitudes and discriminatory behavior toward

members of other social or racial groups and protecting those who experience discrimination

against its negative effects, as well as discrimination directed toward oneself (Causadias et al.,

2021).

Despite decades of exploration and expansion on attachment, the research on Black

couples and attachment is nonexistent, leaving attachment theory incomplete. Attachment

theory must incorporate the knowledge, wisdom, and perspective of researchers and Black

couples. What is missing from the literature is adequate attention to the unique context of

African American couples—a sociohistorical context as well as the "ordinary magic of

attachment, cultural strengths, joy, and couple resilience" (Masten, 2015, p. 268). Embedded in

the lives, narratives, and coupling processes of Black couples amongst the internal and external

forces displayed against them are attachment bonds which can be easily missed but become

striking when observed through an attachment lens.

The statistics on marriage decline and the disparities among Black couples in this area

make it imperative to explore and understand these encounters. Furthermore, the systemic

issues are so real, present and painful that one would have to be blind and morally corrupt to

ignore them. As such, recognition of the detrimental existence and very real harm of the

structural forces displayed against Black marriage is paramount. Nevertheless, cruelty is not the

only story; the attachment stories of Black couples are also different. The stories of African

American love, relationship, bonding and marriage have received scant attention in

professional literature (Guillory, 2022, p. 17).

Patient Attachment Coding System - The Development & Theory

The Patient Attachment Coding System (PACS) was developed to investigate differences

in patients' attachment discursive behavior (Talia et al., 2017). A study by Talia et al. (2014)

found that clients who had a secure classification on the AAI engaged in a free and collaborative

dialogue with the therapist and easily established a connection. Clients with a dismissing

classification appeared almost to be talking to themselves and provided few cues for support as

if preventing the therapist from becoming too close. Clients with a preoccupied classification

seemed to enlist the therapist's constant validation of their perspective, leaving little room for

independent contributions and separateness in the relationship. These findings illuminate that

these differences between clients' in-session attachment discourse seemed to manifest both at

the interpersonal and the narrative levels. Thus, the PACS departs from previous attachment

literature in a "move to the relational" (Talia et al., 2017, p. 53), proposing that language and

behavior do not have to be considered separately (Talia et al., 2017).

The PACS identified 59 specific discursive markers that appear in patient-therapist

discourse. According to Talia et al. (2017):

> The markers were grouped according to their possible function in regulating
>
> attachment, inspired partly from Ainsworth's et al., (1978) behavioral scales for
>
> assessing infant behavior in the Strange Situation: proximity seeking, contact
>
> maintaining, with markers that elicit attunement and exploration of internal experience,

and avoidance and resistance, with markers that discourage or hinder collaborative exploration of internal experience.

The PACS offers a conceptualization of attachment focused exclusively on patterns of internal state communication with another person. This departs from the traditional self-report attachment research that presents the three attachment "styles" as a kind of comprehensive prototype for patients' experiences in and approaches to close relationships (Miller-Bottome, et al., 2019). While most other measures of attachment employed in psychotherapy research rely on retrospective accounts of the therapeutic relationship, the PACS may be able to predict attachment status by observing the actual client therapist interaction (Miller-Bottome, et al., 2019).

In summary, the findings obtained through the development and validation of the PACS shed light on attachment in adulthood as a construct and how it manifests in and influences the therapeutic interaction (Miller-Bottome, et al., 2019). These findings move the attachment narrative from a focus on retrospective self-report to direct observation of in-session interactions between therapist and client.

Imago Relationship Therapy

Imago relationship therapy (IRT) was developed in 1980 by Harville Hendrix, Ph.D. and Helen LaKelly-Hunt, Ph.D. as a theoretical and applied methodology for working with couples in committed relationships (Martin & Bielawski, 1996). Hendrix contended that marriage is "a transferential experience of unresolved infantile expectations, directed toward one's spouse" (Hendrix, 1996, p. 4). Hendrix also claimed childhood wounds from caregivers lead to character adaptations such as detachment, isolation, withdrawal, and rebellion (Hendrix, 1999). IRT is

based on a synthesis of attachment theory, object relations, systems theory, developmental

psychology, transactional analysis, Western spiritual traditions, Gestalt psychology and

behavioral sciences as an integrative, relational approach for couples (Hendrix, 1988, 1992).

Hendrix suggested that this synthesis of each of these schools of thought helps unravel the

problems of intimate relationships and provides tools for improving marital satisfaction

(Hendrix, 1988, p. xv). IRT's ultimate goal is to establish a conscious relationship that can heal

the psychological wounding of childhood (Hendrix, 1998). Understanding childhood wounds

provides the clients with an intergenerational perspective on the reasons they respond to their

partners in certain ways. This involves exploration of the family system and the conscious and

unconscious repressed messages and events that shape current behaviors.

IRT has had widespread use and is considered a well-established model of couple

therapy (Helmeke et al., 2015; Jakubowski et al., 2004). Research shows that IRT has been

demonstrated to increase empathy (Schmidt & Gehlert, 2017; Holliman et al., 2016); improve

family and marital issues (Luquet & Muro, 2017); reduce relational stress, improve

communication skills, and restore connection and wholeness in relationships (Hannah et al.,

1997; Hendrix, 2005; Luquet, 1996); and regulate anxiety so that partners can to listen to each

other in an authentic, intentional atmosphere (Hendrix et al., 2015). Current literature reveals

that IRT is effective in helping couples generate corrective emotional experiences in therapy

(Nov-Sharav, 2021).

A recent study by Hassania et al. (2022) found that Imago therapy was more effective

than cognitive behavioral couples therapy in positive feelings and ability to tolerate failure

between partners as well as reducing boredom in the marriage. Luquet and Muro (2018)

established that IRT processes block negativity at the affective, cognitive and behavioral level to reestablish loving connection while partners gain insight into the systems that created their relational patterns. Gehlert et al., (2017) found that marital satisfaction scores can drop once Imago therapy sessions have ended, although these scores remain higher than they were before the sessions took place.

Hosseini and Movahedi (2016) explored IRT and its effectiveness for improving couples' lovemaking. Findings showed that Imago therapy was effective in helping couples create a more realistic attitude towards lovemaking and Imago education in-group style led to more realistic attitudes in lovemaking. Martin and Bielawski (2011) reported that after Imago-based couple therapy, 92% of the participants experienced an increased understanding of self and a majority of participants (67%) reported an increased capacity to understand their own as well as their partner's childhood, resulting in a better understanding of the present relationship. This is the only study that focuses on IRT for African Americans.

As a relational framework, IRT enables couples to heal the intergenerational trauma of the disruption of family relationships and to create a new legacy of family connection and continuity to bequeath to the next generation. IRT rejects a focus on pathology of the couple dyad and intentionally draws attention to and nourishes the strengths, resources and resilience of the couple. IRT offers couples a sense of purpose, healing, safety, connection and a sense of belonging (Hendrix & LaKelly-Hunt, 2015) that researchers (Lyons-Rowe & Rowe, 2009) propose are essential for African American couples to sustain a healthy coupling in the face of the internal and external pressures of systemic racism.

I believe in the human potential for growth, development, and change, and see the marital relationship as a possible path for spiritual growth and healing. I also maintain that such growth and healing can be experienced most deeply when couples are involved in committed, exclusive, intimate relationships. The capacity for couples to provide emotional safety for this kind of exploration seems to be an essential element of the process. I value programs and interventions that teach couples how to create such safety in their relationships, encourage self-disclosure, and promote the exploration of affect, intimacy, emotion, and psychological healing.

In summary, IRT holds promise as a vehicle for African American couples to return to the richness of their ancestral roots. Studies have shown that IRT is in line with other models; however, there is not much of a focus on non-White couples. While limited in empirical support, IRT model fits the criteria for a sound theoretical approach (Boyd & Pine, 1983; Hansen et al., 1986; Hendrix, 2005). Although IRT has a wealth of positive attributes and techniques, many people have never heard of it, particularly Black Americans.

Summary of Literature Review

In summary, marital research has often used multimethod approaches to conduct studies primarily on white, middle, and upper-class couples (Greenman & Johnson, 2013). This research has created breakthroughs in prediction and theoretical understanding of marriages for White America, and yet misses the mark in investigating fundamental influences and contexts that contribute to Black couples' developing strong attachment bonds and marital satisfaction. The literature on Black couples is sparse. The research that does exist suggests that couple therapists need to know African American history, the context of racial disparities (Guillory, 2022); the interpersonal dynamics of power particular issues associated with Black women and men, their challenges to relationship trust, and microaggression in interpersonal communications (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 1998, Boyd-Franklin, 2003). The literature clearly illustrates the unique struggles Black couples face because of historical racism and discrimination (Awosan & Hardy, 2017); the negative impact of racial stereotypes of Black men and women; gender inequality; higher incarceration of Black men (Helm & Carlson, 2013); greater financial strain than any other social groups (Dew et al., 2017); highest rates of partner distress, and the highest rates of divorce (Bryant, et al., 2010). At the same time, Black couples must also accept and navigate the daily external threats to Black marriage that are embedded in living within the context of a systemically racist society (Bell, 2005). That is to say, the threats to Black marriage are both internal and external.

Black marriage matters and it is currently facing a crisis that the field of CFT and of psychotherapy, more generally is not well-equipped to address. Research in the domains of marital satisfaction and attachment have neglected Black couples, focusing almost exclusively

on White couples and assuming universality. Research on Black marriage and divorce tends to focus more on the unique stressors and challenges that Black couples face than on programs, interventions, information, and resources that enrich communication and closeness, attend to sociocultural factors, and replicate and enhance marital satisfaction. Research on IRT, which at first glance appears well-suited for Black couples in its strengths-based approach and ability to create safety for difficult conversations, focuses primarily on White couples. More importantly, a judicious read of Imago relationship theory does not attend to or reference Black couples within the context of race, racial identity development and at the micro-level each partner's racial identity and race-related internal stress. These issues are embedded in the power struggle, each partner's view of self, relationship, other and attachment process. The current study responds to the need evidenced in existing literature for a culturally-relevant, hopeful, specific, clearly-articulated, attachment-based approach to strengthening Black marriage.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter explains the various methods used to generate the data collected from a previous pilot study. The chapter concludes with an overview of the current research study and data analysis. The current study uses a multimethod observational approach. Multimethod research combines any number of multiple methods (Hunter & Brewer, 2016, p. 186). This study employs qualitative, quantitative and observational methods. Qualitative data provides meaningful information by giving the researcher rich descriptions of events and explanations of processes that take place as the result of an experience. The findings can lead to new conceptions or ways to revise old conceptual frameworks. Participants' words can provide concrete and vivid meaning to those interested in positive social change (Miles & Huberman 2014). The data can also provide information regarding certain elements of the workshop that may need consideration or expanded coverage.

The Pilot Study

Location and Sampling

Upon receipt of approval from the Antioch University New England Review (IRB) (Appendix B), an online survey was created for this study using Survey Monkey (Appendix C). Information pertaining to the pilot study criteria and purpose was emailed to Imago Relationships North America (IRNA) listserv, MFT programs in Rhode Island, Connecticut & Massachusetts on Facebook, and to professionals in RI who work specifically with Black couples (Appendix D). Flyers were placed on two college bulletin boards in Providence, Rhode Island. (Appendix E). Respondents were asked to complete the online survey to determine whether they met study criteria. Interracial couples and couples currently experiencing IPV or issues with substance abuse were excluded from this study. In addition, Black participants who were not

born in the US were excluded from this study, as their racial socialization process is different from the racial socialization process of Blacks born in the U.S. and they may thus experience the effects of racial distress on their relationship differently. Selection procedures involved criterion sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to select Black couples during middle adulthood (35-65 years old). Adults in middle adulthood are at their peak for productivity in love and work, and have begun to examine their personal life decisions, goals, and commitments more seriously (Karimi et al., 2019).

The couple entity, rather than individual participants, was the primary unit of analysis for this pilot study; therefore, it was important for both partners to participate in the workshop. Of the eight couples who completed the initial online survey, three of the couples were removed from the final sample. The final sample for this study was 10, five men and five women for a total of five couples. Selection procedures were based on criterion sampling, and care was taken to ensure that the participants were selected to represent the dimensions that were significant to the study in terms of age, gender, racial identity, length of marriage and availability to travel to Rhode Island. to participate in a two-day workshop. Participants in this study attended a complementary two-day GTLYW couples weekend workshop facilitated by the researcher. Workshops allow for persistent observation to scrutinize the issues and concerns relevant to a particular study *in depth* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Objectives

The purpose of the pilot study was to determine whether Imago relationship therapy (IRT) provided via a GTLYW workshop was an effective treatment for Black/African American couples in distress. The questions for the pilot study were:

1) *What is the impact of GTLYW on the quality of Black/African American couples' communication?*

2) *Does the GTLYW workshop increase relationship satisfaction for Black/African American couples?*

3) *Does the GTLYW workshop increase Black/African American couples' ability to be vulnerable with each other; does GTLYW workshop increase Black/African American couples' empathy toward each other?*

4) *What are the constructs/mechanisms of the GTLYW workshop that make it safe for Black/African American couples to explore issues of race, racial identity and racism?*

The original purpose of the pilot study was to collect data on Black couples' experience of the IRT processes taught in the GTLYW workshop. However, as it became clear in watching the video recordings and reading the transcripts, that they offered rich and hitherto unexplored data on Black couples' attachment processes, their interactions themselves became a new and central focus of this new observational research. To carry out persistent observation, the researcher must focus on various relevant aspects of a particular study in detail for a significant and specific amount of time (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). The interactions observed include couples demonstrating and engaging in dialogical communication processes on topics such as appreciation, childhood experiences, frustration, re-romanticizing, re-visioning and racial distress; giving and receiving feedback after demonstrations; and interacting with other participants following each process.

While questions for the pilot study were developed based on review of the relevant literature, the present study refined the research questions and hypotheses based on additional

information and insight gained while observing the participants. The current study utilizes

qualitative methods, quantitative methods and direction observation. Qualitative questions are

as follows:

1) *Does participating in the GTLYW workshop change how Black couples understand*
   and deal with conflict?

2) *Does participating in the GTLYW workshop increase Black couples' ability to*
   communicate with each other?

3) *Does GTLYW help Black couples to communicate effectively about race and racial*
   distress?

Quantitative hypotheses include:

Hypothesis 1: Marital satisfaction will increase for Black couples from pre to post-participation

in the GTLYW workshop.

Hypothesis 2: The majority of discursive markers observed in couples' dialogue processes over

the course of the GTLWY workshop will fall into the three PACS scales of Proximity-seeking,

Contact-maintaining and Exploring.

Hypothesis 3: The frequency of the discursive markers falling into the three PACS scales of

proximity-seeking, contact-maintaining and exploring will increase over the length of the

workshop.

Hypothesis 4: The frequency of discursive markers falling into the two PACS scales of proximity-

seeking and contact-maintaining will be highest in the racial distress dialogue.

Hypothesis 5: The Imago Dialogue promotes the enactment between partners of several

specific PACS discursive markers more than others and all of these discursive markers fall into

the Proximity-Seeking, Contact-Maintaining and Exploring Scales, indicating a secure

attachment bond.

A summary of the demographic characteristics of the sample provides information

about participants' income, age, gender, status, education, and length of marriage (Appendix

F).

Data Collection

Each couple was given a name tag, chose their own pseudonym and interacted with

each other using their pseudonyms. Participants were given pre-questionnaires (Appendix F)

and post-treatment questionnaires (Appendix G). The questionnaires asked participants to

reflect and report on communication, conflict, racial distress and a marital satisfaction before

and after participating in the workshop. The racial distress questionnaire included a series of

key questions, including the following: *Did any of the experiential processes help you*

understand the impact of racial distress on your relationship? Has your understanding of the

family of origin messages around racism and its impact changed as the result of participating in

the workshop? Pre-and post-questionnaires were designed to elicit participants' stories and

subjective experiences of the workshop, and the workshop's impact on participants' ability to

understand and deal with conflict, communicate with each other, and talk about race/racial

distress.

The researcher facilitated the GTLYW educational guidelines and lectures (Appendix G).

The lectures were also video-recorded. After each educational lecture, participants volunteered

to demonstrate the specific dyadic process (also facilitated by the researcher) as a way of

modeling the processes, which also enhanced group learning and allowed the researcher to

collect further data on these couples' lived experiences. After each demonstration, the demo

couple was offered the opportunity to receive feedback from the group. The guidelines for

offering feedback were as follows: *What I appreciated about what I saw is… and/or what*

resonated from my own life/relationship is... Following the demonstration and feedback

session, participants went to practice the process (each process coincides with lecture material)

in their private dyads. Couples were provided manuals outlining the scripts and exercises to be

used during the private dyadic interactions. Following the demonstrations and practice, all of

the participants shared their experiences of each exercise in the large group setting. Processing

openly in the large group was optional; however, all of the couples agreed to give and receive

feedback and found it helpful to share their experience and listen to the other couples'

experiences. For example, one couple noted, *"This is the first time in my life that I have ever*

been in a room full of other Black couples and it felt good." The group processing again offered

rich observational data about couples' experiences.

During the pilot study, the researcher video-taped the participants for nine hours per

day for two days and was present in the room the entire time. These videos were then

transcribed verbatim and scrutinized for additional visual data such as participants' heads

nodding in agreement, high-fives, and other non-verbal communication. Couples were also

given journals and pens to document and track their experiences of the exercises and were

encouraged to refer to their notes in completing the post-workshop questionnaires.

Research Design

Getting the Love You Want Couples Weekend Workshop

Getting the Love You Want (GTLYW) is a workshop based on IRT, developed by Hendrix

and La Kelly-Hunt at the Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University (Hendrix,

1996; Hendrix et al., 2015, Holliman et al., 2016). The theoretical foundation of for the GTLYW

workshop is found in two books, *Getting the Love You Want* (Hendrix & LaKelly-Hunt 2019, p. 7)

and *Keeping the Love You Find* (Hendrix & LaKelly-Hunt, 2018, p. xiv). GTLYW workshop has a

unique focus on creating awareness about traits experienced in childhood affecting mate

selection, possibly fueling present frustration and arguments (Schmidt et al., 2016). What

resonates with many couples is learning together how to resolve childhood issues, accepting

that one is born into, wounded and healed in a relationship (Khalili & Afkari, 2017).

GTLYW is a two-to-three-day educational seminar for married and unmarried couples,

conducted away from home, serving as an advantage as couples get to be away from their daily

routines (Schmidt et al., 2016). This workshop is presented in a group setting however many

opportunities are provided for private exploration of the relationship and processes. Workshop

costs typically range between $700 - $1200 per couple and include two workshop manuals,

continental breakfast each day, and refreshments and are held either in hotels, retreat centers

or office facilities. However, for research purposes the workshop was complimentary for

participants. The size of the group depends on accommodations and enrollment, but consist of

a few dozen or as many as seventy-five.

GTLYW combines attachment theory, developmental psychology, behavioral change

techniques and neuroscience (Hendrix et al., 2015), with dyadic exercises that make up the core

practices of Imago relationship therapy (Hendrix, 1999) and are delivered by worldwide trained

and certified facilitators (Schmidt et al., 2016). Hendrix (1988) asserts that in order to achieve in

order to achieve the goal of creating a conscious relationship and facilitating mutual healing of

childhood wound couples must communicate their thoughts and feelings in a safe environment.

Couples are taught and practice a communication skill referred to as couples' dialogue, which

aims to increase positive relational patterns (Schmidt et al., 2016), regulating anxiety in order to

be fully able to listen to each other in an authentic, intentional atmosphere (Hendrix et al.,

2015). In addition to active listening, dialogue includes mirroring, validating and empathizing

with what the partner says (Holliman et al., 2016; Mikle & Gilbert, 2019; Schmidt et al., 2016).

Schmidt et al. (2016) found that GTLYW workshops affected the relationship satisfaction and

communication patterns of participants. Although research examines the effect of the GTLYW

workshop on marital satisfaction on predominantly White couples, there is limited research on

Black participants' reports of their experiences in the workshop and how they view its effect on

marital satisfaction.

Outline of the GTLYW Workshop

In this section I briefly describe several key components of the GTLYW workshop in

order to give a sense of the treatment modality.

Workshop Goals

The goal of the GTLYW workshop was to assist people in developing a "new way to love"

(Hendrix & Hunt, 2005, p. i), with the assumption being that couples develop (or enhance)

connection implementing a new style of loving. The GTLYW workshop was not intended as a

substitute for couple's therapy, but to learn about the foundation of the IRT process in a safe

atmosphere advantageous to engaging in the experiential aspects of the workshop. This safe

atmosphere helped couples explore and better understand conflict and their emotions. The

couples were responsible for figuring out how they would apply what they learned in the

workshop to their own lives.

Hendrix (1988) sees relationship as the pathway to spiritual growth and psychological

wholeness and describes IRT as a therapeutic process to help couples achieve a conscious

relationship while facilitating the mutual healing of childhood unfinished business. Hendrix

further assert that "in order to achieve this goal that in order to that goal couples must learn to

communicate their thoughts, feelings and needs in a safe environment" (2021, p. xii). In

response to the need for safety Hendrix developed the couples dialogue the fundamental skill

underlying all IRT processes in the GTLYW workshop. Couples communicate using this precise

structure to emotionally connect with how they experienced significant caretakers in childhood,

experience closeness, share their needs, change how they look at their relationship and

promote understanding (Hendrix, 1996).

The Couples Dialogue

Hendrix (1999) asserts the couples dialogue is the fundamental skill in IRT for creating

safety in communication. Imago dialogue is the language of the relational paradigm, spoken in

the space-between (See table) and the vehicle for transforming personal relationships (Hendrix

& LaKelly-Hunt, 2021, p. 192). Because the goal of IRT is more than the improvement of skill

communication skills and reduction of symptoms, the dialogue is the skill begin the journey to

meaningful connection. Using dialogue partners can create an atmosphere safe enough for

putting language their unlanguaged experiences, that is, their thoughts, feelings, memories,

and dreams. It is a tool that helps couples communicate in a nonreactive manner. the couples

dialogue has three steps: mirroring, validation and empathy to help couples feel accurately

heard and understood. Hendrix (1992) refers to the Imago dialogue as "deliberate conscious

communication" (p. 190). Partners clarify, confirm, and develop appreciation, acceptance, and

respect for each other's inner worlds during this process (Hendrix, 1992). The Imago dialogue

consists of mirroring, validation, and empathy (Hendrix, 1992, p. 283).

Mirroring. The receiving partner is required to reflect the content of the sending party's

message. The receiver does not attempt to defend, analyze, criticize, or interpret the message

being sent. The receiver reassures the sender that the message has been heard by mirroring the

sender's message (Hendrix, 1992). Research evidence indicates that humans have innate mirror

hunger (Kohut, 1971). Mirroring is part of the human longing to experience connecting with

others (Hendrix & LaKelly-Hunt, 2021).

Validation. Validation is the process whereby the receiver affirms that they grasp the

meaning of the message sent and that they understand its importance from the point of view of

the sender (Hendrix, 1992). Validation does not mean agreement or surrendering of any of

one's truth (Hendrix & LaKelly-Hunt, 2021). "Validation invites entrance into the mental

sanctuary of another by looking at the world through their eyes" (Hendrix & LaKelly-Hunt, 2021,

p. 206).

Empathy. The receiver shows empathy by being able to identify the sender's feelings

and emotions. The receiver must also communicate an understanding of the presence of these

emotions (Hendrix, 1992). This 3-step process helps couples break away from the defensive and

symbiotic relating and move toward individuation, differentiation and compassion for the other

(Luquet, 2007). Hendrix and LaKelly-Hunt (2021) assert:

> Dialogue isn't confined to better communication. It creates a tectonic shift in the
>
> structure and content of couple's conversations. Imago dialogue has a potential impact
>
> that is far more significant: what it is capable of doing is no less than tearing down the
>
> structure of the couple's unconscious relationship and replacing it with a new
>
> structure—the conscious relationship (p. 224).

The Unconscious and Conscious Relationship

Similar to the book *Getting the Love You Want* the two-day GTLYW workshop is divided

into parts the conscious and unconscious relationship and conscious relationship and

corresponding dialogic exercises for both (Hendrix,1988 p xxviii). The first part of GTLYW

chronicles the fate of most relationships: attraction, romantic love, and the power struggle and

introduces the dialogue (Hendrix & LaKelly-Hunt, 2005). As couples listen to familiar details of

married life, they are invited to see this emerging psychological drama as the unconscious

marriage or unconscious relationship. According to Hendrix and LaKelly-Hunt (2005) the

unconscious marriage "includes all the hidden desires and automatic behaviors that are left

over from childhood and that inexorably lead to conflict" (p. xlvi). Workshop presenters provide

information and exercises that allow couples to begin to see hidden aspects of their

relationship that prevent them from achieving their goals. The second day of the workshop

which corresponds with part two of the GTLYW book invites couples to explore a radically

different kind of marriage. "The conscious marriage is a marriage that helps you satisfy your

unmet childhood needs in positive ways" (p. xlv). Day two of the workshop is devoted primarily

to helping couples understand and experiences ideas about the conscious relationship. The

exercises are intended to help couples learn how to change the things that prevent them from

having a loving and supportive relationship. All of the exercises in the GTLYW workshop serve

as a way of offering self-monitored sessions as no booster sessions are offered as part of the

GTLYW workshop.

Given the importance of fostering and supporting healthy, strong marital relationships

among Black couples and addressing gaps in the literature, the purpose of this study is to

explore the effect of the IRT through a GTLYW workshop on the lived experiences of Black

couples and how it affects attachment and marital satisfaction. Identify behaviors and

interactions that create secure attachment and explore communications around race. While

some of the theoretical material of the GTLYW workshop suggest an examination of the social

and cultural messaging, it lacks explicit interventions that would enable Black couples to

explore racialized messages, historical and current racial distress. To this point, the researcher

added to the GTLYW manual the racial distress dialogue (Appendix, I), so Black couples can

explicitly communicate their feelings, thoughts and behaviors about the impact of racial

distress on their relationship and each other, as well as imagine new ways of showing up or

behaving when they experience racism and racial distress.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was voluntary. There were no anticipated risks to participating

in this study. All the participants who agreed to participate in the research were asked to read

and sign an informed consent form (A). The consent form explained the purpose of the

research, what was expected of the participants, the procedures for completing questionnaires,

potential risks/discomfort and confidentiality issues. Participants were given the option to withdraw from the study at any stage if they experienced any stress or anxiety while participating. They were encouraged to ask questions or raise concerns they had about the research, and were given the contact details of the researcher and her supervisor.

The researcher was mindful about the emphasis that Imago Relationship Therapy places on the concept of "safety" for partners in a relationship. The researcher took great care to respect and maintain this safety for the participants during the course of the research. Completed questionnaires were kept private and locked away and only the researcher had access to the records. As the completed questionnaires were returned, they were immediately allocated a couple code and a participant code for each partner. All data and information were processed anonymously, using the participant codes to link partners to a couple. The contact details of the participants were only accessed in order to email or post the post-workshop and follow-up questionnaires.

Locating Myself as Researcher

As part of quality qualitative research, it is important that the author be transparent about assumptions, motivations, and presuppositions going into a research study as well as throughout the study as it unfolded (Carcary, 2009; Elliott et al., 1999; Yardley, 2000). Pyrczak and Bruce (2007) note that this, "revealing of oneself" (p. 51) is an important aspect in qualitative research because it recognizes the subjective interplay between researcher and participant that is so integral to qualitative inquiry. This section provides the reader with the author's motivations and presuppositions going into this project.

As a couple and family therapist and Certified Imago Therapist and workshop presenter, my interest in this study came from several places. Initially it came from my sadness over the state of Black marriage in this country and at the same time, a desire to overcome these odds. I was also motivated by my frustration with the assumption of universality, colorblindness and lack of specific attention to race in IRT and the Imago community at large. At the same time, there was an overall increase in people of color seeking mental health services as communities of color were disproportionately impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and I noticed an increase of Black and Brown couples in my clinical practice and workshops. This increase created in me a deep curiosity about the effects of oppressive systems, past and present trauma, injustice, discrimination and economic hardship on Black marriages and relationships. A sense of urgency was ignited in me as a Black Imago therapist and several burning questions about the universality of Imago Relationship Therapy, always simmering underneath the surface, rose fiercely to the forefront.

I have participated in GTLYW workshops, therapy, trainings and private intensives. I attended my first GTLYW workshop in 1999 and the second time in 2007 with the woman I was dating (now my wife). Each time the motivation was different. Initially, it was an attempt to save a very distressed relationship, and the second time, it was an opportunity to enhance an already good relationship, help clarify our commitment, heal and grow together with my partner, and cultivate relational practices that could sustain us through future challenges. During these workshops, I felt a sense of hope and optimism, a greater sense of understanding of the interactional dynamics of the relationship, and more empathy for my partners' childhood

struggles. The workshop clarified for me, and I believe for my partners, the ways in which our

histories played out on the stage of our adult relationship.

In my marriage, we have continued to use the IRT workshop exercises and principles,

and with lots of practice we have made IRT a way of life. I have been married to a White-Jewish

woman for the past sixteen years and I am blessed to say that our marriage is satisfying and

fulfilling and there is no question that our marital success is, in part, due to IRT. We have

become conscious of the interplay of race and white privilege in our marital dynamics, an

awareness we developed on our own as we found that we needed to address how racial, ethnic

and cultural undertones that bind our marriage. This increased my desire to discover whether

Black couples also need a specific way to communicate about race that might not be available

in the general GTLYW workshop.

With the divorce rate for Black couples being so high and all of the negative internal and

external messaging that Black couples face, I, a Black lesbian, have had an intimate and visceral

experience of the transformational power of IRT. As a therapist who works with Black couples, I

understand and know the residual pain and trauma that both Black men and women carry

within the context of their relationships and how these dynamics can make love and life

difficult. Black folks are wounded souls and can project their wounds out within the context of

their adult relationships. Hence, one of the assumptions I hold is that marriage/committed

relationship has the capacity to provide couples with ongoing insight into who they truly are,

have been, and who they can become through the methodological framework of IRT. This is the

impetus for my passion about this work.

Measures

Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire-Revised (MSQ-R)

Change in marital satisfaction was evaluated using a 10-question measure adapted from

Lazarus's Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire–Revised (1996). The MSQ-R (Appendix J) is an

assessment in which spouses individually rate their satisfaction in several independent areas of

marital satisfaction (Herman, 1991). The area of assessment evaluated included

communication, money, sexual relations, emotional support, and spouses' values and attitudes.

The earlier versions of the MSQ-R were based on an 11-point scale (Herman, 1991). However,

the current study employs a 3-point Likert-like scale where participants provide two ratings,

one for themselves and one estimating how they believe their partner would respond.

Participants answer 1 – 3 with 1 representing *none of the time,* 2 representing *some of the time,*

and 3 representing *most of the time.* The results of the research study demonstrate the basic

and minimal conditions of validity and reliability for the MSQ-R (Herman, 1991).

Patient Attachment Client System (PACS)

Attachment was measured and described using the discursive markers identified by the

Patient Attachment Coding System (PACS), which was developed to investigate differences in

patients in session attachment discursive behavior (Talia et al., 2017). As transcripts were

scrutinized, discursive markers were assigned to a single word, part of a phrase, or a paragraph

(Talia et al.,2017) as they occurred. While the PACS focuses on therapist-patient relationships,

for the purposes of this study, it was modified to focus on the language and interactions

between two partners in a couple who are attachment figures to each other. In addition,

whereas the PACS originally focused on assigning a rating on five main scales based on the

intensity and frequency of discursive markers, this study only measured the frequency of these

discursive markers. No specific rating was assigned to any of the participants and the PACS was

used only to describe couples' attachment discourse in the workshop and to conceptualize that

discourse in terms of its indication of secure bonding between partners in a couple relationship.

Thus, for the purposes of this study, the researcher analyzed the GTLYW transcripts of five

demonstration dialogues and marked all the PACS discursive markers as they occurred. Each

dialogue was then divided into 5–7-minute segments and the frequency of discursive markers

was calculated for each segment. The intensity of discursive markers was not measured.

The validity of this coding method was established in a large-scale study showing that

the PACS independently predicts patients' pre-treatment Adult Attachment Inventory (AAI)

classification (N = 156; k = .82), in a sample of patients from three countries and including both

psychodynamic and cognitive–behavioral treatments (Talia et al., 2017). PACS was found to

have high interrater reliability, solid psychometric properties, and impressive agreement with

the AAI at the level of main classifications, the sub-classifications and the scales (Talia et al.,

2017).

PACS Scales and Subscales

The nine subscales are rated based on the occurrences of 50 different markers of

attachment discursive behaviors (Talia & Miller-Bottome, 2012). In order to label interpersonal

behavior scales to code, PACS labels the items according to the function that they seem to

enact rather than according to the attachment classifications they were most readily associated

with (Talia, 2014). Markers are grouped under the nine subscales so that each marker can

contribute to the rating of one subscale only (Talia et al., 2017). Ten to 30-minute couple

interactive segments are observed and coded.

The *secure* classification in the PACS is associated with telling descriptive, vivid, to the

point narratives which are easily visually imagined by the listener (Talia et al., 2019). The

proximity seeking scale consists of markers where participants disclose their present

experience. *Contact-maintaining* scales are markers where participants express experiencing

positive impacts from the partner, such as the expression of gratitude, caring behaviors, and

appreciation. The *exploring scale* consists of markers where participants disclose experiences of

agency and autonomy, share a narrative of a positive experience, express independent

intentions, or how they will cope with a problem (Talia et al., 2017)*.* The *Avoidance* scale

consists of markers where patients minimize or normalize distress. Finally, the *Resistance scale*

consists of markers where patients change topics abruptly or speak in vague generalities. A

given marker can be assigned to any continuous passage of the text so long as the specified

criteria are met throughout (Talia et al., 2014).

Measuring attachment behaviors using PACS departs from Bowlby's emphasis on

attachment as a motivational system activated by threats and distress and focuses on the

broader phenomenon of the pragmatics of verbal communication and meaning making in

relationships (Talia et al., 2019). This study measures participants' observable attachment

discourse and builds on our innate instinct for closeness and safety and our reliance on others

to make meaning of how we experience attachment.

Race and Racial Distress

Participants in this study completed a semi-structured open-ended questionnaire as a qualitative instrument inquiring about their experiences of race and racial distress. Ruslin et al. (2022) suggest that the semi-structured interview has more potential than other types of interviews because it allows researchers to acquire in-depth information and evidence from interviewees. One of the main advantages of using the semi-structured interview method is that it has been found to be successful in enabling reciprocity between the interviewer and participant (Galletta, 2012). The researcher developed the questions for this interview based on current literature on Black couples. In addition, a racial distress dialogue was developed and added to the workshop agenda in order to gather data using participants' own voices about their experiences of race and racial distress and the impact and significance of these experiences in their relationships. The racial distress dialogue enabled Black couples to explore these racialized experiences within the context of the GTLYW workshop, which until now did not explicitly make available such opportunities and thereby moved the workshop beyond its implicitly colorblind approach. Nightingale et al., (2019) notes that while the literature highlights the therapeutic significance of addressing racial issues, it remains unclear how couples perceive the significance of race and/or racial conversations. This study sought to begin answering this question.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative component of this study posed the following questions and thematic analysis was used to interpret the data:

1) *Does participating in the GTLYW workshop change how Black couples understand and deal with conflict?*

2) *Does participating in the GTLYW workshop increase Black couples' ability to communicate with each other?*

3) *Does GTLYW help Black couples to communicate effectively about race and racial distress?*

I began the thematic analysis of data for this study by watching all of the video recordings to engage in an embodied, empathic, and intuitive style of inquiry. I observed what emerged during the workshop, including, but not limited to, noticeable physical gestures and body language of the participants, perceived shifts in the energy of the interactive field, and personal somatic experiences.

I then transcribed the video recordings using Otter transcription software. The participants chose pseudonyms and the researcher documented the names. While reading the transcripts, I noticed that there were fragments of participants' conversations missing and/or incomprehensible. I then went back to the video recording and began manually transcribing the video recordings line by line, verbatim, to fill in the places where data was inaudible from the transcription software. The analysis consisted of repeated readings of the transcript, notes, and supporting material, annotating what was interesting, reoccurring, or poignant until themes, associations, and relationships emerged. In addition, brief memos were completed after each transcript to note broader themes and patterns (Saldaña, 2016). Once the themes were organized, I reflected on my own experience and sought to find all possible meanings and divergent opinions based on the meaning of the experiences to participants and their own personal interpretation. The same process was used to analyze data from the semi-structured

questionnaires regarding participants' understanding of and dealing with conflict, communication in general and communication about race/racial distress.

In vivo coding is championed by many for its usefulness in highlighting the voices of participants and for its reliance on the participants themselves to give meaning to the data (Manning, 2017). Because this dissertation explored the lived experiences captured via real-time dialogic processes of a population that is only minimally studied, it is especially important to accurately reflect these experiences using the participants' own words. I provide these themes in the results section, along with examples of the themes and subthemes in the participants' own words.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Hypotheses related to attachment and marital satisfaction were tested using quantitative measures and were analyzed in the following manner:

Hypothesis 1: Marital satisfaction will increase for Black couples from pre- to post-participation in the GTLYW workshop.

In order to determine whether there was an increase in marital satisfaction as a result of participation in GTLYW, an individual MSQ-R score was calculated by adding together the scores from each of the ten questionnaire items. Two MSQ-R scores were calculated for each individual. One scale represents their perception of themselves and the other represents their perception of their partner. Once the scores were obtained, two graphs were created; the first depicts the change in each partner's view of *self* from pre to post workshop (Figure 1) and a second the change in each partner's view of their *partner* from pre to post workshop (Figure 2).

Next, two combined MSQ-R scores were calculated for each couple (one for view of self and one for view of partner) by adding together both partners' individual scores for self and partner on the MSQ-R. Two graphs were then created to depict the amount and direction of change in the combined view of self (Figure 3) and the combined view of partner (Figure 4) for each couple from pre to post workshop. Because the variation within each couple was lost in this calculation, the difference scores between female and male partners for each couple were calculated and the pre and post difference scores for each couple were graphed to depict the change in these scores (Figure 5). Difference scores were also calculated for each couple's perception of self and perception of other, with one graph created to depict change in perception of self difference scores from pre to post workshop (Figure 6) and a second graph to depict change in perception of other difference scores from pre to post workshop (Figure 7).

Hypothesis 2: The majority of discursive markers observed in couples' dialogue processes over the course of the GTLWY workshop will fall into the three PACS scales of Proximity-seeking, Contact-maintaining and Exploring.

In order to test hypothesis 2, I calculated the frequency of all discursive markers for each 5- to 7-minute segment of dialogue for each couple (See Table 2). I then added together the frequency scores for all of the discursive markers that fell into each of the three main PACS scales of proximity-seeking, contact-maintaining and exploring to arrive at a total frequency score per 5 -7-minute segment of dialogue for each of these three scales (Tables 1.1-1.5). Finally, I added together the frequency scores for these three scales to arrive at one frequency score for all "secure" discursive markers, and created a graph with this number alongside the total of other (avoidant) discursive markers (Figure 8).

Hypothesis 3: The frequency of the discursive markers falling into the three PACS scales of proximity-seeking, contact-maintaining and exploring will increase over the length of the workshop.

In order to test this hypothesis, I calculated the frequencies of discursive markers falling into each PACS scale for every 5-7 minute segment of each dialogue. I then arranged the segments of these dialogues in the order in which they took place in the workshop and created a graph to visually represent the changes in frequencies of these discursive markers over the course of the workshop (figure 9).

Hypothesis 4: The frequency of discursive markers falling into the two PACS scales of proximity-seeking and contact-maintaining will be highest in the racial distress dialogue.

In order to test this hypothesis, I calculated the frequency of all discursive markers for each of the dialogues in 5-7 minute increments and created a graph depicting total frequencies for each dialogue (Figure 9).

Hypothesis 5: The Imago Dialogue promotes the enactment between partners of several specific PACS discursive markers more than others and all of these discursive markers fall into the Proximity-Seeking, Contact-Maintaining and Exploring Scales, indicating a secure attachment bond.

In order to determine which specific discursive markers occurred the most during the dialogues of the workshop, the number of occurrences of each discursive marker for each dialogue was mapped on a graph, one graph per dialogue (see figures 10-14).

CHAPTER 4: Results

Qualitative Results

Qualitative data was obtained through semi-structured, opened-ended questionnaires (Appendix G & H) and workshop transcripts. This data assesses the effects of Imago relationship therapy (IRT), as provided through a GTLYW workshop, on Black couples' communication, understanding of and ability to manage conflict, and ability to communicate effectively about race and racial distress. From the questionnaire responses, transcripts and direct observations, several themes and subthemes emerged. I have organized the data into four major themes and nine subthemes.

The first major theme is: Increase in the ability to communicate with the partner. This theme details study participants' experiences as they are related to the research question, "*Does participating in the GTLYW workshop increase Black couples' ability to communicate with each other?*" The three subthemes that emerged under this heading are: a) Use of Imago Dialogue as key to improved communication, b) Increase in ability to listen to partner, and c) Ability to communicate about sex.

The second major theme is: New understanding of and ability to deal with conflict. This theme details study participants' experiences as they are related to the research question, "*Does participating in the GTLYW workshop change how Black couples understand and deal with conflict?*" Data collected under this theme was less complex and had only one subtheme: a) Understanding the roots of conflict.

The third major theme is: Ability to communicate about race and racial distress. This theme details study participants' experiences as they are related to the research question,

"Does GTLYW help Black couples to communicate effectively about race and racial distress?"

This was the richest of the major themes, and five subthemes emerged under its heading: a) Racism has an impact on the relationship, b) Racism is a frequent topic of conversation, c) There is a constant fear for own, partner's and/or child's safety when away from home, d) Being harassed and/or physically assaulted by law enforcement due to being Black is a commonly shared experience and e) The Racial Distress Dialogue was key in exploring the impact of racism on the relationship. The fourth theme that emerged, while not directly related to the specific research questions, were nonetheless prevalent and striking enough to warrant mention as they are also prominent themes in the literature on Black couples and directly impact Black couples' lived experiences. The final theme is: Intersections of race and gender. A table of the qualitative themes and subthemes can be found in (Appendix K). Each of the themes and subthemes is addressed in depth below and includes an exhaustive description.

Theme 1: Increase in ability to communicate with partner

Effective marital communication skills positively correlate with marital satisfaction and are considered to be of great importance to happily married couples (Nyarks & Hope, 2022). Findings show that, while all of the participants entered the GTLYW workshop reporting difficulty communicating with each other, the majority of the participants reported an increase in their ability to communicate effectively as a result of participating in the workshop. One participant, for example, stated, "There has been better communication and I have a better understanding of her feelings." Three subthemes emerged in participants' descriptions of their experiences of improved communication: use of Imago dialogue as a central factor in this increase, increased ability to listen to partner, and ability to communicate about sex.

Subtheme 1: Use of Imago dialogue as key to improved communication

The "couple's dialogue" facilitates healthy verbal expression (Hendrix, 1988, p. 155). This style of communication requires partners to listen to, reflect back, validate, and empathize with what is said based on a summative understanding of how their partners feel. Several participants spoke about the value of learning how to communicate with each other using Imago dialogue. For example, Elmer stated, "Our talks are more impactful and relevant. I feel closer to my spouse and she understands me more." Here Elmer refers to dialogue as allowing for deeper impact than he had previously experienced in communicating with his wife as well as an increase in feeling understood. Junior also highlighted understanding as significant in his experience of using dialogue: "We listen more to understand than respond."

Skye emphasized another aspect of understanding that was noteworthy: understanding what lies beneath the couple's issues. She reports: "Being able to find out where these issues stem from helps me UNDERSTAND [her emphasis] why there are certain behaviors." The purpose of dialogue is to provide a safe container and space where vulnerable feelings can be shared between partners. Skye came to understand the attachment meaning of Amare's behavior which allowed her to become more comfortable with him and vice versa. Her husband Amare echoed the sentiment: "I have a better understanding of her feelings." As their cycle changed Amare and Skye were able to see each other's true intentions using the dialogue. In a safe environment Black couples can relearn trust and risk sharing the feelings.

Motif, a participant who indicated that she had been contemplating leaving her husband, spoke about her experience using dialogue in this way:

> Imago has been life changing so far. I was considering leaving my husband because of his behaviors (toxic) but after dialoguing and hearing his story, my feelings have changed toward him. I feel more in love and connected to him.

The dialogue opened the way for partners to experience a perceptual change in their marriage. Observing Motif and Elmer in dialogue, I noticed Motif's empathic mirroring of Elmer's feelings and her validation of his experiences and point of view. Elmer, who reported a positive experience of dialogue asserted: "She finally validates me."

One participant highlighted an important function of dialogue which can be described as "two people taking turns talking without judging, listening without criticizing and connecting beyond differences" (Hendrix & LaKelly-Hunt, 2021, p. 193). For this participant, listening to her partner's story in dialogue not only "changed their interactive space but also simultaneously changed her intrapsychic space" (p. 194). Chicky reported, "I try to be more patient and see things from his perspective." She went on to say that her ability to make space for her husband's perspective led to her husband making "more eye contact and offering unsolicited affection. He seeks me out more." For Chicky, being able to see things from her husband's point of view was an act of breaking the symbiotic relating of the power struggle wherein partners struggle to get their partners to see things their way, resulting in one or the other of them becoming a mere projection screen. Seeing things from her partner's perspective also validates him as a person who is different from her, thus honoring his right to be a separate and equal person. This kind of emotional learning emerges in dialogue through listening and being attuned and vulnerable with each other.

According to research, Black people, hypervigilant to White oppression, have been forced to suppress their emotions in order to survive because displaying emotional vulnerability

could be dangerous or even fatal (Causadias et al., 2021; Nightingale, et al., 2019). This is where

racism can be most treacherous as Black coupes are forced to respond in fear and shame rather

than with responsive vulnerability and acceptance. Engaging in the Imago dialogue for Aiyanna

was a means of liberation from suffocating emotional suppression, thus freeing her to be

vulnerable: "I think dialogue was freeing … to expose myself in this way … in one way I felt like

we were even more connected …" Aiyanna's husband Keith echoed her sentiment when he

described his experience of dialogue: "For me it was freeing … I'm just in awe of dialogue."

Aiyanna and Keith's comments demonstrate the relational shift both *between* people and

within people that is made possible by dialogue's encouragement of self-disclosure and

vulnerability.

Subtheme 2: Increase in ability to listen to partner

Cultivating a practice of listening was highly valued by (*n*=8) of the participants.

Listening was also described as one of their biggest challenges. Observing the participants

throughout the workshop, partners repeatedly emphasized actions such as opening up,

empathizing, and understanding as important factors in sustaining connection. At the heart of

these actions was the overarching theme of listening. Junior reported: "We listen more to

understand than respond." Skye related, "I had to learn that I am not the only voice in a

marriage. If the marriage is going to work, I need to take a step back and allow him to express

himself." Dante echoed this learning: "Listening in the dialogue has opened up new feelings for

my partner, creating an understanding." Participants also reported the significance of being

heard by their partner, underscoring that the essence of communication goes beyond simply

talking to the emotional impact of having one's message received the way it was intended.

Motif reported it this way: "[There was] a huge change in how my husband hears me. He wasn't

hearing me before but mirroring helped us to hear each other." Her husband Elmer concurred:

"I feel like she can hear my thoughts without putting her own spin on it." Participants reported

an increase in understanding of their partner. Junior said, "We listen to empathize and

understand, not to respond. Listening is enough." Amare echoed Junior's experience: "It has

made me feel like it is more important to listen to my wife's needs to get a better

understanding." In summary, a majority of the participants reported an increase in their ability

to listen to their partner.

Subtheme 3: Ability to communicate about sex

The subtheme of sex emerged in one of the dialogues called "Soft Topics" which

occurred on day one of the workshop. Several minutes into the dialogue, the demo couple

asked if there were any restrictions regarding the content of their communication. After I

clarified that the content of participant dialogues was left to their discretion as a couple, the

couple volunteering to demonstrate the process for the group shared that having sex in a public

pool was one of her favorite memories in the relationship. I noticed that the topic of sex stirred

the energy in the room as the other participants appeared to be more relaxed, energetic, and

humorous. Other participants acknowledged their experiences with sex in a variety of ways: MJ

expressed her appreciation to Motif and Elmer for the courage it took to introduce the topic of

sex. "I appreciate the conversation about sex. I resonate with that also [because] I think it is

important to make those statements…so thank you for that … just bringing [it] out." Skye, who

maintained a sexual connection with her husband, described her experience this way: "About

the sex, like I appreciate the honesty, because after 13 years of me and Amare being together,

that's the one thing we're really still connecting with, it's never been lost."

Chicky described the sometimes self-imposed barriers put in place out of fear, mistrust

and protective factors that many Black women experience speaking about sex. Chicky

responded: "I don't think we talk enough about sex especially as Black women, the changes …

menopause takes on your body, and what it does to emotions, our sex drives." Despite these

barriers, MJ summarized her thoughts around sex which ultimately created an eruption of

laughter in the group: MJ elaborated:

> Kudos to your husband….It is important as we do get older, that um … we might not be as fast and furious as we were [group laughter] you can say the next morning on text whatever, you know to keep that part [sex] going. But yeah, so thank you for that … just bringing [sex] out.

The literature speaks extensively about how both Black men and Black women are

plagued by destructive representations, stereotypical constructions and myths about Black

sexuality (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2004). Study participants speared to find some relief from the

silencing and shame embedded in these destructive representations of Black sexuality as they

expressed their appreciation for the courage and honesty of the couple who brought the topic

to the forefront during the dialogue they demonstrated for the group. Participants highlighted

how infrequently they have these kinds of conversations as well as how their age affects their

sex lives and libido.

Theme 2: A new understanding of and ability to deal with conflict

Regarding relationship functioning and well-being variables, it is shown that need

fulfillment is positively associated with relationship satisfaction and commitment, and results

also demonstrate an increase in understanding the partner's response to conflict (Spence,

2021).

Imago theory identifies three major sources of conflict within the power struggle stage:

stirring up each other's childhood wounds, re-injuring of each other's childhood wounds, and

projecting one partner's own negative behavior onto the other (Hendrix, 1992). In the pre-

workshop questionnaire, many of the participants described their experiences of conflict as

being punctuated by intense ruptures and emotional withdrawal. After the workshop,

participants reported developing new understandings of conflict as well as an increase in their

ability to deal with conflict. "Conflict represents boundaries and we can listen and understand,"

reported one participant. Another participant stated, "I don't want to try to handle conflict

without using the frustration dialogue," and "I understand now that the process with the

dialogue can solve probably all the issues we have."

Subtheme 1: Understanding the root of conflicts

Several study participants reported that seeing how their and their partner's early family

experiences have affected their adult relationship informed their understanding of the roots of

conflict. Relationship research has shown the importance of understanding growing up

experiences, life and stressors and how it relates to adult relationship satisfaction (Guillory,

2022, p. 204). With an increase in emotional safety, participants' cycles became fueled with a

confidence in their ability to repair ruptures, leading to a better working alliance and increase in

empathy. One participant described her experience this way:

> [My understanding of conflict] has absolutely changed! The word "SAFE" really stuck
> with me. Being able to find out where these issues stem from helps me understand why
> there are certain behaviors. If I want to solve a problem with Amare, I know what I need
> to do and how to act! And also, what to say to help guide me along the way.

Understanding the origin of early experiences and development provided some participants with intergenerational insight and awareness to stir up new conceptualizations of their partners' behaviors. This involved an exploration of the family system and the conscious and unconscious events that shape current behaviors. Although MJ was "not sure if there was a change in the way she and her partner dealt with conflict," she acknowledged the importance of coming to an awareness about the roots of conflict: "We have tools that we will begin to use … also the idea that conflict arises from childhood wounds is a good starting point."

Theme 3: Communication about race and racial distress

Race was an organizing principle that informed the participants' thoughts, behaviors and attitudes even when it was not being explicitly addressed. The impact of external race-based stress/trauma has not been investigated, yet it is reasonable to suggest that it represents a major threat to intimacy in African Americans (Helms & Carlson, 2013). Race-based stress adds another layer of stress for Black couples. What follows is a description of these subthemes related to the participants' experiences revealed through dialogue and the workshop feedback process. The themes are presented separately for clarification. Some of the participants' descriptions are overlapping, fluid and fall into more than one category.

Subtheme 1: Racism has an impact on relationships.

Participants described their lived experiences of racism's impact on their relationship as "an everyday burden of trying to navigate a predominately White society" and "something "we're always aware of." Some participants were more direct in their descriptions of the impact of racism on their relationships. For example, Chicky stated, "The insidious and pervasive nature of racism can poison the relationship space," while Ayanna reported that "Racism

impacts how we love each other, [it is] integrated into our habits and interactions with other

and is a constant issue in every decision we make and takes an emotional toll." Another

participant related, "We're always aware of it because of our sensitivity to things going on in

the world and also being a Black executive."

One of the participants referred to the internalization of racism that can happen for

African Americans in experiencing a lifetime of exposure to race-based events. This

internalization can result in a kind of "voicelessness" (Hardy, 2022, p. 173), making it difficult to

even put language to one's internal racial experience. The participant described it this way:

"The fact that I can't think of any specific ways [racism impacts my relationship] means I've

internalized my experiences to such an extent I can't even tell." When racial distress cues

and/or triggers happen to the body of already traumatized Black couples, it is a signal of alarm

and danger. There is an increase in the need for emotional connection. In fact, these couples

are pleading for help. The structural fissure that has taken place in Black marriage due to the

pervasive threat of racism is evident in the ways the participants described their experiences of

racial distress.

Subtheme 2: Race is a frequent topic of conversation

A majority of the respondents (*n = 9)* reported that race is a frequent topic of

conversation, as one participant stated, "Racism is around us every day, at work, news and

social media." One participant noted a unique way of engaging her husband in this topic, "We

bring artifacts to each other's attention. We speak freely about our own experiences and that

of our parents and ancestors." For others, these conversations were "not always serious and

deep. Sometimes we joke about the differences and similarities." Amare described speaking

about racism in the context of skin color: "We get upset when people we consider friends talk

about darker skin colors." His wife Skye, who is light skinned, had a different experience: "I

have been called a White girl or I'm not really Black and it has affected how we talk about

racism." These findings illustrate that Black couples communicate frequently about racism in a

variety of ways, both at home and in the world at large.

Subtheme 3: Fear for own, partner's and/or child's safety when away from home

Safety was a key concern named by most participants. According to Coard (2022),

strengthening attachment in Black couples is about enabling children and adults to navigate the

terrain of racism in a society that threatens their sense of security on a daily. Several

participants spoke to this threat and the impact it had on their lives and relationship. Chicky

reported, "I don't feel like I can just completely go outside." Chicky's husband Junior agreed,

"I'm a big Black man and wow, all these white people in this neighborhood I'm going to jail!"

Some of this tension was due to the inflamed political climate, as Elmer stated:

> We were around for Rodney King, you know what I'm saying. But you know historically, we know that like, the violence piece kind of did the roller coaster kind of type joint. But under a certain administration it seems to have escalated. George Floyd in my opinion was the modern day lynching.

MJ described a lived experience of fearing for her husband's and son's lives when they left the

house and the dislodging impact of that terror on her mental health and emotional security:

> The police officer has my son pulled over and my husband pulls up behind the police officer and then is walking towards the car. And the police turn around says, like you know, 'what are you doing?' In my mind when he is telling me this, I'm like he's overpowered two to one. Even though my youngest son is in the police car, and so my husband said, 'That's my son.' And the police is like, 'Sir I need you to get back to the car.' 'That's my son. I want to make sure my son is okay' … I was out of my like, mind. I'm like losing my mind. Like that's two of my people, that's my husband and my son. That's two people, in my family and he was impacted because he couldn't get to his son.

Motif reported how she manages her own safety, the safety of her marriage and family:

> If I'm going to therapy, um, that no, I'm not mentioning what's going on with race, with racism against me, you know. I'm dealing I'm trying to deal with personal trauma so I can be helped me and my marriage or stuff for my kids and, so it like generational racism and then just personal racism, you know. And we have the same thing with our 25-year-old son, like just the day he was stopped and I'm like, I love that he sends me pictures. You know he sends me clips of what's going on cuz like it's two in the morning … he works a graveyard shift.

Hardy (2022) alludes to what he calls the "death/death dilemma" that Black people face in a culture of domination and oppression nothing "This is a spiritual death/physical death dilemma; regardless of what action one takes, one pays a cost." One participant related her experience in this way:

> I'm just so scared to get a phone call. I'm scared of that phone call. That my husband just because he looks a certain way, because you're Black, he's uh, you know, he's a big guy you know. I'm nervous to get a phone call and there's a danger that I may lose you. And it scares the shit out of me when you have to travel or you know, you're driving at night. It just scares the hell out of me and it feels like as much as I'm a fierce strong powerful woman that's the one thing I can't do to protect you from that. But if it came down to that and if I had to, I would make the decision to protect you and deal with the consequences later.

In relating a story about he sought counsel with Black police officers about how to behave to ensure his safety in encounters with law enforcement, Aiyanna's husband Keith also referenced Hardy's (2022) "death/death dilemma":

> I ask my [sic] brothers in law enforcement 'What do I do to stay alive? They say 'Here's the thing it's a roll of the dice. You might end up in a situation where you get a cop who just don't like Black people. You stay alive. Even if you got a life sentence you alive.

Other participants spoke about feeling powerless when their partner or child was stopped by the police, as MJ stated, "That could have been a whole different thing. Every time he walks in the door, I say thank you." Chicky agreed: "So do I want to feel out of my feminine energy by cussing this dude out every single time I saw him or do I want to sit back in my

feminine energy and put my husband at risk? And just that choice was very difficult." Ayanna

expanded on this, "As much as I'm a fierce strong powerful woman that's the one thing I can't

do to protect you from that." Chicky also alluded to her fear for her husband's safety if he were

to come to her defense:

> I was in a situation where any woman would be expected, could expect that her partner would come and defend her with all the manliness you know that a White woman can come to expect from their man, but I was denied that because I had to be worried about that if he defended me he could end up dead.

Subtheme 4: Being harassed and/or physically assaulted by law enforcement due to being Black

The subtheme of being physically assaulted by law enforcement due to race was a

commonly shared experience. One of the participants reported that being harassed by the

police was normal: He reported:

> In the [city where he lives], police harassment of Black men is par for the course. "I've been pulled over by a cop, will have one headlight out and ask "Why are you pulling me over? Then five cop cars later. So it's just how [city] always was.

Participants also noted the emotional and physical impact of police violence and harassment.

Motif reported:

> Being maced as a teenager you know" and wondering "Why did they pepper spray us at a youth event? It was normal to see police you know, push down brothers and beat 'em with their stick, you know…and I feel like I carry it with me … I think I have PTSD from it."

As a result of her teenage experiences Motif reported how she changed her behavior when she

went shopping and taught her children to do the same in order to avoid potentially traumatic

experiences with law enforcement.

> I don't take my purse, or big bags. I don't take the kids, no strollers. But that's like what I do…like, I do not take a bag in any store…I teach kids don't touch anything unless you buying it. Racism is a part of everything in our marriage because I still have those wounds.

In summary, the participants' responses illustrate that Black couples have a unique race-based experience of hypervigilance, trauma, anxiety and stress around their own and their families' physical safety and survival. "It brings a level of fear to your marriage," Dante stated, "because again when you walk out the door, you know, as a husband, as a son, as a daughter, you know, your wife is, you know, thinking like oh, anything can happen."

Subtheme 5: Racial distress dialogue was key in exploring the impact of racism on the relationship.

The majority of participants stated that of all the dialogue processes of the workshop, the racial distress dialogue was most helpful in communicating about their experiences of racism and its impact on their relationships. For example, one participant noted that this dialogue helped her explore racialized experiences that "add[ed] another layer of stress that we did not realize. We are comfortable sharing with each other but did not realize the emotional toll it has." Motif noted that "I appreciate that [the couple who demonstrated the dialogue] gave language to how I feel" and MJ agreed: "I second that. I felt the same way. She was speaking from pain. I was there with her; that resonated with me."

For many this was a unique and welcome experience, as MJ noted:

Being able to speak to have dialogue while looking into each other's eyes. Eye contact. I was also thinking that we really don't have outlets to speak about this professionally, we sit in spaces with our friends, our tribe and we talk about this and it doesn't go anywhere it just sits there.

For MJ, dialogue helped the conversation to move beyond "just sitting there." Skye reported a similar experience: "The racial distress dialogue really helped. It helped Amare and I have a more in depth conversation about experience and how it does and will affect us in the future."

Amare, Skye's husband, echoed his wife's sentiment: "It allowed me to get an understanding of

my wife's experience and it is okay to talk about racial issues."

Another participant emphasized the importance of this kind of space for Black married

couples to connect about their experiences *as Black married couples*. While he and his wife had

previous experience with Imago, they had never been explicitly invited to dialogue about race.

Keith shared:

> It tells how much you talk around it [race/racism] … I've never had a complete dialogue
> … you talk about things that are happening you respond to the news, you respond to the
> small things right … we talk around it, that was probably the first time, you talk about
> comprehensive dialogue, we've never had it like that, and for me it was freeing … I'm
> just in awe of the dialogue. And you know what to share about your Blackness and what
> not to. Like we been to Imago session and it wasn't like this. But this dialogue could
> happen, and I was just thinking last night where else does this dialogue happen. Where
> does this talk with Black married couple when marriage in our community is like many
> times not even celebrated.

This participant refers to the liberating quality of experiencing dialogue in a community of other

Black couples and acknowledges that there are few safe spaces in which Black marriage is

celebrated.

Aiyanna agreed that dialogue about race was liberating: "I think for me it was freeing to

expose myself in this way to let him know that this is something I'm constantly on the fence of,

in one way it felt like we were even more connected." Motif noted that this dialogue was "eye

opening because I didn't think Elmer dealt with racism because he doesn't really talk about it

like that so, it was very eye opening. Eye opening to know he experienced that and I feel like I

can relate to him on this subject."

Theme 4: Intersections of Race & Gender

African American men and women experience the invisibility syndrome because of their high visibility are perceived with fear and mistrust and are more often ignored by White society (Boyd-Franklin, 2003, p. 88). African America becomes visible in White society when they are viewed as being threatening, challenging or dangerous (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Littlefield, 2003). omen deal with the same issues and conflicts that many other women face (e.g., wife, mother, domestic goddess). The difference is the additional pressure of racism (Dunham & Ellis, 2010). African Americans are especially loath to admit how racism is also complicated by sexism (Collins, 2005; Hooks, 1995). The effects of the interplay between racism and sexism painfully emerge in the dynamics of African American couples (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 1998). his contention was borne out by several study participants. Male participant, for example, spoke to the fear he experiences in his role as protector: "As Black men, I mean, it is our nature to protect. Racism] brings a level of fear here … to your marriage. I'm trying to protect my wife, my family, you know, in these times, when I go out the door, when our son is out, coming back from travel." This participant's words highlight the intersection of race and gender and the pressure he experiences as he attempts to meet the expectations prescribed by both.

The dual pressures Black men and Black women face due to their race and gender can create conflict between them. Boyd-Franklin and Franklin (1998) write, "Black partners may displace their racism related anger and frustrations onto each other, increasing relationship conflict and distress" (p.37). Aiyanna and Keith speak in detail about a sensitive topic that has created distance between them and placed stress on their relationship:

Aiyanna: There was this dynamic we had of going back and forth, and made me uncomfortable. So in his line of work he is usually the only Black person in the room and I would hear him … you want to explain it.

Keith: I'm advising most of the time Fortune10 CEO's so when we go out with them, um you're getting another layer of their comfortability, I think. And so, they are they're trying to determine how Black am I [group laughs] so we have these and I'm pretty confident in who I am. So I'll play this game with them. So I'll play this game with them. And we'll do the whole you know as I tell them when it comes to my money, I'm very conservative, or when it comes to my people I'm very liberal. And I walk this game. I say, I'm the best in the room. I know you all want it. So let's just get over that right away. And so, my wife fears that if he's like, why do you do that to make them [Whites] feel comfortable?

Aiyanna: Yes, um it made me cringe to see my Black man who does not first of all, my shirt says unapologetically Black okay, I am unapologetically Black, okay. And it made me uncomfortable to see him try to make them [White people] feel comfortable. I'm like you don't have to and don't you dare and here's the [his] perspective.

Keith: I said, baby, here's the decision I'm making [x amount of dollars]. Do I want to be right, or do I want to be rich? That's, that's a continuous thing, and she makes me question like. Okay, I don't want to lose myself trying to assimilate into a situation, but I'm a provider, and I'm trying to hit the top, right? I'm trying to make sure my family has the best of everything they need; you can be successful when I'm not here. So these are the sacrifices I made good or bad. It's a discussion and it's ongoing.

Aiyanna: So while he is giving us his best and is providing and we do have a certain lifestyle, I am not willing to compromise, compromise our integrity or our comfortability, or shy away from our back and our arch being straight. Because it may limit us in any way, I am from Brooklyn you know; I did go to an HBCU. But also I have experienced extreme racism and it is my way of not being abused by the system anymore.

Here Keith points to his role as a provider and speaks to the "sacrifices" he makes, "good or

bad," in order to succeed as the only Black person in his workplace. He refers to the "game" he

plays with his White colleagues in order to "assimilate into [the] situation." His wife Aiyanna,

while she appreciates the "certain lifestyle" he provides the family, feels uncomfortable with

how he interacts with these White men. "It made me cringe to see my Black man…try to make

them [White people] feel comfortable." She is concerned he is compromising their integrity or

"being abused by the system," while Keith feels "pretty confident in who I am." Nonetheless,

Aiyanna's concern makes Keith question himself: "I don't want to lose myself trying to

assimilate into a situation." Keith is contending both with his wife's expectations of him as a

Black man (to be strong, not assimilate, not accommodate) and his own and his wife's

expectations to be a good provider. In order to succeed in the high-stakes, all-White

environment of his job, however, he has to conform to yet another set of expectations based

on his race has to use humor and performance to make his White colleagues feel comfortable

with his Blackness.

Chicky also spoke about her view of her husband changing because he could not fulfill

his role of male protector. In this case, his inaction was due both to her fear of putting his life at

risk by speaking up and his fear of being killed because he was Black. "So here I am, desperately

wanting my husband to stick up to protect me, have my back. I wasn't able to sit in my feminine

energy because I had to protect myself and my husband. And so that changed how I saw my

husband. Not in a good way." The fatal threat embedded in racism interfered with both her and

her husband's ability to meet the expectations of their gender roles. Chicky continued to

describe her dilemma: "We teach it to our daughters because whatever safety skills we have we

are going to teach it to our daughters; and they're going to perpetuate they expect the men in

their lives to protect them, which puts them at risk too. So do I share this fear?"

Elmer and Motif described a different way in which the intersectionality of race and

gender played out between them. Elmer stated, "Motif came home and was talking about how

she was very frustrated that she would go to a new supply store owned by Asians. And they

would follow her. She's kinda saying it to me and I wasn't very sensitive to that. And it caused a

kind of a thing between us. I-I-I let her down." Previously, Motif had noted that she "didn't

think Elmer dealt with racism because he doesn't really talk about it like that." However, as he

listened to other Black couples speak about their experiences in the safe environment of the

workshop, Elmer clearly shifted in his understanding of the intersectionality of race and gender

and became aware of how he had failed to validate his wife around her own painful

experiences. Providing Black couples the opportunity to openly explore their racism-related

feelings of distress and powerlessness in the face of threats against their own and their family's

safety appeared to mitigate some of the frustration and anger that can disrupt their relational

connection.

Summary of Qualitative Results

Overall, the qualitative results show that participants showed that participating in a

GTLYW increased their ability to communicate effectively with each other, increased their

understanding and ability to deal with conflict and increased their ability to communicate about

race/racism and racial distress. The contributing factor to this increase in communication was

the majority of the participants found that listening to their partner was a crucial element in

communication. With regards to understanding and dealing with conflicts findings suggest that

a deeper understanding of the roots of conflict as well as the systemic nature was also

important.

Qualitative results also showed that for Black couples' race is a frequent topic of

conversation and while the racial distress dialogue enabled couples to speak about race/racism

and racial distress, the use of the racial distress dialogue was a key factor in this outcome.

However, participating in a GTLYW workshop did not decrease participants' overall racial

distress. The contributing factor to this outcome may be that it was the first time using dialogue

to communicate about race/racism and racial distress.

Quantitative Results

Marital Satisfaction

Hypothesis 1: Marital satisfaction will increase for Black couples from pre to post-participation in the GTLYW workshop.

In order to test this hypothesis, I calculated the pre- and post-workshop scores on the MSQ-R for each individual participant. A study by (Herman 1991) employed a 10-point scaling to make the MSQ more consistent with Nunnally's (1978) position that Likert scales should be based on seven to nine items (Herman, 1991 p. 86). These 12 areas of interaction are conceptualized to be of paramount importance to marital satisfaction (p. 86) and consistent with variables in other symptom-based marital quality measures (Margolin et al., 1983). Herman (1991) study found basic and minimal conditions of validity and reliability for the MSQ.

In light of this, the current study employed a 3-point Likert-type scale consistent with the original MSQ-R, whereby participants provided two responses for each question: one for themselves and one for how they believed their partner would respond (see Appendix G). The results of Herman's (1991) research show that Black couples have unique experiences and history has ignored their voices, actively promoting distortions, misrepresentations and racist assaults (Guillory, 2022).

Overall findings revealed that 90% of participants reported an increase in marital satisfaction from their own point of view, with only one participant's MSQ-R score remaining the same pre-and post-workshop and none reporting a decrease. However, only 60% of participants believed that their partner experienced an increase in marital satisfaction, with 2

participants estimating that their partners' marital satisfaction remained unchanged from pre

to post-workshop and two estimating a decrease in their partner's overall marital satisfaction.

When MSQ-R scores for both partners of each couple were combined, all couples (100%)

reported an overall increase in their own view of marital satisfaction as measured by the MSQ-

R, while 80% (4 of the 5 couples) reported an increase in their combined estimate of their

partner's view of marital satisfaction.

Difference scores were more difficult to interpret. One pattern I thought I might see was

a decrease in the difference between the view of self and view of the partner from pre to post-

workshop (Figure 5). In other words, perhaps participating in the workshop would bring both

partners' views into alignment. However, the results were mixed, with only three individuals

reporting a decrease in difference from pre to post, six reporting an increase in difference, and

one remaining the same. Similarly, I hypothesized that the difference between both partners'

views of their own marital satisfaction would decrease from pre-to post-workshop. The

difference scores for the MSQ-R view of self for four of the five couples did, in fact, become

more closely aligned with each other, with one becoming less aligned (Figure 6). Finally, I

hypothesized that the difference between both partners' views of their partner's marital

satisfaction would decrease from pre to post-workshop. Results here were mixed, with two

decreasing, two remaining the same, and one increasing (Figure 7).

One possible explanation for many participants' underestimation of their partner's

marital satisfaction might be attachment avoidance or anxiety. A study by Rodriguez et al.

(2019) found that greater actor attachment avoidance was associated with perceptions of

lower partner satisfaction, meaning that more avoidant actors perceive that their partners are

not as fulfilled in the relationship when compared with their less avoidant counterparts. These

researchers named this tendency a "pessimistic bias" (p. 588). They further found that actors

higher in anxiety displayed a pessimistic bias. Collins and Allard (2001) note that attachment

anxiety and avoidance influence information processing in close relationships by shaping which

aspects of a partner's behavior are attended to and remembered. Dykas and Cassidy (2011)

note that individuals higher in attachment anxiety or avoidance engage in "schema-driven" (p.

22) processing in which their perceptions of their partners are influenced by their negative

relationship beliefs and expectations.

However, the attachment-related findings from the current study, which appear in the

next section of this chapter, do not appear to provide evidence of attachment avoidance or

anxiety in the lived interactions between partners, raising an interesting question about how

attachment is traditionally measured and conceptualized. The attachment-related data for this

study was collected via observation of couples' attachment discourse as they interacted with

each other in the workshop. It is interesting to note that all of the couples in this study had a

connected and connecting experience through dialogue—an experience which, as the next

section will show, is replete with what the PACS identifies as the discursive markers that make

up the bulk of discourse for patients who have a secure attachment. In the qualitative findings

section of this chapter, evidence of participants' own positive, bonding, and liberating

experiences of the dialogue and the workshop is presented. Yet, when asked in a subjective pen

and paper measure to rate their own and their partner's marital satisfaction, some participants

still appeared to perceive their partner as less satisfied than they were themselves, seeming to

indicate that many participants did not trust their own experiences of safety and connection outside the moment of experiencing it.

In summary, marital satisfaction as measured using a modified version of the MSQ-R, increased for Black couples participating in the GTLYW weekend workshop when looking strictly at either the couples' combined view of their own marital satisfaction or each partner's individual view of their own marital satisfaction. Support for an increase in marital satisfaction pre to post workshop was also strong, though less so when looking only at partners' estimates of their partner's marital satisfaction.

Attachment

Hypothesis 2: The majority of discursive markers observed in couples' dialogue processes over the course of the GTLWY workshop will fall into the three PACS scales of Proximity-seeking, Contact-maintaining and Exploring.

In order to test hypothesis 1, I first calculated the frequency of all discursive markers for each 5- to 7-minute segment of dialogue for each couple. In order to calculate the frequency for each discursive marker, I counted the number of times the specific discursive marker occurred in the segment and divided that number by the length of time of that particular segment. Because I was also interested in looking at broader patterns in the occurrence of the PACS discursive markers, I also calculated the frequency of all discursive markers falling into the three PACS scales of Proximity-seeking, Contact-maintaining and Exploring to arrive at one total frequency score for "secure" discursive markers. For dialogues that consisted of more than one 5-7 minute segment, I calculated the mean of the segments, arriving at one frequency score per dialogue, which I then placed on a graph alongside frequencies for avoidant discursive markers

so as to illustrate the comparative frequency of secure and avoidant discursive markers (Figure 8).

Results overwhelming illustrate that almost all discursive markers observed in the dialogues that comprise the GTLYW workshop fell into the three PACS scales of Proximity-seeking, Contact-maintaining and Exploring (the scales considered to make up the majority of in-session discourse for those who are securely attached), while three of the five couples displayed no avoidant discursive markers in their dialogues and two displayed very few avoidant discursive markers (with frequencies for those two being .142 with 2.856 secure and .047 with 3.078 secure).

Hypothesis 3: The frequency of the discursive markers falling into the three PACS scales of Proximity-seeking, Contact-maintaining and Exploring will increase over the length of the workshop.

In order to test this hypothesis, I calculated the frequencies of discursive markers falling into each PACS scale for every 5–7-minute segment of each dialogue. I then arranged the segments of these dialogues in the order in which they took place in the workshop and created a graph to visually represent the changes in frequencies of these discursive markers over the course of the workshop (Figure 9). As predicted, findings showed an overall increase in the frequency of combined secure discursive markers from the first half to the second half of the workshop, with frequencies ranging from .956 to 2.856 in the first half and from 2.197 to 3.853 in the second half. There was also a marked increase in frequency of Contact-maintaining, Proximity-seeking, and Exploring discursive markers from first to second half of the workshop, with total frequency of contact-maintaining discursive markers at 2.57 in the first half of the

workshop and 5.13 in the second half of the workshop, total frequency of proximity-seeking

discursive markers at 4.856 in the first half of the workshop and 9.771 in the second half of the

workshop and total frequency of exploring discursive markers at 1.297 in the first half of the

workshop and 3.14 in the second half of the workshop.

Hypothesis 4: The frequency of discursive markers falling into the two PACS scales of Proximity-

seeking and Contact-maintaining will be highest in the Racial Distress Dialogue.

In order to test this hypothesis, I calculated the frequency of all discursive markers for

each of the dialogues in 5-7 minute increments. The Racial Distress dialogue was the longest

dialogue and consisted of six 5-7 minutes segments. The two dialogue segments with the

highest frequency of proximity-seeking discursive markers both occurred in the Racial Distress

dialogue, at 3.14 and 2.85; the total average frequency of proximity-seeking discursive was also

highest in the Racial Distress dialogue, at 1.628. The two segments with the highest frequency

of contact maintaining discursive markers also both occurred in the racial distress dialogue, at

1.42 and 3.14.

There are several possibilities for the concentration of secure discursive markers in the

Racial Distress Dialogue. First, this dialogue occurred on the second day of the GTLYW

workshop and it was the last dialogue of the workshop. Typically on the second day of the

GTLYW workshop, participants have become more relaxed with their partners and in the group

as a whole and group safety has been established. Another possibility is that discussing this

particular topic (within the structure of dialogue) with one's partner sets the stage for an

increase in vulnerability and increased affect. A third possibility is that the couple that

demonstrated this dialogue for the group had some previous experience with Imago and were

ready to explore this conversation in a group format in a deep and thoughtful manner.

Hypothesis 5: The Imago Dialogue promotes the enactment between partners of several

specific PACS discursive markers at a higher frequency than others and all of these discursive

markers fall into the Proximity-Seeking, Contact-Maintaining and Exploring Scales, indicating a

secure attachment bond.

In order to determine which specific discursive markers occurred the most during the

dialogues of the workshop, the number of occurrences of discursive marker for each dialogue

were mapped on a graph, one graph per dialogue (see Figures 10-14). These graphs illustrate

that the specific discursive markers with the highest number of occurrences in the dialogues

were "affirms partner's remark," "discloses unmet relational needs," "gives a vivid narrative of

a past distressful event," "praises partner," "discloses distressful emotions experienced in the

present," and "gives a vivid narrative of a self-defining moment." The PACS identifies a total of

59 observable discursive markers, 10 in the proximity-seeking scale, 5 in the contact-

maintaining scale, 9 in the exploring scale, 10 in the avoiding scale, 13 in the resisting and

involving scale, and 8 in the merging scale. Of all these 59 discursive markers, only a select few

appeared throughout the dialogues of the GTLYW workshop. See Figures 10-14. The reason for

this could be that the dialogue is specifically designed to create emotional safety and "elicit

attunement and exploration of internal experience in the present (Talia & Miller-Bottome,

2014).

Summary of Overall Study Results

Qualitative

In summary, the findings in this study, which used data gathered from a previous pilot study, illustrated that participating in the GTLYW workshop increased Black couples' ability to communicate effectively with each other, increased participants' understanding of and ability to deal with conflict and increased their ability to communicate about race and racial distress. Results illustrated that the Imago dialogue was a key factor in this result. IRT which defines "conflict as an invitation to growth and healing, rather than a problem to be solved or signal to give up on the relationship" (Hendrix & LaKelly-Hunt, 2021, p. 141) appeared to not only contribute to the increase in participants' ways dealing with and understanding conflict, but I observed a sense of personal agency of some participants that came as a result of embracing this countercultural definition of conflict and also through a systemic awareness that many maladaptive behaviors have tentacles that reach back into past relationships, generations and that the current relationship is the healing container. Results also revealed that participating in the GTLYW weekend workshop did not decrease participants' overall racial distress. There are a few possibilities for this result. First, the GTLYW is an introductory workshop and it was the first time many of the participants have had an opportunity to discuss race/racism/racial distress within a dialogical structured format. Second, the expectation that a 2-day workshop would decrease layers of multigenerational racial distress was unrealistic. The findings did, however, show that race was an important topic of conversation for the study participants and that the racial distress dialogue in the GTLYW workshop setting provided the safe structure that was essential for Black couples to have these conversations.

Quantitative

Utilizing a modified version of the MSQ-R results showed that participation in the GTLYW increased Black couples' perception of their own marital satisfaction, although it provided less strong support for an increase in their perception of their partner's marital satisfaction. The underestimation of the partner's view of marital satisfaction may be due to the differences in a subjective post-analysis self/other measure and an in-the-moment dialogic combined view measure. Another possibility is that individuals higher in attachment anxiety or avoidance engage in "schema-driven" (p. 593) processes in which their perceptions of their partners are influenced by negative beliefs and expectations (Rodriguez et al., 2018). Lastly, another possibility has to do with the intersectionality of racism and sexism that painfully emerge in the dynamics of Black couples (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin 1998). Whether or not people are ready to discuss the effects of racism on their relationships, research shows couples who face racism and discrimination are likely to report verbal and physical aggression (La Taillade et al., 2000). Internalizing experiences of racism and discrimination also has a negative effect on trust and marital satisfaction (Kelly & Floyd, 2001, 2006). Consequently, how couples perceive their partner's behavior as either beneficial or detrimental to the relationship is important in evaluating relationship functioning.

Results overwhelming illustrate that almost all discursive markers observed in the dialogues that comprise the GTLYW workshop fell into the three PACS scales of Proximity-seeking, Contact-maintaining and Exploring (the scales considered to make up the majority of in-session discourse for those who are securely attached),

Quantitative findings also illustrated through PACS revealed that after calculating mean score frequencies of discursive markers in increments of 5–7-minute segments, showed a marked increase for Contact maintaining, Proximity-seeking, and Exploring markers from the first to the second half of the workshop. Results overwhelmingly revealed that almost all of the dialogues that comprise the GTLYW workshop fell into the three PACS scales that make up "secure attachment," Contact maintaining, Proximity-seeking, and Exploring. As predicted, the findings showed an overall increase in the frequency of combined secure discursive markers from day 1 to day 2 of the workshop, with frequencies ranging from .956 to 2.856 in the first half and from 2.197 to 3.853. Calculating the frequency of discursive markers in 5–7-minute increments, each dialogue consists of up to three segments. This means that the dialogues range anywhere from 20 minutes to 30 minutes. The dialogue with the most segments was the Racial distress dialogue with six segments which was posited by Nightingale, et al, (2019), who notes that for Black couples, discussing race and racism is especially therapeutic and important. The two segments of this dialogue that consisted of the highest frequency of contact maintaining discursive markers both occurred in the Racial distress dialogue, at 1.42 and 3.14. In addition, the total average frequency of proximity-seeking discursive was also highest in the Racial distress dialogue, at 1.628.

Lastly, the specific discursive markers with the highest number of occurrences in the dialogues were "affirms partner's remark," "discloses unmet relational needs," "gives a vivid narrative of a past distressful event," "praises partner," "discloses distressful emotions experienced in the present," and "gives a vivid narrative of a self-defining moment." Overall, the finding also revealed that the structure of the Imago dialogue itself was shown to provide

the conditions necessary for introducing Black couples to an attachment therapeutic whereby they move to the relational (Talia et al., 2017) and can together serve as attachment figures to each other can communicate distress and other internal states described using the discursive markers named and identified by the PACS.

Chapter 5: Conclusion & Discussions

Our society prizes the strong autonomous individual. But this cultural emphasis unwittingly marginalizes the emotional skills of interdependence involved in creating responsive, loving and enduring couple relationships (Fishbane & Wells, 2015). This study was anchored in my desire to examine Black couples as a unit of analysis and explore the effects of IRT on their lived experiences through a GTLYW workshop utilizing qualitative, quantitative and observational measures. Unfortunately, almost all of the major theoretical models in the field of CFT conceptualize romantic relationships and processes from the perspective of the "theoretical myth of sameness" in which all couples, regardless of contextual background, possess similar relational and emotional dynamics (Hardy, 1989). In particular, theoretical models such as IRT center on a Eurocentric theoretical model. Using Eurocentric conceptualizations of coupling obfuscates a full understanding of the coupling processes and romantic relationships between Black men and Black women (Lawrence-Webb, Littlefield & Okundaye, 2004). The shadow of slavery, Black laws/codes and current discrimination have resulted in the invisible wounds of racism, internalized devaluation, assaults on sense of self, and a sense of being voiceless (Hardy & Awosan, 2019). In spite of these barriers, most Black people desire marriage (Moore et al., 2021).

The decline in African American marriage rates and the increased divorce rate have highlighted the need to provide supportive services that can strengthen African American marriages (Dixon, 2009). Extant literature clearly illustrates the unique struggles Black couples face due to historical racism and discrimination (Awosan & Hardy, 2017) as well as internal and external factors. However, the research stops at identifying these challenges, rather than

proposing solutions that are culturally relevant. The current study suggests that IRT, as offered via a GTLYW workshop, can be modified to fill the need for a culturally relevant, strengths and attachment-based approach to strengthening Black marriage. This study engaged five Black/African-American couples in a GTLYW workshop modified both by adding a Racial distress dialogue designed to provide direct opportunities for the couples to explore their lived experiences of the impact of racial distress on their relationship, and by integrating race into the theoretical portions of the workshop that address childhood socialization processes.

Over the course of the workshop, I was able to observe how and why it is important for Black couples to attach to each other, obtain therapeutic/educational information together, as well as learn and practice their new relational skills together. In the following discussion, I summarize this study's overall findings in relation to the qualitative themes that emerged in the domains of communication, racism/racial distress and conflict, as well as the quantitative findings regarding marital satisfaction and attachment. The qualitative and direct observations provided a rich body of important data regarding the intimate lives and coupling processes of Black couples.

The findings suggest that Black couples' overall ability to communicate with each other increased as a result of participating in the GTLYW workshop and several themes emerged in their responses. These themes highlighted participants' experiences of using Imago dialogue to communicate in ways that increased their sense of closeness and understanding, as well as participants' increased ability to listen to their partner, to feel heard, and to communicate about sex.

While a previous research study tracing the use of Imago Education among African American couples determined that participants had increased communication and insight into themselves and their partners after they attended the workshop (Martin & Bielawski, 2011), the current study went further to examine Black couples' ability to communicate specifically about racial distress in the context of a GTLYW workshop with other Black couples. Given the significant impact of racism and racial distress on Black couples' relationships, as already detailed in the literature, and the promise that IRT appears to hold as strengths and attachment-based couple modality, it was deemed necessary to directly and explicitly address these factors in the study. As the literature argues, for Black American couples, race and culture do indeed matter (Bent-Goodley, 2017; Bryant et al., 2011).

Through the Racial distress dialogue and following feedback and process sessions, couples were able not only to explore these unique stressors but also to examine possible behaviors and interactions that could potentially help them metabolize and move beyond racial distress by imagining new ways of interacting with each other when challenged by these emotional and psychological injuries. One participant, for example, stated that it was "freeing to expose myself in this way to let [my partner] know that this is something I'm constantly on the fence of; in one way it felt like we were even more connected." Another noted that, "As a Black man in America, [dialogue] was liberating. I am in awe of dialogue!" Findings suggest the structure of the Imago dialogue "creates a setting so that authentic equal connection can occur … [it] transforms their primary relationship from adversarial to a cooperative and healing partnership" (Hendrix et al., 2015, p. 257). These types of emotionally connecting moments have historical and cultural significances that are revolutionary, according to bell hooks (2001).

Observational studies are the basis of most psychological evaluations and they rely on careful observation and assessment of social, affective, and communicative behavioral cues (Chakravarthula et al., 2015). Observing participants engaging in dialogue and the supportive feedback they offered each other, illustrated the importance of learning these skills within a group context. Witnessing the action of participants expressing themselves with their partners and other participants appeared to create a paradigm shift that was significantly different from how participants had previously experienced having racial conversations. The findings suggest the unique power of being invited to talk and listen to each other's stories regarding race and racism. For example, one participant stated, "We sit in spaces with our friends, our tribe and we talk about [racism] and it doesn't go anywhere; it just sits there. Being able to speak, to have dialogue while looking in each other's eyes. Eye contact … ." This participant highlights the dual nature of eye contact, of both seeing and being seen, and also the power of being visible to another in a positive way.

Franklin (2000) wrote poignantly about the invisibility syndrome from which African Americans have suffered and its negative impact on relationships. Repeated racial slights can create within an individual a feeling of not being seen as a person of worth (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000) and the internalization of perceived acts of prejudice is as idiosyncratic as it is universalistic (Franklin, 1993). Findings suggest that, for Black couples, the experience of being in the workshop, sharing their experiences, beliefs, character, and personal achievements in a space where it was valued and acknowledged, was the antithesis of the invisibility Black men and Black women experience through damaging stereotyping in the larger society due to racial

discrimination and prejudice. This experience of visibility is powerfully healing in and of itself;

that is, being visible to one's partner, and being visible to a group of other Black couples.

Gottman and Krokoff (1989) suggest that engaging in conflict and problem-solving may

be more beneficial to a couple than withdrawing from conflicts. This study's findings illustrated

that participating in the GTLYW workshop provided Black couples with valuable skills to manage

conflict as well as a new way of understanding what conflict means in their relationship.

According to IRT, conflict and dynamics in the couple's relationship create a close facsimile of

early childhood wounding experienced with critical, relational and developmental needs. (Muro

et al., 2016). Participants embraced IRT's notion that conflict, at the root, involves examining

the unfinished business of childhood and this establishes an opportunity for resolution.

According to the literature, relationships between Black men and Black women have historically

been characterized by conflict, power struggle and distrust (Harknett & McLanahan, 2004).

Invisible and often overlooked within society, Black men tend to express frustration within their

personal relationships (Boyd-Franklin, 2006). The new understanding of conflict which studies

participants developed during the workshop allowed them to see conflict in a hopeful, strength-

based, non-pathologizing way, helping them to move from working against each other with

unproductive strategies of blaming and criticizing to working together as allies in healing,

expressing their conflict and frustrations in a way that leads to collaboration, rather than pulling

them apart.

The findings of study revealed marital satisfaction showed less strong support for an

increase in their perception of their partner's marital satisfaction. But overall participation in

the GTLYW increased Black couples' perception of their own marital satisfaction. Yet, when

asked in a subjective pen and paper measure to rate their own and their partner's marital

satisfaction, some participants still appeared to perceive their partner as less satisfied than they

were themselves, seeming to indicate that many participants did not trust their own

experiences of safety and connection outside the moment of experiencing it. It is also

suspected that the reason for the low effect on the partner's perception of marital satisfaction

in the quantitative analysis was this data was self-report, which participants can distort for a

variety of reasons.

Attachment has long been considered an integral part of the couple's therapy process

(Bowlby, 1988) and a defining dimension of a couple's relationship. I also introduced new,

information about the clinical presentation of different attachment categories, and

demonstrated a process to classify partners' attachment patterns based on in-session discourse

and more specifically, intended for dyads. Talia et al (2017) note that while other measures of

attachment employed in therapy research rely on retrospective accounts of the therapeutic

relationship, the PACS assesses the client's attachment status by observing the actual

interaction taking place between them at the moment. Even though I was unable to use the

PACS in the way that it was originally developed, utilizing the discursive markers delineated in

the PACS to conceptualize and analyze participants' in-session attachment discourse (Talia et

al., 2017) and thus make a preliminary assumption "that discourse can serve distinct

interpersonal functions, including and maintaining emotional proximity, comfort and

reassurance from a [partner] which are defining features of attachment behavior (Ainsworth et

al., 1978). Research conducted with PACS discursive markers also led to an unintended

confirmation of my clinical experience that the structure of the Imago dialogue itself enables

and encourages secure attachment bonds between partners. The hallmark of security in the

PACS is the capacity to convey present self-states in an open fashion without restricting the

listener's responses (Talia et al., 2014). The findings in this study suggest that the structure of

the GTLYW workshop can increase in-the-moment experiences of secure bonding and

connection.

Mikulincer and Shaver (2023) have introduced a broaden and built cycle of attachment

security to show how attachment security:

Contributes to a reduction in prejudice and discriminatory attitudes and behavior

toward people who differ from oneself racially, ethnically, or in terms of group

membership. We also consider theoretical ideas and research suggesting that

attachment security functions as an inner resource when one is forced to cope with acts

of prejudice, discrimination, and racism against oneself (p. 261).

Cycles of attachment safety and security that emerge from interactions with sensitive

caregivers and adult partners promote emotion regulation, resilience in the face of adversity,

and empathy with others (Causidias et al., 2022). When I first began watching the videos from

the pilot study and discovered the rich data embedded in the lives, narratives and compelling

dynamics of Black couples in the face of internal and external forces that affect their

attachment bonds, it became essential for me to switch my focus to observing these Black

couples within their interactional context utilizing an attachment lens. This was also important

to me because there is little research linking attachment categories to the specific attachment-

related interactions between adults.

Black couples have unique experiences, and history has ignored their voices, actively promoting distortions, misrepresentations and racist assaults (Guillory, 2022, p. 23). Distrust and conflict in Black couples trace back to three and a half centuries of slavery with remnants of institutional racism observed in society today (Bethea & Allen, 2013; Watson, 2013) and marriages that end in divorce at higher rates than other cultural groups (Price et al., 2017). In this light, it is necessary to understand that race, ethnicity, and culture are powerful variables influencing how people think, behave, and make decisions (Sue & Sue, 2012). "Each cultural/racial group may have its own distinct interpretation of reality and offer a different perspective on the nature of people … and the standards for judging normality and abnormality" (Sue & Sue, 2012, p. 45). An understanding of the factors that promote relationship satisfaction and stability among African Americans is important in terms of guiding theoretical models, policy, and intervention efforts (Cutrona et al., 2011).

Study Limitations

Although the unique study findings provide significant insights into the lived experiences of Black coupling experiences, limitations exist. One of the limitations was the small sample size. Findings gained from this study are specific to this population; generalization to other groups should be tentative. Another limitation is that this does not include Black couples who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Dixon (2014) expressed that although members of the African American LGBT communities share challenges similar to those experienced by African American heterosexual couples, they experience additional stressors and challenges because they are marginalized in other ways. Research on the impact of the GTLYW workshop for LGBT Black couples would be important.

Although this study addresses the gap in the absence of a culturally sensitive treatment for African American couples, a limitation of the study is the focus solely on the experience of U.S.-born Black Americans and not Black couples born outside the country. Caribbean Blacks or Africans who immigrated to America may not be able to relate to the historical struggles of African Americans because they do not have the same experiences (Dixon, 2014). While their experience of present-day racial discrimination may be similar, they do not have the same history of segregation, Jim Crow and enslavement in the United States. However, the GTLYW weekend may also be a valuable tool to help Black couples of other descents explore how race and racial distress impact their relationship and learn skills and techniques to address them.

It is probable that a Black couple might have questions about the generalizability of IRT for Black couples and they should as well as for IRT researchers and practitioners. Even the argument that attachment is universal and the IRT views marriage as the "second chance to fulfill unmet attachment needs ruptured in childhood" (Hendrix, 1988) as an important foundation of IRT theory would be strengthened with more cross-cultural studies. As Otto and Keller (2014) suggest, Bowlby and Ainsworth were theorists and reformers. Their work focused on White-middle-class mothers and children and demonstrated the critical importance of sensitive, responsive caretaking for healthy child development. Ainsworth seemed to share the belief that more fieldwork observations were needed to understand attachment within different cultural contexts:

> [T]hat so many attachment researchers have gone on to do research with the Strange
> Situation rather than looking at what happens in the home or in other natural

settings…it marks a turning away from 'field work' (basic research)," and I don't think it's

wise (Ainsworth, 1995 p. 12).

Finally, an important limitation of this study was not being able to use the PACS the way

it was developed.

Future Research and Recommendations

Future research could utilize the PACS to measure the frequency and intensity of

discursive to measure changes in attachment discourse for each couple from the beginning to

the end of a GTLYW workshop. Future research could also include utilizing PACS with a larger

sample to explore differences in the discourses of partners with different attachment patterns.

Future research could involve a qualitative study that allows Black couples to define marital

satisfaction rather than a measure.

Broader Implications

Black couples are more likely to bring additional challenges to couples' work that other

racial groups do not bring. There are so few Black IRT Certified Imago therapists in the U.S. that

it is likely that a Black couple seeking IRT therapy (or any other model of therapy) will see a non-

Black therapist. Diversity training, culturally responsive supervision, racial humility and

inclusiveness, and increasing the number of Black IRT therapists and faculty are critical. I also

recommend that the GTLYW workshop be modified for Black and African American couples

such that the lectures and exercises move from their current "colorblind" state to explicitly

theorize Black couples' unique attachment experiences, development and socialization *as racial*

beings. In addition, the workshop should provide an opportunity for Black couples to

investigate the historical, present-day and chronic impact of race and racial distress on their

relationships so they find hope through breaking dysfunctional patterns and cycles, heal trauma

and racial distress, and begin creating and thriving in sustainable, loving, empathic marriages

and relationships. In essence, the workshop should help Black couples find hope and purpose

for their marriage and create one that aligns with their goals and dreams and also the legacy

they so wish to leave behind.

<div align="center">**Social Justice Implications**</div>

Maintaining social justice as a focus in couple therapy remains a work in progress. The

field of mental health has made gains, but still encounters what is often a latent and sometimes

explicit anchoring of research and practice in a certain kind of heterosexual, White upper

middle-class norm with minimal awareness of the importance of context. Research

demonstrates that, while Black American couples have the highest rates of divorce compared

to all other racial groups (Bryant et al., 2011), the desire to marry and the high regard for

marriage has not waned (Hurt, 2012). Couples' educational programs such as the Getting the

Love You Want (GTLYW) workshop, provide an opportunity for couples to learn skills that

provide an opportunity to genuinely hear and see each other. Improving Black marriages and

relationships has a trickle-down effect, impacting the children and all of those with whom these

couples have contact.

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Tables & Figures

Table 1

Communication, Conflict and Racial Distress

Theme and Subthemes	Example quotes
Increase in ability to communicate with partner	
Use of Imago Dialogue to communicate	"Our talks are more impactful and relevant. I feel closer to my spouse and she understands me more." (Elmer, age 48)
	"Imago has been life-changing so far. I was considering leaving my husband because of his behaviors (toxic), but after dialoguing and hearing his story, my feelings changed toward him. I feel more in love and connected to him." (Motif, age 45)
Increase in ability to listen to partner	"We listen more to understand than respond." (Junior, age 53)
	"Listening in the dialogue has opened up new feelings for my partner, creating and understanding." (Dante, age 55)
Ability to communicate about sex	"I appreciated the conversation about sex. I resonate with that also [because] I think it is important to make those statements…so thank you for that…just bringing [sex] out." (MJ, age 55)
	"About the sex, like I appreciate the honesty, because after 13 years of me and Amare being together, that's the one thing we're still connecting with, it's never been lost." (Skye, age 37)
New understanding of and ability to deal with conflict	"My understanding of conflict had 'absolutely' changed. The word 'SAFE' really stuck with me. If I want to solve a problem with Amare I know what I need to do and how to act! And also what to say to

help guide me along the way." (Skye, age 67)

Theme and Subthemes	Example Quotes
Understanding the roots of conflict	"We have the tools that we will begin to use…also the idea that conflicts arise from childhood wounds is a good starting point." (MJ, age 55) "Being able to find out where these issues stem from helps me understand why there are certain behaviors." (Skye, age 37)
Communication about race and racial distress	
Racism has an impact on the relationship	"[Racism] is an everyday burden to navigate a predominantly white society." (Junior, age 53) "Racism impacts how we love each other" (Aiyanna, age 44) "Everyday racism can add to the relationship." (Dante, age 55)
Race is a frequent topic of conversation	"[We talk] often. We bring articles to each other's attention. We speak freely about our own experiences and that of our parents and ancestors." (Chicky, age 52) "[We talk about race] all the time." (Motif, age 45)
Fear for own/partner's/child's safety when away from home	"I don't feel like I can just completely go outside." (Chicky, age 52) "I asked brothers in law enforcement what do I do to stay alive? They say, here's the thing, it's a role of the dice. You might end up in a situation where you get a cop who just don't like Black people. You stay alive. Even if you get a life sentence you alive." (Keith, age 46)

"I was in a situation where any woman would be expected, could expect, that her partner would come and defend her with all the manliness you know that a white woman can come to expect from their men, but I was denied that because I had to be worried about that if he defended me, he could end up dead." (Chicky, age 52)

Being harassed/physically assaulted by law enforcement due to being Black

"Being maced as a teenager and wondering, why did they pepper spray us at a youth event, it was normal to see police, you know, push down brothers and beat them with their stick, you know…and I feel like I carry it with me…I think I have PTSD from it." (Motif, age 45)

"In the [city where I live] police harassment of Black men is par for the course. I've been pulled over by a cop, will have one headlight out, and ask why are you pulling me over. Then 5 cop cars later. So it's just how [my city] always was." (Amare, age 41)

Racial Distress Dialogue was key in exploring the impact of race on the relationship

"I appreciate that she gave language to how I feel." (Motif, age 45)

"It helped Amare and I have an in depth conversation about the experience [racial distress] and how it does and will affect us in the future. The dialogue [was] key!" (Skye, age 37)

Intersections of race and gender

"Motif came home and was talking about how she was very frustrated that she would go to a new supply store owned by Asians. And they would follow her. She's kinda saying it to me and I wasn't very sensitive to that and it caused a kind of thing between us. I-I-I let her down." (Elmer, age 58)

"When I go out with these Fortune 10 CEO's…they are trying to determine how

Black am I and I walk this game. And so my fears that if he's like that…why do you make them [whites] feel comfortable and it's a sensitive topic between us." (Keith, age 46)

Table 2

Frequencies of Discursive Markers by Dialogue Segments

Dialogue	Proximity-Seeking	Contact-Maintaining	Exploring	Total Secure	Total Avoidant
Black Gratitude	.428	0	1.714	2.142	0
Appreciation	1	1.285	.571	2.142	0
Parent Child Dialogue Segment 1	2.43	0	0	2.43	0
Parent Child Dialogue Segment 2	.428	.857	.714	1.999	0
Soft Topics Segment 1	.142	.428	.714	1.284	0
Racial Distress Segment 1	3.14	.142	0	3.424	0
Racial Distress Segment 2	.777	1.42	0	2.197	0
Racial Distress Segment 3	2.285	.428	0	2.713	0
Racial Distress Segment 4	1.428	.428	1.714	3.57	0
Racial Distress Segment 5	1.75	0	1.142	2.712	0

Dialogue	Proximity-Seeking	Contact-Maintaining	Exploring	Total Secure	Total Avoidant
Racial Distress Segment 6	.571	3.14	.142	3.853	.285

Note. Frequencies of discursive markers falling into main PACS scales were calculated for each segment of each dialogue. The fourth column depicts the total frequency in the secure scale and the fifth column depicts the total frequency in the avoidance scale.

Table 3

PACS Scales & Markers

| PACS Scale	Subscales & markers	Example excerpts from Participants
Proximity Seeking	*Help*: (1) Asks for help (2) Discusses own needs of help (3) Asks for advice (4) or for T's opinion *Disclosure*: (5) Discloses distressful emotions experienced in the present (6) Gives a vivid narrative of a past distressful event (7) Criticizes unloving behavior of a significant other (8) Discloses unmet relational needs (9) Discloses to have been hurt by the therapist (10) Cries	*I understand you say you are grateful for your father [crying & lots of emotion] for all he went through in his life [voice shaking] he was someone whowas very important to you in your life, did I get you? [5, 6, 10]* *Sometime, sometimes our parents have harmful processes, and we're the collateral damage [6]* *I mean I couldn't keep it together because [crying] [10]*
Contact Maintaining	(11) *Praises* T (12) Praises treatment (13) Praises therapeutic tasks (14) Affirms T's remark (15) Refers to past session	*You were doing everything … you were like Mr. Mom [chuckle] umm… and I just saw you in a different light and that made me feel more connected to you [11]* *I don't know what it is. But I feel like we've created safety okay [13]* *That definitely make sense [14]*
Exploring	*Self-asserting* (16) Expresses independent will (17) Actively reflects on how to cope with problem (18) Proposes tasks/goals for therapy	*I feel .. I want you to get the full experience of my feeling relaxed,[16] But if it came down to it, and I had to I would make a decision to protect you. And deal with the consequences later. [17]*

| PACS Scale	Subscales & markers	Example excerpts from Participants
Exploring (cont.)	(19) Expresses misgivings about therapeutic tasks **Affective sharing** (20) Reports self-defining experience in detail (21) Reports instances of being helped or cared for by other (22) Praises positive characteristics of other and their consequences (23) Praises relationship **Autonomous reflection** (24) While reflecting in the present, assumes alternate perspective on self/other's experience beyond what is apparent	*I like to express to you something that I will value appreciate cherish. I value your non-judgmental way of being. You just let people be themselves [22]* *There is a helplessness that we cannot protect Black partners from danger [20] I appreciate that way you have being with me [21]* *I have just what really resonated with me was just the joy and pleasure you seem to take in each other's presence. It it it was just something that was tangible in touch with right in my heart you just just the joy that you take in each other [23]*
Avoidance	**Direct avoidance** (25) Fails to respond to inquiry about distress; or (26) to prompt to explore (27) Responds too briefly to reflection (28) Dismisses offer of support **Downplaying** (29) Minimizes or (30) Normalizes distress (31) Turns distress to positive (32) Reassures self that the problem can be fixed (33) Retracts criticism of hurtful other **Releasing** (34) Gives advice to self about how problem 'should' be solved	*Because when you were struggling with with you know, I'm like you know because we want to find the good [30], [32]*

| PACS Scale	Subscales & markers	Example excerpts from Participants
Avoidance (cont.)	(35) Provides external justification for a problem (36) Rejects own complaint as pointless (37) Briskly interrupts discussion of distress (38) Laugh over distress	*Childhood [laughter] was very different [38]*

Note. In this table, four main scales of the PACS are listed alongside an abbreviated description

of discursive markers associated with each of them, as well as an example of the described

markers taken from the actual transcript of dialogue processes and feedback from participants.

Table 4

Demographics of Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Education	Relationship Status	Income Level	Length of Relationship	Age
Amare'	Male	Highschool	Married	30K-59K	14 Years	41
Skye	Female	Bachelor's	Married	60K-100K	14 years	37
Ayanna	Female	Master's	Married	>100K	7 years	44
Keith	Male	Some college	Married	>100K	7 years	46
Chicky	Female	Master's	Married	>100K	28 years	52
Junior	Male	Master's	Married	60K-100K	28 years	53
Dante	Male	Some college	Married	60K-100K	30 years	55
MJ	Female	Bachelor's	Married	60K-100K	30 years	55
Elmer	Male	Master's	Married	>100K	24 years	48
Motif	Female	Highschool	Married	>100K	24 years	45

Figure 1

MSQ-R Scores for View of Self
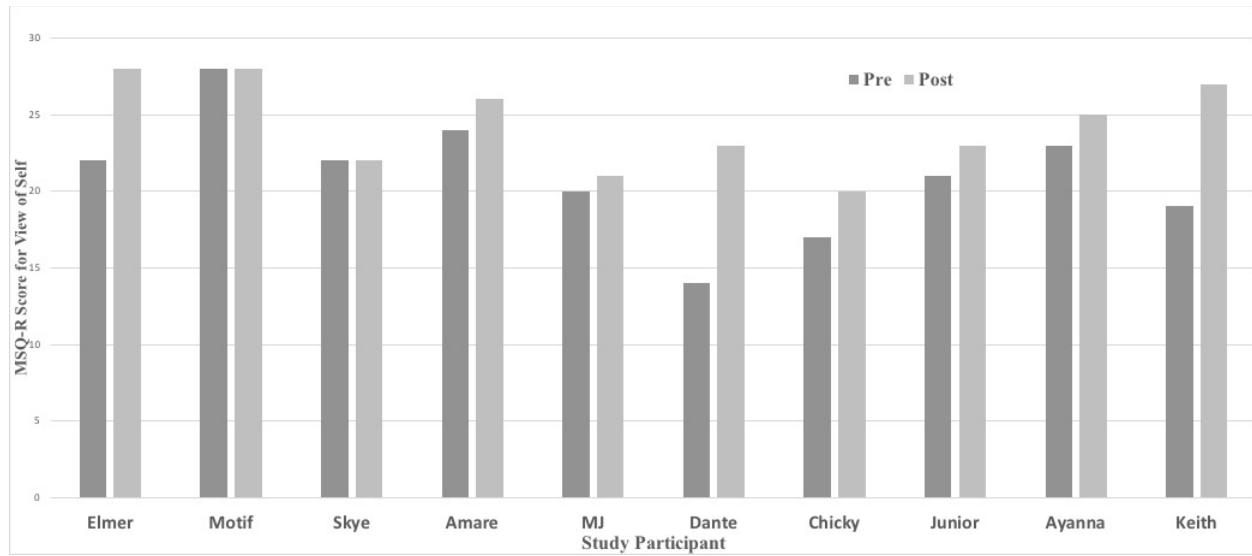
Figure 2

MSQ-R Scores for View of Partner
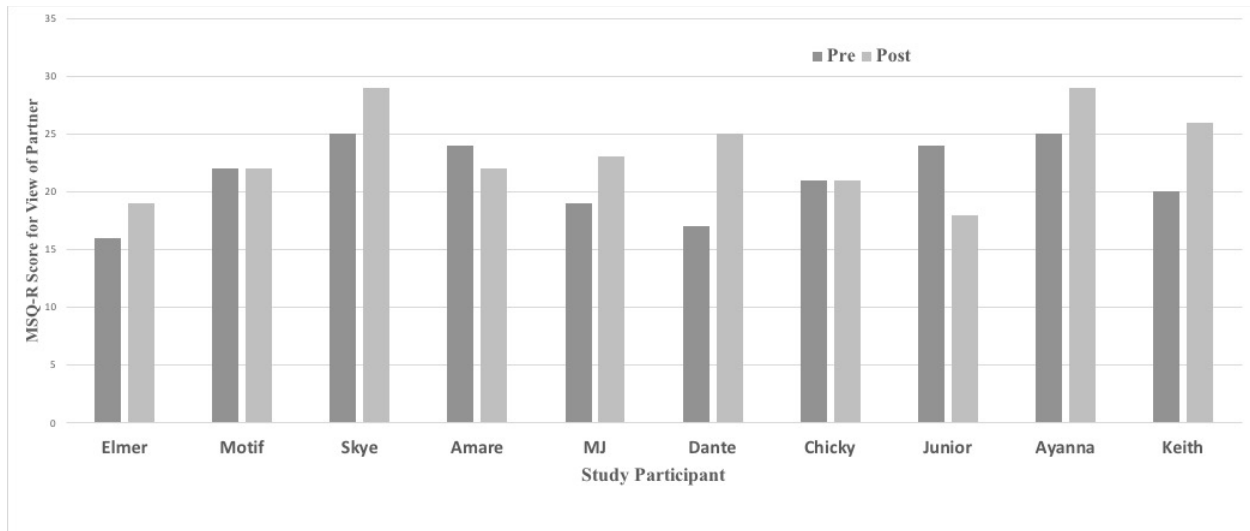
Figure 3

*Combined MSQ-R Scores for View of Self*
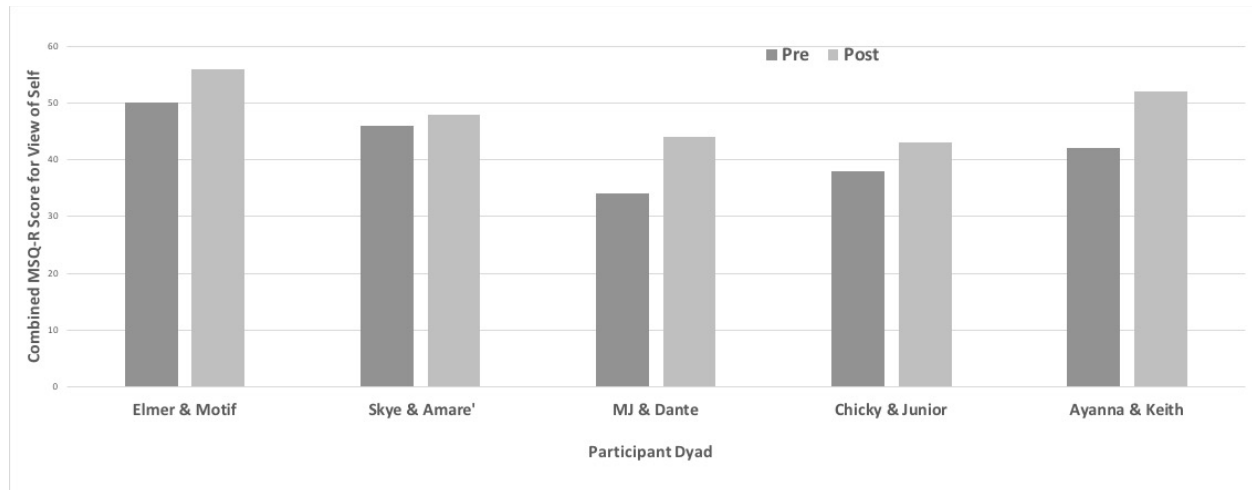
Note. Combined MSQ-R score for view of self was calculated by adding together both partners' view of self scores.

Figure 4

Combined MSQ-R Scores for View of Partner
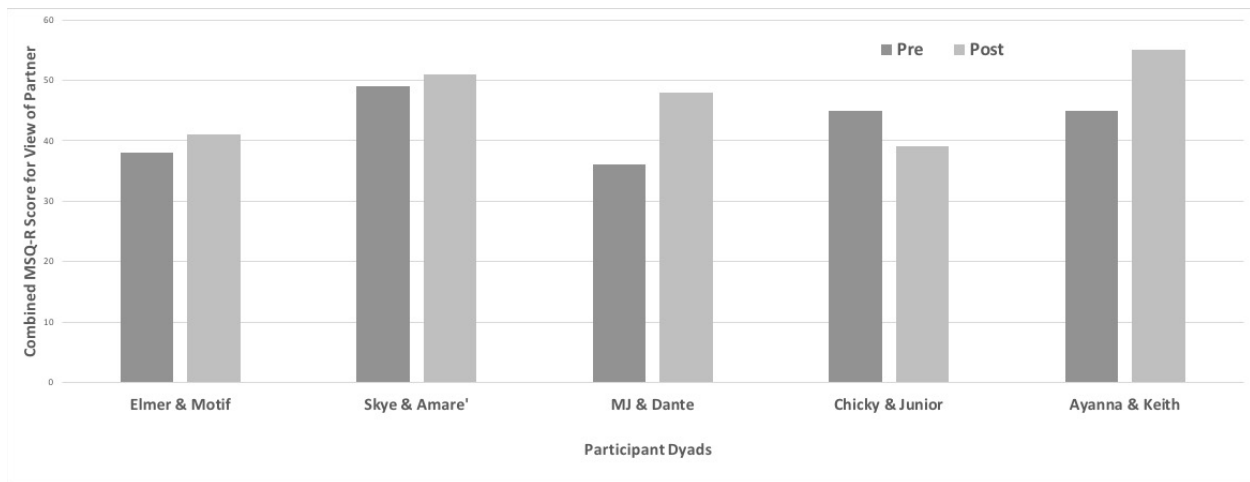
Note. Combined MSQ-R score for view of partner was calculated by adding together both partners' view of partner scores.

Figure 5

MSQ-R Self/Partner Difference Scores
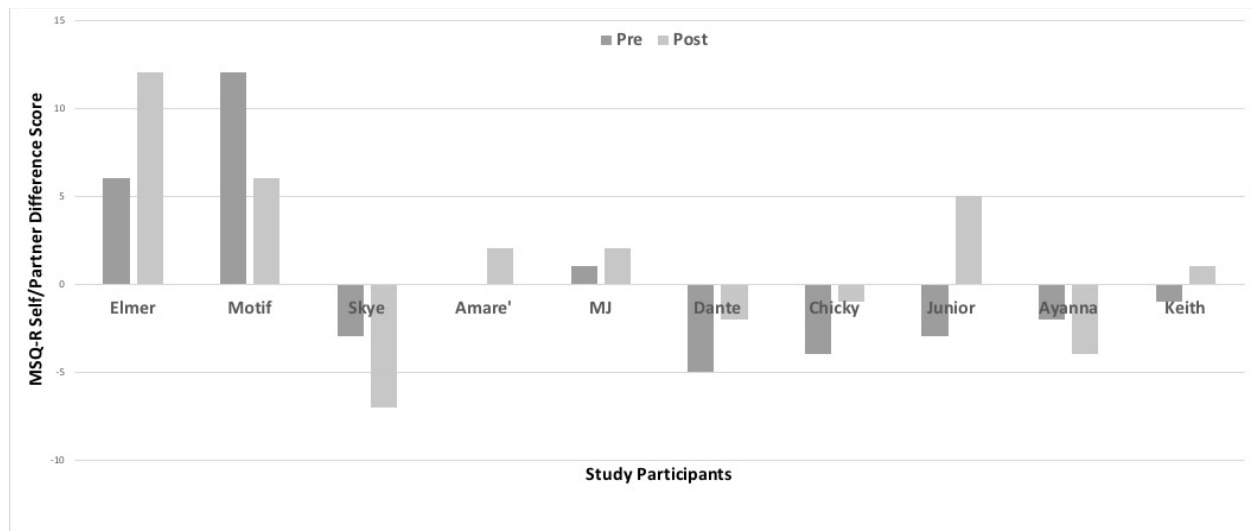
Figure 6

MSQ-R Difference Scores for View of Self
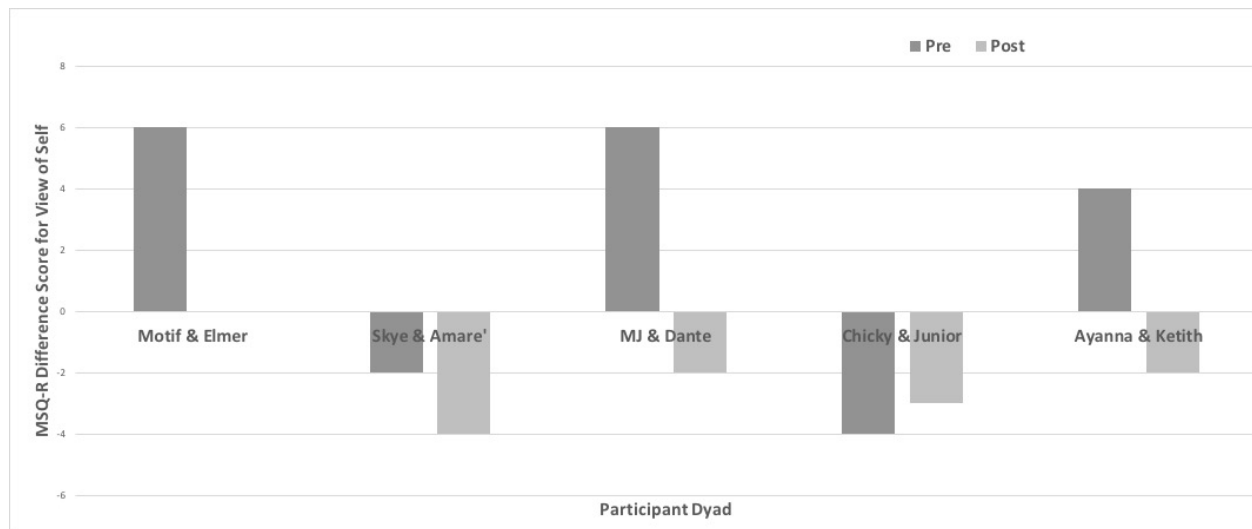
Figure 7

MSQ-R Difference Scores for View of Partner
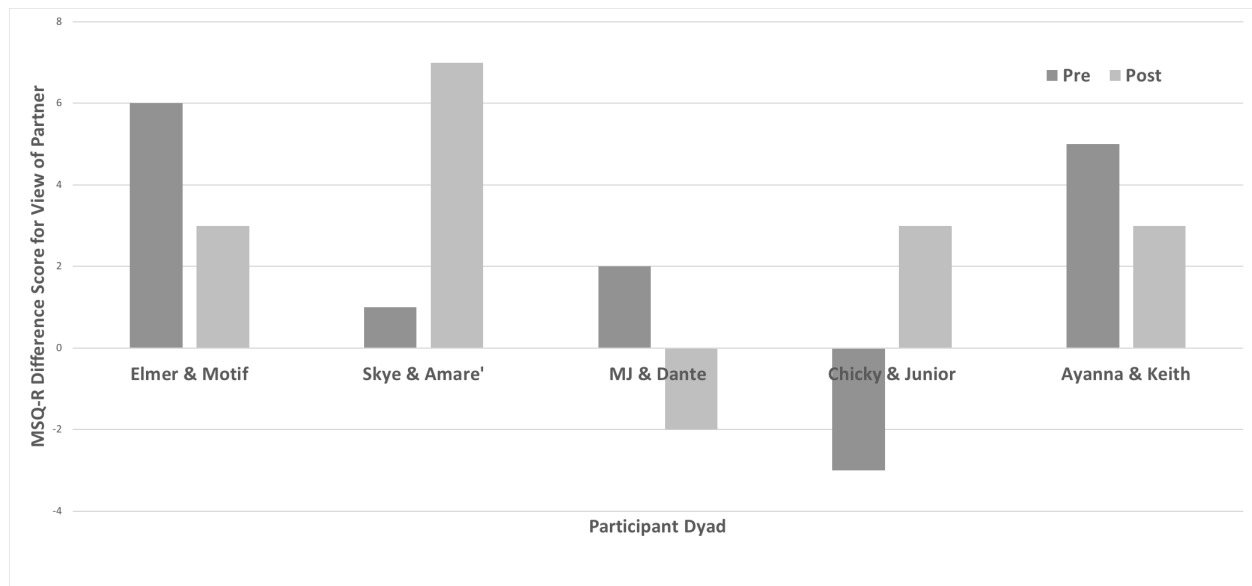
Figure 8

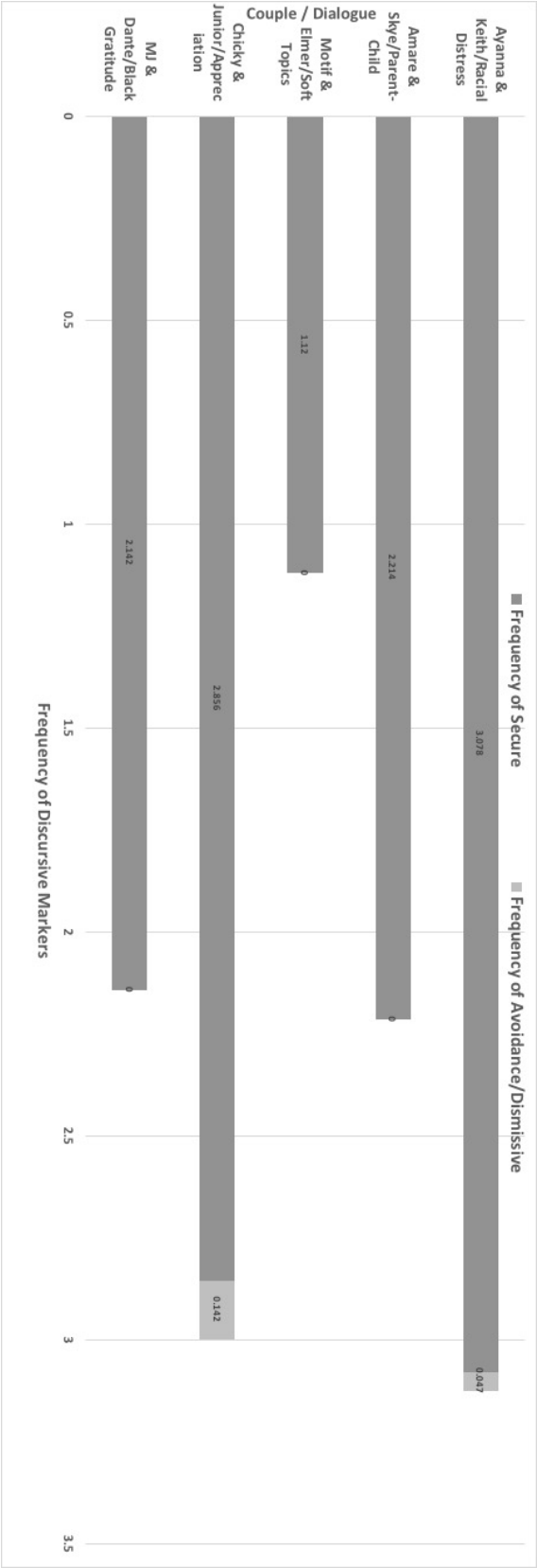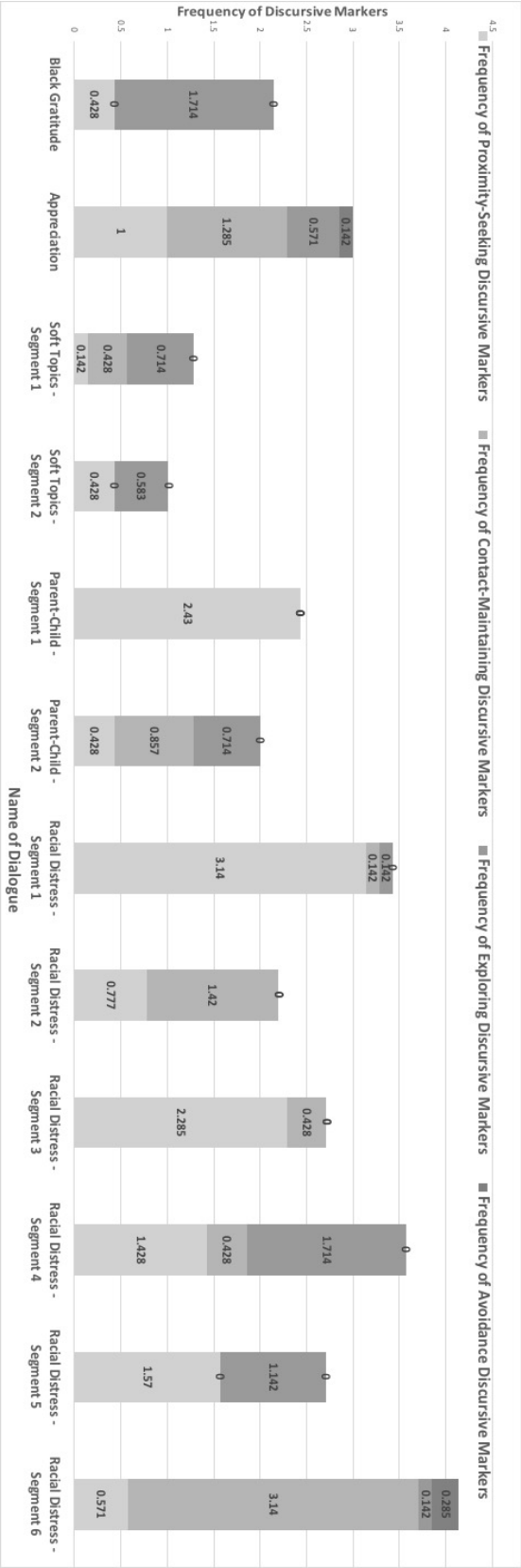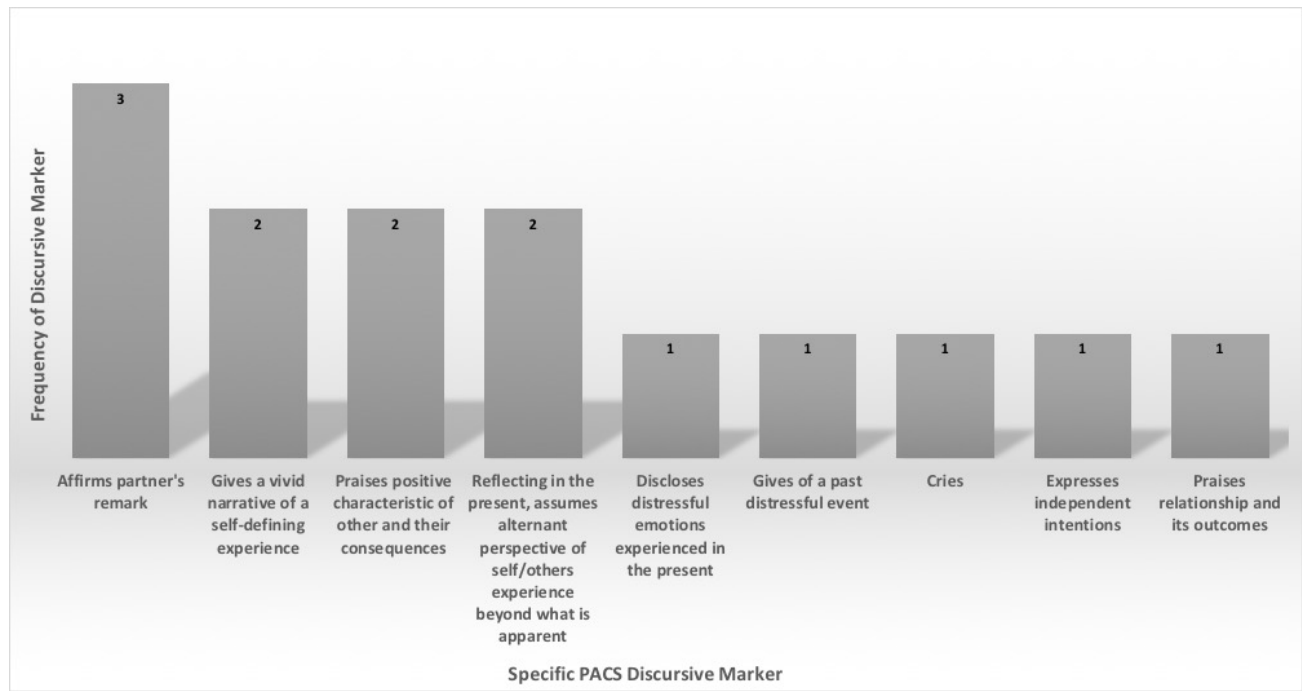*Frequency of Discursive Markers Per Dialogue Grouped by PACS Scale Type*

Figure 9

Timeline of Discursive Markers Frequencies Across Length of GTLYW Workshop
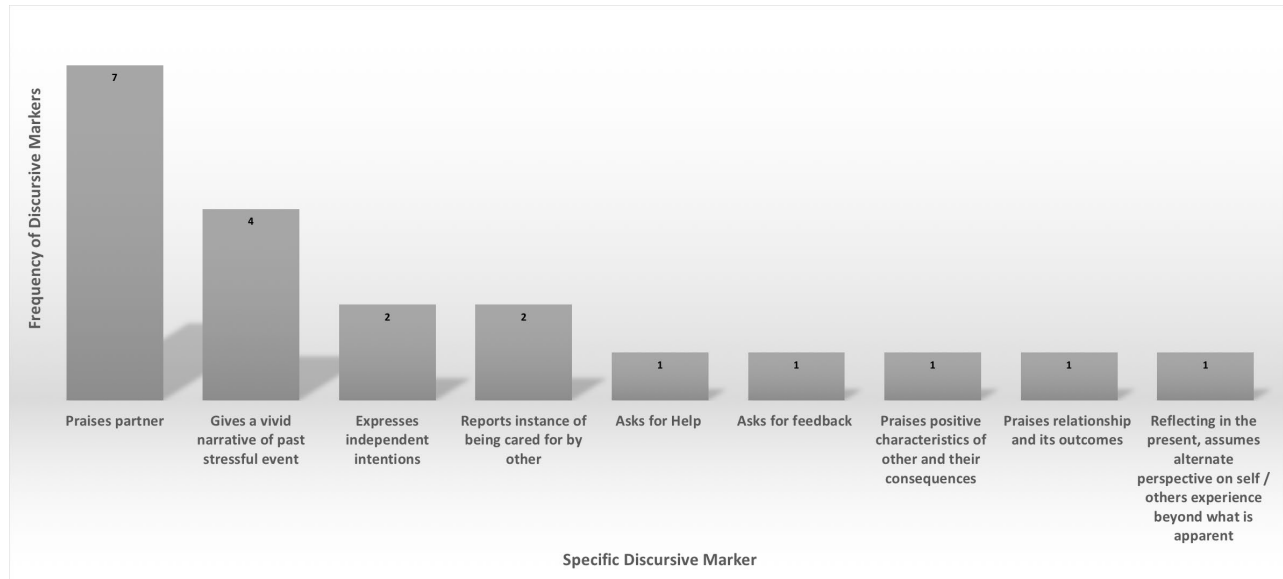

Frequency of Discursive Markers

Figure 10

Number of Occurrences of Specific Discursive Markers in Black Gratitude Dialogue
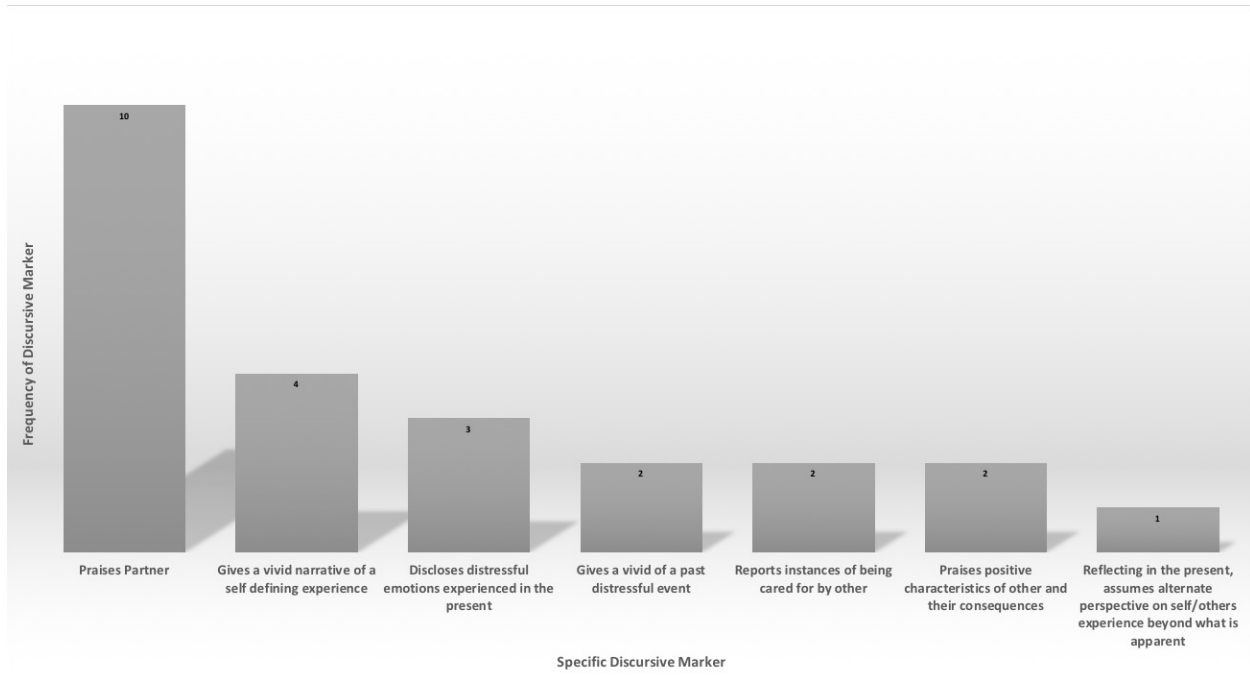
Figure 11

Number of Occurrences of Specific Discursive Markers in Appreciation Dialogue

Figure 12

Number of Occurrences of Specific Discursive Markers in Soft Topics Dialogue

Figure 13

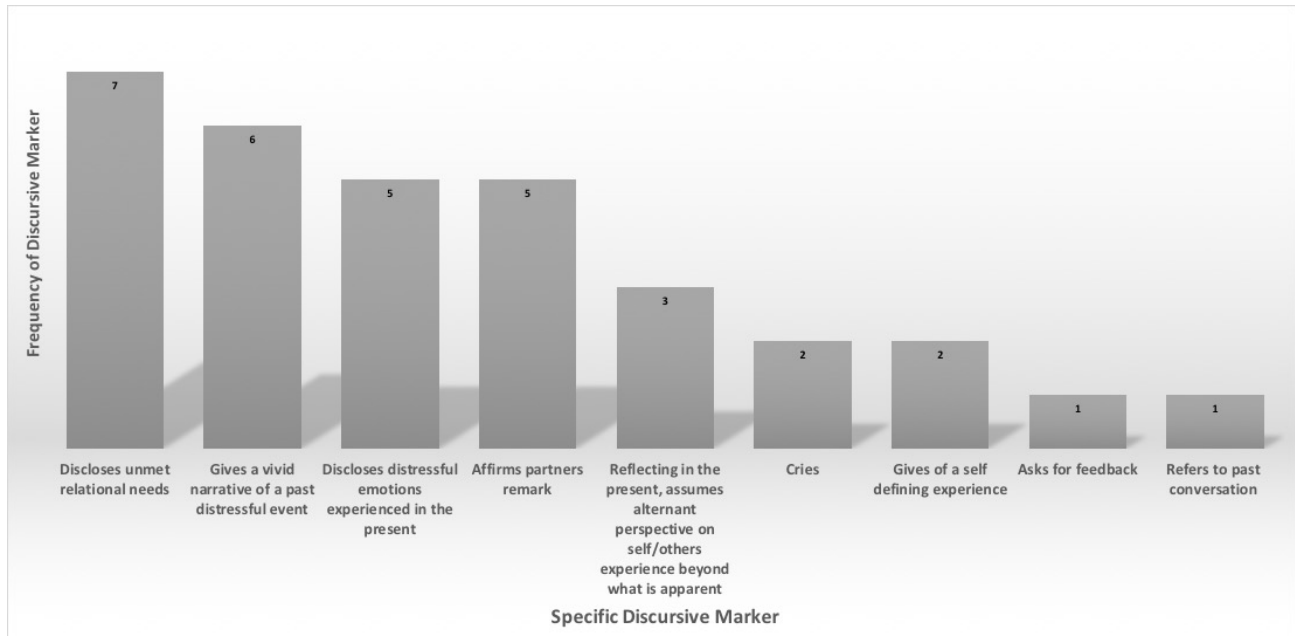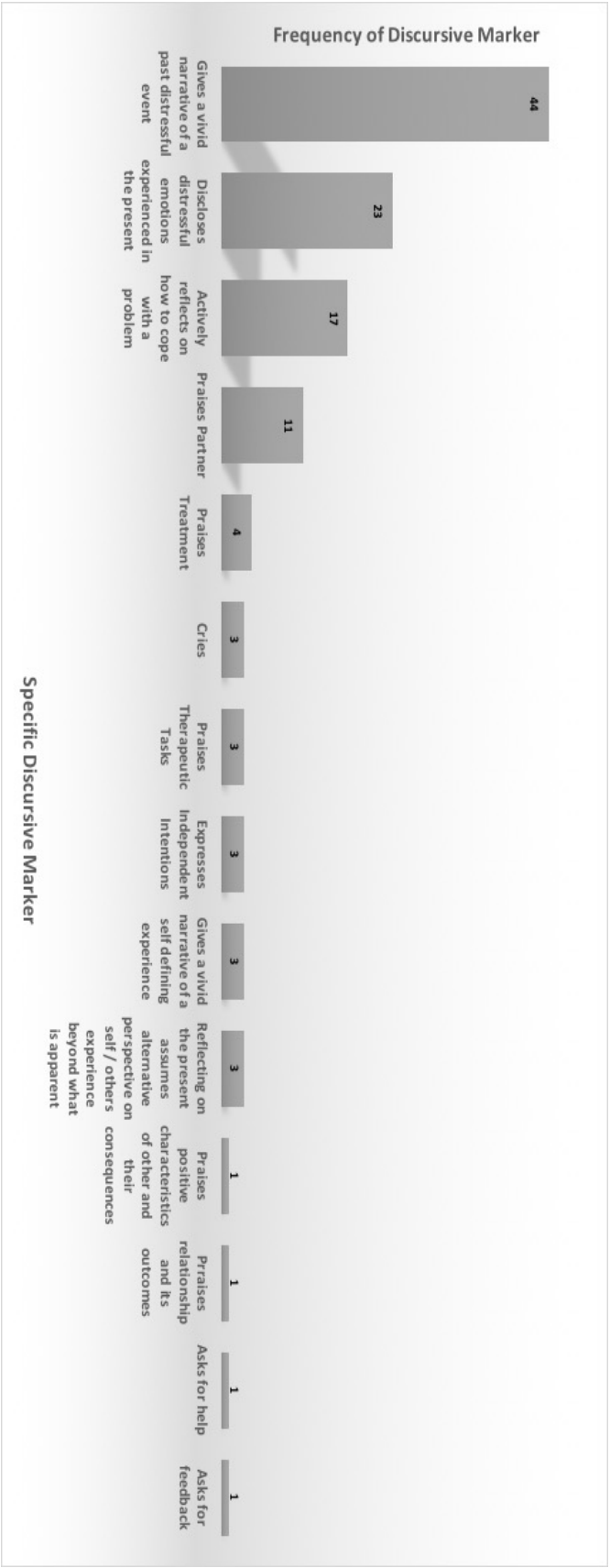*Number of Occurrences of Specific Discursive Markers in Parent-Child Dialogue*

Figure 14

Number of Occurrences of Specific Discursive Markers in Racial Distress Dialogue

Appendices

Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

TITLE OF STUDY
What is the Effect of Imago's Getting the Love You Want Workshop on Black/African American Couples?

INVESTIGATOR (S)
Paula M. Smith, PhD Student – Primary Investigator

PURPOSE
The purpose of this pilot study is to examine the effect of the Getting the Love You Want workshop on Black/African American couples. We hope to advance our knowledge of how Imago Relationship Therapy (IRT) affects Black/African American couples' communication, vulnerability, empathy, race/racial distress, and communication about racial issues to determine cultural relevance and spell out clinical implications of these findings.

PROCEDURES
Couples desiring to participate in the study will complete an online screening form and send it via email to researcher. If couples meet all study criteria, they will receive a call from the researcher to participate in a screening/intake interview. Agreeing to be part of this study means participating in a Getting the Love You Want weekend workshop. Couples will be given pre and post treatment questionnaires and attend both days (Saturday and Sunday from 9 am-6 pm) of the Getting the Love You Want weekend course. The researcher will present the Getting the Love You Want educational lectures. After each educational lecture, couples will be instructed to practice the specific experiential process (each process coincides with lecture material) in their couple dyads. Couples will be provided manuals that outline the scripts they will follow in their dyadic exercises. Following each dyadic exercise, couples will then process their dyadic experiences with another couple. Couples will also be provided with journals to document their experiences. Couples will attend the workshop at no cost.

RISKS/DISCOMFORTS
The risk for those participating in this study is minimal. This study is designed to minimize potential risk to participants. It is not our intention to elicit distressful responses; however, self-reflection regarding some of the topics about identity and relationship may cause emotional discomfort. If, at any time, participants have any concerns, questions, or upsets, the researcher will be available to discuss them with you at XXXXX if participants need further assistance, the researcher will provide you with a list of Certified Imago Therapists to discuss any distress related to the interview. Participation is entirely voluntary. The participant is defined as the couple, which means that both partners must agree to participate in this study. Participants have the right to refuse to answer any questions or to discontinue their involvement in this study (including the weekend course) at any time, for any or no reason, without being subjected to any judgment on the part of the investigator. If one partner decides to drop out, this disqualifies the couple (both partners) from the study. If participants choose to withdraw

from the study, they will also be withdrawing from the weekend course. These couples will be provided with a list of therapists in the area if they need continuing support.

BENEFITS

For Couples:

- Increase awareness in several areas of relational functioning for Black/African American couples; Reduce racial distress in couple relationship;
- Foster a better understanding of how couples change outside of the treatment office when engaged in couple therapy;
- Gain insight into how they transform marital satisfaction, thus enhancing their ability to sustain marital adjustment.

For Others:

- Assist clinicians in understanding how to use IRT with Black/African couples;
- Provide research toward understanding of the cultural relevance of IRT;
- The public health benefits of investing in Black couples will be far-reaching, improving the economic, mental and physical health and relational and educational success of the couple, their children, and the community as a whole.
- This study is an important step in understanding the impact of IRT on Black/African American couples.

Indirect benefits may include informing clinical practice that will improve treatment outcomes for Black/African American couples.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The following procedures will be followed in an effort to keep participants personal information confidential. All transcripts will be coded with false names for all the participants. The only people who will be able to identify you are the research investigators. False names will be used in all publications and/or presentations. All transcripts will be secured in a private location. All videotapes/audiotapes will be kept in a locked cabinet. After work with the data is done, videotapes/audiotapes will be destroyed.

It should be noted that participants in the weekend workshop will know each other's names and identities. As a requirement of participation in the Getting the Love You Want weekend course, participants must sign a confidentiality agreement noting that each participant will respect the confidentiality of every other participant. Information and personal experiences that occur in the workshop will be held in strictest confidence. To be included in the workshop and research study, each participant must agree to honor fellow participants' information and experience and may not discuss this experience either among other participants or with people who did not participate in the workshop.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

For further information about the study contact primary researcher: Paula Smith, PhD student at XXXX

If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact Dr. Kevin Lyness, PhD Program Director at Antioch University New England at XXXX or Dr. Shawn Fitzgerald, Provost at Antioch University New England at XXXX

SIGNATURES

I have explained the above components and conditions of this study. I have also provided an opportunity for research participants to ask questions and have attempted to provide satisfactory answers to any questions that have been asked in the course of these explanation.

PRIMARY INVESTIGATOR   DATE
_____   _____

I have read the above information and have had the opportunity to ask questions about this information and hereby acknowledge my participation in this study.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT   DATE
_____   _____

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT   DATE
_____   _____

Appendix B

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval

Dear Paula Smith,

As Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for 'Antioch University , I am letting you know that the committee has reviewed your Ethics Application. Based on the information presented in your Ethics Application, your study has been approved.

Renewal is not required, however, any changes in the protocol(s) for this study must be formally requested by submitting a request for amendment from the IRB committee. Any adverse event, should one occur during this study, must be reported immediately to the IRB committee. Please review the IRB forms available for these exceptional circumstances.

Sincerely,
Kevin Lyness, Chair AUNE IRB

Appendix C

Online Survey Questionnaire

*1. Please provide your full legal name

* 2. Please provide your partner's full legal name.

* 3. Please provide your best email address.

* 4. Please provide your partner's best email address.

* 5. Please provide your or your partner's best phone number.

* 6. Do you identify as Black/African-American?

* 7. Does your partner identify as Black/African-American?

 Yes No

* 8. Describe your relationship status.

 Married

 Living together

 Common law married None of the above

* 9. What is the length of your relationship?

*10. Do you and your partner identify as heterosexual (that is, are you in an opposite-sex relationship)?

* 11. What is your age?

* 12. What is your partner's age?

* 13. What is your occupation?

* 14. What is your partner's occupation?

*15. What is your current combined income?

 <15,000

 15,000-29,000

 30,000-59,000

 60,000-100,000

 >100,000

* 16. Highest level of education?

 Highschool diploma/GED Associate's Degree,

 Bachelor's Degree

 Master's Degree Ph.D.

 Post-Doc

* 17. Partner's Highest Level of Education?

 Highschool diploma/GED Associate's Degree

 Bachelor's Degree Master's Degree Ph.D.

* 18. What are your reasons for participating in the Getting the Love You Want Pilot Study?

* 19. What are your most significant concerns about your relationship?

* 20. What problems present themselves the most often in your relationship?

* 21. What are you hoping to get out of the Getting the Love You Want Workshop?

* 22. Are either you or your partner currently experiencing domestic violence in your relationship?

* 23. Have you or your partner experienced domestic violence in the past 18 months?

* 24. Is either of you currently abusing substances (alcohol, cannabis or other drugs, legal or illegal)?

* 25. Has either of you abused substances in the past 18 months?

* 26. How did you learn about this study?

27. Is there anything else you think is important for the researcher to know?

Appendix D

Recruitment Flyer

MARRIED OR IN A COMMITTED RELATIONSHIP?

If you identify as Black/African American and are currently in an intimate relationship, married, in a common law marriage, or living together for at least six months with a partner who also identifies as Black/African American and you are both between the ages of 35-65, you are invited to participate in a complimentary 2-day couples workshop (normal cost of $800) as part of an Antioch University New England Pilot Study conducted by Paula M. Smith, PhD student.

The purpose of this study is to explore the effects of the "Getting the Love You Want" 2-day workshop on Black/African American Couples.

The weekend workshop will be conducted by the researcher at her office located at XXXX. Interviews and questionnaires will be conducted pre and post workshop. Material gathered will be used in the pilot study. Your names and identifying information will remain confidential. Participation is voluntary. If you would like more information about participating in the study please contact:

Paula Smith

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact Kevin Lyness, Ph.D. (Research Advisor) XXXX

Appendix E

Recruitment Letter to Professionals

Greetings! My name is Paula Smith, Certified Imago Therapist & Imago Certified Workshop Presenter. I am also a PhD student in the Applied Psychology Department Marriage and Family Therapy program at Antioch University New England. I am conducting pilot research on the effectiveness of Imago on Black/African American couples via the Getting the Love You Want couples weekend workshop with a distinct focus on:

- What is the impact of GTLYW on the quality of Black/African American couples' communication?
- Does the GTLYW workshop increase relationship satisfaction for Black/African American couples?
- Does the GTLYW workshop increase Black/African American couples' ability to be vulnerable with each other; does GTLYW workshop increase Black/African American couples' empathy toward each other?

- What are the constructs/mechanisms of the GTLYW workshop that make it safe for Black/African American couples to explore issues of race, racial identity and racism?

I would be grateful if you would be agreeable to distributing my flyer, which is attached. The flyer also includes the link to the survey if you wish to preview it before distribution.

Should couples opt to participate in my pilot research, they will be asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire, pre-workshop questionnaire, a 2-day <u>Getting the Love You Want weekend</u> workshop and a post-workshop survey.

If you have any questions, I may be reached at XXXX My research advisor, Dr. Kevin Lyness, may be reached at XXXX

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you,
Paula M. Smith
PhD Student Department of Applied Psychology
Couple and Family Therapy Program
Antioch University New England
40 Avon St.
Keene New Hampshire 03431

Appendix F

The Effectiveness of GTLYW on Black/African American Couples

Code Name_____

Participant Information Questionnaire

Demographic info

1. Do you identify as Black or African American?

2. Married (   ) Co-habiting (   ) Common Law Marriage (   ) Living together (   )

3. Length of relationship?

4. Do you and your partner both identify as heterosexual? (That is are you in an opposite-sex relationship?

5. Your sex (   ) Male (   ) Female

6. Age (   )

7. Occupation _____

8. Your income level now? Circle one (<15, 000), (15,000 – 29,000), (30, 000 – 59, 000), (60, 000 – 100,000) (>100,000)

9. Yes of Education _____?   Highest Degree_____?

Appendix G

Pre-Workshop Questionnaire

Communication

1. How well do you feel your partner hears you during difficult conversations?
2. Is there something you or your partner could do that would make communication more effective?
3. How do you react when you and your partner disagree on something and/or have conflict?
4. What kind of communication problems do you and your partner have?
5. What does conflict mean in your relationship?
6. How do you handle frustration in your relationship?

Racial Distress, Racism

1. How does racism affect your relationship?
2. How often do you talk with your partner about race?
3. What typically happens when you bring up issues related to race/racism with your partner, i.e., microaggressions, negative messages (spoken and unspoken), discrimination etc.?
4. What messages did you receive in your family of origin around race and racism? What is the impact of these messages on your current relationship?
5. How does racism affect your ability to be vulnerable with your partner?

Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire -Revised (MSQ-R) - Included

Appendix H

Post Workshop Questionnaire

Communication

1. Since participating in the workshop, have there been any changes in how well your partner hears you? If, so what has changed?

2. Before the workshop you stated that _____ would make your communication more effective. Has that happened? If so, how has that affected your feelings about your partner?

3. Since parting in the workshop has there been any changes in how you and your partner deal with conflict? If so, please describe.

4. As a result of your participation in the workshop, what if any changes have you and your partner experienced in the way you communicate with each other?

5. After the workshop, have your understanding of conflict changed? If so, in what ways. How has this impacted the quality of your communication?

6. Has the workshop changed how you address frustrations in the relationship?

Racial Distress, Racism

1. Did any of the experiential processes (Parent child dialogue, Racial distress dialogue, Frustration, Caring behavior, etc.) help you understand the impact of racism on your relationship? Is so, how?

2. As the result of the workshop has your experience of talking about racial issues changed? If so, how. Be specific.

3. Has your understanding of the family of origin messages around racism and its impact changed as the result of participating in the workshop? If so, how. Be specific.

4. Has your perspective on racism and vulnerability changed as the result of participating in the workshop? If so, how do you think these changes might impact your relationship?

5. Has there been an overall decrease in your experience of racial distress as a result of participating in the workshop? If so, in what ways?

Appendix I

Racial Distress Dialogue

I'd like to have a dialogue about my experience of racism/racial distress. Is this a good time?

One of the ways I experience racism/racial distress is...

The bodily sensations that I'm experiencing as I say this are... *(What's happening in your body right now?)*

The feelings connected to these bodily sensations are ...*(E.g., I feel sad, relieved, angry)*

When I feel this way, I react by...*(E.g., sulking, lashing out, leaving)*

What I'm afraid of is...

How I imagine all of this might impact you is...

How I imagine all of this might impact our relationship is...

A new way I could show up/behave when I experience racism/racial distress or discomfort is...

What I appreciate about having this dialogue with you is...

Appendix J

Black Gratitude Dialogue

When we are upset in our relationships, it is easy to forget all the things we are grateful for.

Our brains are wired to pay attention to what threatens our safety and survival.

Generally, these things are negative and don't feel good. To counteract this negativity, marital researchers tell us we need to bring to mind five positive things for every negative.

Being able to share what you are grateful for in the relationship and in your life with each other is one of the ways you can put a spot light on what is working. In addition, there is lots of evidence that being grateful is good for your physical health as well as your emotional and spiritual health.

SENDER	RECEIVER
I'd like to express some gratitude to you. Are you available?	I'm available.
I'm grateful for being Black/ African American because …	What I heard you say is… Did I get you?
I'm grateful for being Black/ African American because …	What I heard you say is… Did I get you?
I'm grateful for being Black/ African American because …	What I heard you say is… Did I get you?
I'm grateful for being Black/ African American because …	What I heard you say is… Did I get you?
I'm grateful for being Black/ African American because …	What I heard you say is… Did I get you?

Switch roles and repeat

Appendix K

Synopsis of the "Getting the Love You Want" Workshop

I. Discussion of Stages in a Conscious Love Relationship

A. Romantic Love
B. Power Struggle
C. Commitment Knowledge
D. Transformation
E. Awakening
F. Real Love

The unconscious relationship is defined as reactive and the intentional relationship leads to revisioning one's partner as wounded from childhood. The goal is to learn skills that help develop empathy, re-romanticize the relationship, communicate more effectively and lead to non-defensive relating and "real love".

II. Romantic Love

A. Identifying parental characteristics
B. Identify Childhood Wounds and Character Adaptations
C. Learning the Couples Dialogue
D. Parent-Child Dialogue Exercise

During this phase of the workshop participants complete exercises which help them understand their childhood wounds (attachment concerns) and how they adapted. During the "Romantic Love" stage of the couple's relationship, individuals believe they have found someone who makes them feel whole and helps to heal those wounds. The Couples Dialogue is taught to participants as a way to share those childhood wounds using techniques such as mirroring, and using empathy, and validation. This type of communication is described as the key to healing one's partner and oneself.

III. The Power Struggle

A. Understanding Partner's Profile
B. Identifying Frustrations with Current Partner
C. Identifying Feelings and Fears
D. Sources of the Power Struggle
E. Complimentary Defenses

Couples identify the positive and negative traits of their partners. They are asked

to make a list of current frustrations and identify their feelings, reactive behaviors, and hidden fears. Sources of the power struggle in the relationship are identified based on the coping mechanisms that are acquired during the developmental stages (such as Avoider or Clinger). Couples are taught how their defense mechanisms are complimentary, such as a Loner and a Caretaker, causing them to be drawn together.

IV. The Conscious Marriage
A. The Transformation Process
B. the Concept of Intentionality
C. The Invisible Divorce
D. the No-Exit Decision
E. Restructuring Frustrations
F. Behavior Change Request Dialogue
G. Resolving Negative Emotions
H. Re-romanticizing the Relationship

Couples are encouraged to be more "intentional" or consciously aware of their thoughts and behaviors in the relationship. They are directed to identify feelings and behaviors that diminish intimacy and these are defined as "exits" (such as too time spent watching television, working, and the use of alcohol or drugs). They are asked to discuss frustrations with their partner in a structured way that promotes understanding and emotional safety. To resolve strong negative emotions the "container" exercise is used to safely express resentment and rage. This is a 1-3 minute transaction in which the frustrated partner is encouraged to discharge negative emotions before they build up. The receiving partner mirrors, validates, and empathizes but does not respond with their own experience. The re-romanticizing segment of the workshop teaches participants "positive flooding" (a technique which involves sharing all the positive characteristics of your partner), directs couples to identify and share behaviors that make one another feel loved and cared for, and encourages couples to make a list of a list of desired caring behaviors.

This workshop synopsis was derived from the *Getting the Love You Want: Couples Manual* (Hendrix, 1999)