

Utah State University

DigitalCommons@USU

All Graduate Theses and Dissertations

Graduate Studies

5-2007

An Exploratory Qualitative Study of Dual-Earner Couples in Great Marriages: The View from the Empty Nest

Reva C. Rosenband
Utah State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/etd>



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rosenband, Reva C., "An Exploratory Qualitative Study of Dual-Earner Couples in Great Marriages: The View from the Empty Nest" (2007). *All Graduate Theses and Dissertations*. 2582.

<https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/etd/2582>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usu.edu.



AN EXPLORATORY QUALITATIVE STUDY OF DUAL-EARNER COUPLES IN
GREAT MARRIAGES: THE VIEW FROM THE EMPTY NEST

by

Reva C. Rosenband

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Family, Consumer, and Human Development
Marriage and Family Therapy

Copyright © Reva C. Rosenband 2007

All Rights Reserved

ABSTRACT

An Exploratory Qualitative Study of Dual-Earner Couples in
Great Marriages: The View from the Empty Nest

by

Reva C. Rosenband, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2007

Major Professor: Dr. Linda Skogrand

Department: Family, Consumer, and Human Development

Dual-earner couples raising children face stress that can interfere with marital happiness. Some of these couples seek help from marriage and family therapists, but many therapists claim they are not well trained in the issues facing these couples. In order to determine what might help therapists, researchers in the past have traveled two scholarly paths: (a) studying dual-income couples who still have children at home and are dealing with the stressors of this lifestyle with varying degrees of success, and (b) asking long-term, happily married couples what helped them stay together successfully. This study combined both approaches. Dual-earner couples whose children were grown and who identified themselves as having great marriages reflected on strategies that helped them develop and maintain successful and satisfying marriages. Implications for marital therapy are discussed.

(136 pages)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND DEDICATION

I gratefully thank my committee: Dr. Linda Skogrand for guiding me through the process and the data; Dr. Scot Allgood for his spot-on critical observations; and Dr. Thomas Lee for picking up the pieces. I especially thank Linda for her unflagging friendship and encouragement throughout my graduate school career and for allowing me to get in on the ground floor of this and other research projects. With unending good cheer, she also put up with my puzzling charts and presented me with much-needed deadlines. I am grateful, as well, to fellow graduate student Pamela Morrill for sharing her ideas and technical expertise.

For his newfound support for my late-found journey (and also for giving me deadlines), I sincerely thank my husband, Leonard Rosenband, with whom I have shared over 32 dual-earning years. Finally, I dedicate this work to our daughter Amy, who often wonders just how she will navigate the seas of the likely dual-earner relationship she will someday come to enjoy.

Reva C. Rosenband

CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND DEDICATION	iv
LIST OF TABLES	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
Theoretical Frameworks	3
Purpose of the Study	6
LITERATURE REVIEW	8
The Current State of Marriage and Family Therapy for Dual-Earner Couples	8
The Relationship between Work/Family Stress and Marital Satisfaction	10
Sources of and Strategies for Maintaining Marital Satisfaction Among Dual-Earner Couples	12
Long-Term Satisfactory and Happy Marriages	20
Conflict Resolution Skills of Happily Married Couples	23
Summary and Purpose of the Study	25
Research Questions	26
METHOD	28
Procedure	28
Sample	29
Instrument	31
Analysis	33
RESULTS	35
Research Question One	35
Research Question Two	40
Research Question Three	45
Research Question Four	53
Research Question Five	64
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS	70
Major Findings	71

	vi
Therapeutic Implications	73
Limitations and Strengths of Study.....	79
REFERENCES	82
APPENDICES	88
Appendix A: Letter to Newspapers.....	89
Appendix B: Press Release	91
Appendix C: Consent Letter	93
Appendix D: Questionnaire	96
Appendix E: IRB Approval	128

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1 Age Range, Education Level, and Employment Status of Respondents	30

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Dual-earner couples raising children, estimated to be 61.3% of all two-parent households in the United States in 2005 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006), face a myriad of problems and often employ a variety of solutions when trying to balance, manage, navigate, or blend work and family pressures (Fraenkel, 2003). Many of these pressures affect a couple's marital satisfaction, and, thus, propel some couples to seek marital therapy (Fraenkel). Research on the marital relationships of dual-earner couples with children has focused primarily on problems such as role strain, perceptions of an equitable division of labor for household and childcare tasks, gendered attitudes about work in and out of the home, or on the use of conflict resolution skills for these marriages (Amarapurkar & Danes, 2005; Ehrenberg, Gearing-Small, Hunter, & Small, 2001; Fraenkel; Frisco & Williams, 2003; Haddock & Rattenborg, 2003; Marshall & Barnett, 1993; Stevens, Kiger, & Riley, 2001; Tsang, Harvey, Duncan, & Sommer, 2003; Yogev, 1986). These quantitative and qualitative studies have been largely cross-sectional and captured couples as they were facing their concerns and marital issues with minor children still at home (Ehrenberg et al.; Haddock & Rattenborg; Marshall & Barnett; Yogev).

Studies also surveyed dual-earner couples to determine strengths and successful strategies as partners were living and using them (Haddock & Rattenborg, 2003; Haddock, Zimmerman, Ziembra, & Current, 2001; Marshall & Barnett, 1993; Zimmerman, Haddock, Current, & Ziembra, 2003). Attempting to guide marriage and family therapists (MFTs) help some dual-earner couples cope and have more satisfying

marital relationships, these latter studies mirrored a history of research into happy marriages in general, research that had usually tapped couples of long standing, married two decades or more (Bachand & Caron, 2001; Kaslow & Hammerschmidt, 1992; Kaslow & Robison, 1996; Lauer & Lauer, 1986a, 1986b; Lauer, Lauer, & Kerr, 1990). Missing from the research on successful dual-earner couples with children, however, is any longitudinal data on how their difficulties, strengths, and strategies affected their marital relationships in the long run. In other words, how did they keep it together and keep togetherness (Perry-Jenkins & Turner, 2004)?

In the absence of longitudinal data, dual-earner couples of long standing whose children are grown can perhaps reflect back on what worked for them and what helped them the most. For a larger exploratory study, Professors Linda Skogrand and John DeFrain collected qualitative data from 65 couples who identified themselves as having, in essence, great marriages. These couples had responded to advertisements asking for volunteers who wanted to tell how they created strong, satisfying, happy, and high-quality relationships. Both partners had to agree that they had a great marriage. A subsample of 16 couples in or close to the empty nest stage of these great marriages also met the criterion of having been dual-earner pairs while raising their children. From the words and reflections of the individuals in these 16 great marriages, in which both husband and wife worked for pay, raised children to adulthood, and nurtured their marriages to the point of greatness, marriage and family therapists may be able to glean strategies for other dual-earner couples and for therapy. Long-lasting, dual-income couples who have happily and successfully faced and resolved work-family issues may

validate ongoing or typical MFT practices, as well as illuminate additional paths for therapeutic intervention, particularly if they had not always been so happy or satisfied.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study draws on the assumptions of two related theoretical frameworks: role theory and family systems theory. Role theory assumes that family members have expected roles to fulfill in order for the family to function in society (White & Klein, 2002). When a family member takes on additional roles without a clear idea about how the new role will fit or function, role strain may result (White & Klein). Role strain and the attendant stress may also be the result of individuals sensing they are unable to fulfill the expectations others hold for them and their roles (White & Klein). As a corollary, family systems theory presumes that a change in one part of the family system affects other parts of the family system (Becvar & Becvar, 2000). Adding children to the marital couple subsystem creates a new family system, with new roles, and spurs changes within the couple subsystem as well as changes for each individual within their job or career subsystem. For dual-earners, role strain increases as individuals add the role of parent to the role of spouse (or in the case of single parents add the role of spouse to their repertoire), all in addition to facing the ever-present routines and demands of paid work. Roles may change, yet again, when the youngest child leaves the family nest.

According to family systems theory, actions of the other human or institutional members of the family system may jar the homeostasis of the marital system in which role expectations have been set (Becvar & Becvar, 2000). For example, when a stay-at-home parent returns to the work force and stay-at-home children become school children,

both parents find themselves enmeshed in several new systems with more role expectations. Couple relationships may spiral down into chaos and conflict, signaling that change is needed and desired (Becvar & Becvar). Thus, the marital couple system experiences changes throughout the family lifecycle, adding, subtracting, multiplying, or dividing roles as it moves through time.

In recent years, the concept of a family lifecycle has also undergone much expansion as family forms have multiplied (McGoldrick & Carter, 2003). In the progression of just one form, the family lifecycle takes couples from the formation of their union through childrearing to the empty nest stage. Along the way, families encounter and adapt to stressors from within and outside of the family. For dual-earner couples, outside stressors may include inflexible workplaces and employers (Fraenkel, 2003). Inside the family itself, couples must deal with typical developmental tasks and transitions as children grow, parents age, and marriages evolve, all in the context of particular social, cultural, political, and economic environments (McGoldrick & Carter). McGoldrick and Carter summed up this perspective with the notion that the family is "a system moving through time" (p. 376).

Following systems theory down one possible road through the family lifecycle, the addition of children to a dual-earner marriage already dealing with two workplaces necessitates interactions with educational systems and childcare providers, to name just some of the many social systems in which the developing family may have a role. In terms of therapy, it is not that marital discord for dual-earners might be any more severe or frequent than for couples with a traditional family structure in which only one parent works. However, the multiple systems within which dual-earner couples must operate

during this lifecycle phase as they perform their multiple roles perhaps provide therapists with more levels to assess and places at which to intervene.

The family lifecycle perspective also presumes that there is a marital lifecycle (Wallerstein, 1994, 1996). Typically, couples' marital satisfaction is lowest during the child-rearing years and studies of dual-earner couples often concentrate on this period (McGoldrick & Carter, 2003; Perry-Jenkins & Turner, 2004). Researchers note that dual-earner couples with children bring these marital-dissatisfaction issues to therapy (Fraenkel, 2003). McGoldrick and Carter advised, however, that it may be difficult for such couples to have and maintain a long-term perspective in the midst of marital distress: "[Couples] tend to magnify the present moment . . . [and] lose the awareness that life means continual motion from the past and into the future, with a continual transformation of familial relationships. As the sense of motion becomes lost or distorted, therapy involves restoring a sense of life as process and movement from one state toward another" (p. 378). Therapists are not immune to these potential blind spots, as they may get caught up as well in the content of the dual-earners' distress, to the exclusion of process issues, such as how couples resolve conflicts in general.

An investigation into the long-term lifecycle processes of dual-earner couples may provide useful perspectives for therapists and their clients (Brown, Graves, & Williams, 1997; Perry-Jenkins, Repetti, & Crouter, 2000). Dahl and Boss (2005) support this view as well, cautioning that "our knowledge will be skewed" if data is limited to "special times of crisis or stress" (p. 67). Thus, reflections on and knowledge of what has helped successfully married dual-earner couples maintain equanimity throughout the

years of raising children and adolescents may help couples in distress find some grounding, comfort, and ways to cope.

Purpose of the Study

Couples who over time have dealt with family lifecycle challenges well or who have heeded the call for systemic change possibly started with, improved upon, or wound up with more satisfying marital relationships. As already noted, quantitative and qualitative studies of successful dual-earner families have often caught these families mid-stream with children still at home. Haddock and Rattenborg's (2003) sample, for instance, only included families with at least one child under age 12. To fully appreciate the overall range of marital relationship strategies for dual-earner couples, and perhaps to frame the bigger picture of how couples adapted to this lifestyle and how it played out for their marital relationships in the long run, this study focuses on couples in self-identified great marriages who have substantially launched their children and entered the empty nest stage of the family lifecycle. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study was twofold: first, to explore how long-married couples in self-identified great marriages reflected back on how they resolved (or kept from dissolving into) marital discord as they created and lived the lives of dual-earner families; and second, to infer from the experiences of these couples which MFT practices and prescriptions (perhaps unbeknownst to them) worked to foster marital satisfaction, and to discern other strategies or techniques that MFTs and family life educators may adopt and/or teach. This exploration may also add to the tradition of asking couples in happy and/or long-

term marriages for the secrets of their success, with an eye on the implications for MFT practice with couples in general and with dual-earners in particular.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the United States Department of Health and Human Services noted that satisfying and stable marriages yielded great benefits for women, men, children, and society at large (ACF, 2006). In an effort to stem or reduce the incidence of divorce and strengthen marriages overall, the ACF has promoted a healthy marriage initiative (ACF). Research into the characteristics and dynamics of successful and satisfying marriages are a part of the effort to fortify marital relationships.

Any of a multitude of problems, however, can affect the quality of a couple's marriage, and many dual-income couples with children often face difficulties when trying to balance the demands of family and work (Fraenkel, 2003; Perry-Jenkins & Turner, 2004). In over 15 million two-parent households in the United States, both marital partners are engaged in working for pay (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). An individual or couple attending to the needs of both work and family, including the marriage itself, may end up not satisfying any of them well or even adequately (Fraenkel).

The Current State of Marriage and Family Therapy for Dual-Earner Couples

Some couples who struggle to find the time to care adequately for each other, their children, extended families, jobs, and communities, nevertheless, on occasion find time for marital therapy in an effort to strengthen frayed marital relationships. Marriage

and family therapists (MFTs) estimated that the presenting problem in approximately 30% of their caseloads involved the stresses of dual-earner households (Haddock & Bowling, 2001). Yet, MFTs sometimes give short shrift to the specific problems of dual-earner households or neglect to focus on larger contextual circumstances (e.g., inflexible employers) and societal messages (e.g., mothers should stay home with children) influencing a couple's conflict or concern (Fraenkel, 2003; Haddock & Bowling; Tatman, Hovestadt, Yelsma, Fenell, & Canfield, 2006). Researchers who surveyed MFTs to determine typical approaches to the problems of dual-earner couples suggested that practitioners who perhaps focus solely on a more global strategy (bolstering a couple's communication skills, for example) are both misinformed about research on dual-earner couples with children and missing a valuable point of discussion (e.g., about outdated "values" or attitudes regarding gender roles or the effect of working mothers on their families; Haddock & Bowling). Almost half of these practitioners rated themselves as inadequately trained to deal with marital stress related to work-family conflict (Haddock & Bowling).

A related content analysis of family therapy journals over 20 years (1979-1999) could locate only nine applied articles on the stressors of dual-income couples (Haddock, 2002). With so little guidance, it is perhaps not surprising that MFTs may struggle with this issue as much as their clients do, and are as equally "challenged by the lag in social ideologies" (Haddock & Bowling, 2001, p. 117). Tatman et al. (2006) recommended additional training for MFTs who often overlook work-family conflict when helping clients resolve marital distress. What is the substance of this overlooked issue of the connection between work and family and marital problems (Tatman et al.)? Is this truly

where the focus of couple therapy needs to be for dual-earners facing these issues? How do successful dual-earner couples survive and thrive? The remainder of this literature review will address the first and third of these questions and will propose a study to tease out the answers to the second. After a brief discussion of the relationship between work/family stress and marital satisfaction, an in-depth look at how some couples have mastered the art of maintaining good dual-earner marriages with children will be presented. The literature review continues with a synopsis of research on the characteristics of happy marriages in general, including how happily married couples resolve conflict.

The Relationship Between Work/Family Stress and Marital Satisfaction

Fraenkel (2003) discussed stress over marriages and parenting as a normal family process for dual-earner couples with children. Some common couple problems related to dual-earner status as reflected in MFT journals included stress, guilt, dissatisfying divisions of labor, gender identity issues, role cycling or role overload, insufficient time as a couple, and a loss of closeness, intimacy and support as a couple (Brown et al., 1997; Haddock, 2002). Tatman et al. (2006) identified work overload, conflict at work, and job seeking while employed as significantly more stressful for those in their sample (85% of whom were married or partnered) who had children at home than for those who did not have children at home. In another sample of 47 married couples living with at least one child under age 12, dual-earners described three sources of stress: lack of workplace support for family pressures; guilt about not spending enough time with one's spouse or children; and sacrificing career, couple, or individual time in order to make room for the

others (Haddock & Rattenborg, 2002). Women in dual-earner relationships with children under 12 appeared particularly vulnerable to work-family pressures (Marshall & Barnett, 1993). In some cases, parents who felt particularly overworked or stressed by poor working conditions or who worked opposite shifts to cover childcare responsibilities reported more marital distress (Fraenkel).

In studies over the past 20 years, researchers have documented the negative relationship between role stress or overload and marital satisfaction or quality for dual-earner couples with children (Tsang et al., 2003; Yogeve, 1986). One survey of 136 dual-earner couples with children under 18 at home found that the stress of role overload at work and at home significantly correlated with lower marital satisfaction for men and women (Yogeve). Adding pre-school age children to a dual-earner marriage also appeared to have a negative effect on marital satisfaction, as did couples' dissatisfaction with household division of labor and lower levels of marital interaction (Tsang et al.).

Some researchers note, however, that direction of effects between work/family stress and marital quality might fluctuate back and forth (Fraenkel, 2003). For example, a strong marital relationship can relieve some of the stress of blending work with family responsibilities (Haddock, 2002; Marshall & Barnett, 1993). Thus, a couple's marital quality could mediate, moderate, or be an outcome of particular work-family discord (Amarapurkar & Danes, 2005; Fraenkel). In one longitudinal study, greater marital happiness lessened the likelihood of divorce among dual-earner couples in which the wife perceived that she bore an unfair share of household labor, a factor often related to marital unhappiness (Frisco & Williams, 2003).

Sources of and Strategies for Maintaining Marital

Satisfaction Among Dual-Earner Couples

Positive Correlates of Marital Satisfaction for Dual-Earner Couples in Quantitative Studies

Corollary to findings that document stressful marital relationships for dual-earner couples are the studies that show significant positive correlates of marital satisfaction for dual-earners. Overall, dual-earner status was associated with higher marital satisfaction through the indirect effect of having more family income (Tsang et al., 2003). In one study of dual-earners, both with and without children, both men and women reported that higher marital satisfaction went along with how satisfied they were with three aspects of their relationship: (a) the division of household labor (regardless of who did what); (b) how satisfied they were with the arrangement of emotion work in the marriage (attending to the emotional state of one's partner); and (c) whether they were satisfied with status enhancement activities (supporting each other in their vocations; Stevens et al., 2001). Investigating the effect of shared parenting in a sample of 58 dual-earner couples caring for at least one child under age 10, Ehrenberg and her colleagues (2001) found that general expressions of support for one's spouse, more than flexibility or specific praise for parenting efforts, was a significant predictor of marital satisfaction.

These quantitative studies can point marriage and family therapists in the direction of what helps dual-earner couples maintain equanimity, and some literature indicates that many dual-earner couples are happy and doing well (Ehrenberg et al., 2001; Fraenkel, 2003; Marshall & Barnett, 1993). The more open-ended qualitative inquiry, however, may help us understand how this occurs within these marriages, and thus

suggest implications for therapeutic interventions when the strains described above bring on stress and dissatisfaction.

Qualitative Explorations of High-Quality Dual-Earner Marriages

The Colorado study. Two Colorado State University researchers, Shelley Haddock and Toni Zimmerman, solicited volunteers for a study of families that were managing to balance work and family demands successfully. They attracted 47 dual-earner couples with children under age 12 at home who agreed to participate in extensive interviews about their lifestyle and attitudes. The findings have been summarized in five different articles that focused on what these two professors and their graduate student associates, collectively referred to below as the Colorado research team, found relevant and compelling (Haddock & Rattenborg, 2003; Haddock et al., 2001; Haddock, Zimmerman, Current, & Harvey, 2002; Zimmerman, Haddock, Ziemba, & Rust, 2001; Zimmerman et al., 2003). In these in-depth interviews, the 47 dual-earner couples revealed the strengths, benefits, parenting practices, adaptive strategies, and marital characteristics that helped them avoid, cope with, or resolve conflicts over the typical problems many dual-earner couples faced (Haddock & Rattenborg; Haddock et al., 2001; Haddock et al., 2002; Zimmerman et al., 2001; Zimmerman et al., 2003).

Haddock and her colleagues (2001, 2002), Haddock and Rattenborg (2003), and Zimmerman and her associates (2001, 2003) sought to discover not only what these couples did to be successful, but also what personal philosophies and attitudes guided them. Spurring this research effort was Haddock's (2002) and Haddock and Bowling's (2001) conclusion that therapists needed more empirical grounding to guide dual-earner

clients in distress. To qualify as participants in this study, both partners had to agree that they were skilled at managing their busy lives successfully despite some inevitable strains that they also identified (Haddock & Rattenborg, 2003). In addition, these married couples, working at least 35 hours per week each and having at least one child under age 12 at home full time, needed to agree that they had "quality and quantity time with each other and our children and are mostly satisfied with our performance at work and at home" (Haddock et al., 2001, p. 449). This last statement provides some indication that these couples were happily married even though they were not specifically asked to rate themselves on a quantitative scale. The couples subsequently provided information in the 90-minute conjoint interviews that appeared to support this assumption.

Couples in this Colorado study responded to open-ended questions about their lives and relationships (Haddock et al., 2001). Ten themes emerged from data about the strategies these couples used that allowed them to feel they had a satisfying and workable balance of work and family life: placing the highest value on family; striving for a marital partnership; having meaningful work; leaving work at work; focusing and producing while at work; giving priority to family fun; being proud of dual-earner status; simplifying their lifestyles; making conscious decisions; and maximizing their use of time (Haddock et al.). It was apparent from the couples' own words and the researchers' comments about them that several of these strategies addressed aspects and strengths of the marital relationship. Forty-five couples out of 47 talked about how they consciously desired and operationalized a marriage of equal partners, especially in regard to the division of labor surrounding housework and children, decision-making, and providing

interpersonal emotional support for each other (Haddock et al.). At least 45 couples as well prioritized their commitment to the family and marriage they created, and protected the time devoted to it (Haddock et al.). They described maintaining strict boundaries between their work and their families physically, temporally, and emotionally (Haddock et al.).

Using data from these same 47 interviews, but focusing more deeply on the details of how these couples designed, built, and maintained their intimate dual-earner partnerships, Zimmerman and her associates (2003) identified six themes. Partners shared housework, were both actively involved with their children's activities, made decisions jointly, and managed their money together, which included trusting each other with access to and use of the family funds. They also clearly valued each other's work and life goals, and participated equally in whatever emotion work kept the marriage vibrant. Couples jointly talked about how they continually negotiated, evaluated, renegotiated, and reevaluated who would do household and childcare tasks, covering for each other as situations dictated changes were needed (Zimmerman et al.). In terms of decision-making, husbands and wives reported that they each felt comfortable expressing their needs and each appeared to be open to compromising (Zimmerman et al.).

Compromise—and the high level of communication couples demonstrated in effecting compromise—stood out as well in how they helped each other manage parenting responsibilities (Haddock et al., 2002). Couples also described a high level of trust in each other in regard to their financial affairs, and, in ways that “communicate[d] caring and concern” (p. 117), these dual-earner couples supported each other's individual vocational and avocational pursuits (Zimmerman et al.). The nature of the marital

relationship, however, seemed most evident in Zimmerman and her colleagues' description of the emotion work these partners shared. In addition to the love and affection visible to the interviewers, couples conversed about their deep and enduring friendships, about the importance of spending time together, and about their mutual respect, selflessness, appreciation, and commitment.

As rich as these qualitative data were, however, the Colorado research team was disappointed that a more diverse sample did not respond to their wide-ranging appeals for participants (Haddock & Rattenborg, 2003; Haddock et al., 2001, 2002; Zimmerman et al., 2001, 2003). The 47 couples they attracted were very well educated, middle-class, and mostly white professionals laboring in very flexible and accommodating work environments and/or fortunate enough to be able to structure their own work lives. These investigators expressed hope that others would replicate the study with couples balancing family and work in more diverse socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic circumstances (Haddock et al., 2001). In addition, perhaps couples from older dual-earner cohorts could provide the often obstructed long-term view that couples (and therapists) may fail to see (McGoldrick & Carter, 2003).

The west coast researchers. Several other qualitative studies have provided clues for therapists and their clients about how dual-earner couples maintain high-quality relationships (Schwartz, 1994; Wallerstein, 1994, 1996; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995). Schwartz, based in Seattle, found many of the same marital relationship characteristics that emerged from the Colorado study, that is, equal influence over decision-making, equal use and control of money, equal weight given to partner's work, and near equal sharing of child care and household chores. Wallerstein, after researching divorce for

many years, conducted individual and joint interviews with couples in self-defined and self-identified "happy" marriages, primarily in northern California, to determine what contributed to their success.

In addition to detecting nine psychological tasks that all happy couples should master (several of which will be discussed below), Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1995) identified four types of good marriages: romantic, rescue, companionate, and traditional. In a companionate marriage, stereotypically male and female roles become interchangeable on an equal or near-equal basis (Wallerstein & Blakeslee). Seventy-six percent of the 50 couples in this qualitative, exploratory study reported themselves to be dual-earners, and many had created companionate marriages, at once the most common and "the most difficult to maintain" of the four types (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, p. 154). As one happily and companionately married male informant noted, marriage in the 1990's "... is marriage under pressure. Especially with children." (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, p. 163). Schwartz (1994) and Wallerstein and Blakeslee believed, as did Haddock and her associates (2001), that successful dual-earner companionate marriages were breaking new ground through entrenched societal ideologies about the superiority of the so-called traditional form of marriage in which one partner, usually the female, remained at home to care for hearth, home, kith, and kin, freeing the other partner to concentrate solely on breadwinning. Schwartz (2002) now considers the companionate marital form to be the norm.

Many dual-earner couples in Wallerstein and Blakeslee's (1995) study and all in Schwartz's (1994) sample formed companionate or peer marriages. Couples typically shared childcare and household responsibilities and considered each other to be equals in

their decision-making process (Schwartz; Wallerstein & Blakeslee). For the most part, neither partner's job was prioritized. Friendships and shared values and worldviews formed the foundation for these relationships and strong mutual respect and commitment to the relationship held it together through the years (Schwartz; Wallerstein & Blakeslee). Couples in both studies lauded the substantial rewards of the dual-earner lifestyle in which neither men nor women felt bound by stereotypical male and female roles and in which each felt they could pursue individual goals while also investing emotionally in and receiving the emotionally supportive investment of their spouse (Schwartz; Wallerstein & Blakeslee).

Maintaining the dual-earner lifestyle and facing its inevitable frustrations, however, appeared to require much thought, commitment, and flexibility (Schwartz, 1994; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995). Continual negotiation and compromise settled "very serious issues [that couples] traded back and forth" (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, p. 167). Schwartz noted among the couples in her sample a "commitment to reach a mutually agreeable arrangement in a reasonably civilized fashion" (p. 30). Respect and commitment appeared to trump conflict for couples who stayed together amicably.

Because of the many time-binds dual-earner parents face, however, keeping togetherness in their marital relationship was perhaps one of the most difficult chores for these couples to manage (Schwartz, 1994; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995). Togetherness was one hallmark of the deep friendship Schwartz described as characteristic in her sample, and it pervaded the nine psychological tasks of marriage that Wallerstein (1994, 1996) outlined for happy marriages in general. The tasks follow the developmental lifecycle of a marriage (see also McGoldrick & Carter, 2003). After separating from

one's family-of-origin (task 1), two individuals are expected to build togetherness while respecting and allowing for each other's autonomy (task 2). In the middle phases of the marriage, a couple may become parents yet have to protect their privacy (task 3), confront and tackle crises (task 4), create a safe space for conflict (task 5), fashion a felicitous sex life (task 6), share laughter, humor, and fun (task 7), and provide each other with nurturance, comfort, and encouragement (task 8). The ninth and truly final task, meant to help those couples facing old age together, requires each person to maintain a "double vision" of (a) their idealized early selves and romantic relationship in order to offset (b) the impact of real or potential infirmities. This last task appears reminiscent of McGoldrick and Carter's advice about the therapeutic helpfulness of reinforcing an awareness of time and the family lifecycle.

Happily married companionate couples acknowledged experiencing stress and occasional marital conflict engendered by the "difficult juggling act" that was their existence (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995, p. 163). While the tasks above may be relevant for all marriages regardless of structure, the fact that 76% of Wallerstein and Blakeslee's sample were dual earners with children seems to imply that the tasks identified from this data were very relevant for them. The discussions of companionate marriage and peer marriage particularly noted the potential loss or neglect of designated couple time, time sacrificed in favor of the demands of work and children, and the concurrent "emphasis on individual autonomy" (Schwartz, 1994; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, p. 167). A dual-earner marriage that can accomplish tasks 3 and 6, protecting couple time and sexual intimacy, and task 5, creating a safe space for conflict so that each

person feels equally comfortable expressing frustrations and needs, all with good humor (task 7), is a dual-earner marriage on its way to success (Wallerstein & Blakeslee).

Long-Term Satisfactory and Happy Marriages

The qualitative studies discussed above about successful and happy dual-earner marriages mirror and follow the tradition of other studies of couples in long-term satisfactory relationships, studies that aimed to guide marital therapists helping couples in distress. When investigating factors that contributed to long-term marital satisfaction, researchers studied marriages of various lengths. Lauer and Lauer's (1986a, 1986b) sample of 351 couples had to be wed a minimum of 15 years. The couples in two studies, Kaslow and Hammerschmidt (1992, $N = 20$) and Kaslow and Robison (1996, $N = 57$), were united in marriage from 25 to 46 years. Bachand and Caron (2001) set a 35-year minimum length of marriage for the 15 couples they interviewed, and the 100 couples in the Lauer et al. (1990) sample had to have passed their 45th anniversary. These researchers all gathered their purposeful samples through networking, just as Wallerstein (1994, 1996) and Schwartz (1994) did, and employed several different methods to determine if couples were happy. Bachand and Caron only interviewed couples who subjectively evaluated themselves as happy; the rest used quantitative scales such as the Dyadic Adjustment Scale to determine which portion of their samples qualified as satisfied or happy (Kaslow & Hammerschmidt; Kaslow & Robison; Lauer & Lauer; Lauer et al.). The percentage of satisfied couples in these long-term marriages ranged from 51% of the couples who participated in one study, for example, up to 91% of the

couples sampled in the remainder of the studies (Bachand & Caron; Kaslow & Hammerschmidt; Kaslow & Robison; Lauer & Lauer; Lauer et al.).

Only one study addressed whether happy couples had always been that way (Lauer & Lauer, 1986b). The researchers asked all 351 couples to graph their marital happiness over time. The median length of marriage in this study was 25.5 years and 300 of the couples said they had a happy marriage. In their book, Lauer and Lauer reproduced some of the graphs, which showed dips and upswings in marital happiness throughout the years. These researchers noted that while some individuals drew graphs that indicated a steady or increasing sense of happiness, "the great majority [of the graphs] portrayed variations in [couples'] satisfaction over time" (Lauer & Lauer, p. 165). Thus, findings were mixed as couples described how they dealt with intermittent conflict and stress throughout their marriages. Lauer and Lauer concluded that happy marriages most likely also experienced difficult times that sometimes lasted for years.

Four of the studies of long-term marriages employed at least partially qualitative methods, such as interviews or open-ended response questionnaires, to determine what factors contributed to marital happiness and satisfaction (Bachand & Caron, 2001; Kaslow & Hammerschmidt, 1992; Lauer & Lauer, 1986a, 1986b; Lauer et al., 1990). The fifth study, Kaslow and Robison (1996), used checklists and questionnaires with pivotal and significant items derived from Kaslow and Hammerschmidt's earlier qualitative pilot study of what factors contributed to long-term marital satisfaction. For example, in the later study (Kaslow & Robison), married partners could check off which of 44 motivations for staying married most applied to them. Partners were asked to choose their top 3 reasons, but many chose 10 or more (Kaslow & Robison). This study

also included questionnaires with checklists regarding couples' problem-solving strategies, communication styles, and elements of marital satisfaction that the couples already enjoyed as well as those that they would like to have (Kaslow and Robison).

Regardless of the sample size, length of marriage, and research methodology, the results of these studies were remarkably similar. Abiding friendship between husband and wife appeared on every list of themes that the researchers compiled from the four qualitative samples (Bachand & Caron, 2001; Kaslow & Hammerschmidt, 1992; Lauer & Lauer, 1986; Lauer et al., 1990). Rather than list friendship on their questionnaire as an essential quality for marital satisfaction, Kaslow and Robison (1996) gave their participants a inventory that included some of the many elements of friendship such as mutual trust, respect, support, closeness, comfort, shared interests, doing interesting things together, and so forth, all of which the participants identified as significant to their marital relationships. Lifetime, or at least long-term, commitment to the partner and/or to the institution of marriage was prominent in the responses in all five studies, and love for the partner appeared on three lists (Bachand & Caron; Kaslow & Hammerschmidt; Kaslow & Robison). Other common findings in all five studies included sharing similar backgrounds, having similar values, enjoying fun and laughing together, having good communication and problem-solving abilities, admiring the spouse as being a good person, and giving and receiving support to each other, especially in relation to outside interests that presumably might include a job or career (Bachand & Caron; Kaslow & Hammerschmidt; Kalsow and Robison; Lauer & Lauer; Lauer et al.). Thus, whether happily married for 15 years or 45, the couples appeared to be "involved in an intimate relationship with someone they liked and enjoyed being with" (Lauer et al., p. 193).

Happily married couples valued each other as well as the fun they had together, and stayed together "because they wanted to be with each other, and not for the sake of the children" (Kaslow & Hammerschmidt). They were also highly sensitive to each other's needs (Kaslow & Hammerschmidt).

Conflict Resolution Skills of Happily Married Couples

Neither the successful dual-earner couples nor the couples in long-term satisfactory relationships were immune to dissatisfactions and conflicts. Yet, they appeared to approach these issues with the attitude that resolving conflict is both doable and desirable (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995), and they appeared to have developed the skills necessary to resolve conflict. The 47 couples in the Colorado sample talked about their high level of communication despite the time constraints on their lives (Zimmerman et al., 2003). These couples reported "a commitment to working through their relationship challenges" and a desire to negotiate and compromise as they engaged equally in proactive decision-making (Zimmerman et al., p. 118). In parenting and other aspects of their lives, couples worked as a team providing support for each other as needed (Haddock et al., 2002). Individuals in successful dual-earner relationships felt comfortable and not threatened when expressing their needs as well (Haddock et al.; Schwartz, 1994).

Several other qualitative studies described how satisfied couples took a problem-solving approach to disagreements, appearing to vilify the problem rather than each other (Lauer & Lauer, 1986a, 1986b; Kaslow & Hammerschmidt, 1992). "Good problem-solving and coping skills" were the top "essential ingredients" to an enduring good

marriage identified in one group of couples (Kaslow & Hammerschmidt, p. 35). When asked to provide "words of wisdom" to help others craft satisfying relationships, these same couples named "give and take, compromises, . . . [and] good communication" above trust, respect, love, and so forth (Kaslow & Hammerschmidt, p. 32). Following up on this theme, Kaslow and Robison (1996) administered a problem-solving questionnaire to 29 fully satisfied couples, 15 mid-range satisfied couples, and 13 dissatisfied couples. The satisfied couples indicated that they remained cooperative, calm, supportive, and flexible, and appeared to drop the conflict into a manageable space that they created for it and over which the couple could talk (Kaslow & Robison). Mid-range and dissatisfied pairs, on the other hand, approached arguments with more rigid and controlling attitudes and self-isolating behaviors and coping strategies (Kaslow & Robison).

So, how do happily married, stable couples argue, fight, or resolve conflict? Gottman (1993, 1999) has described three conflict resolution styles that happy couples use to their advantage and also seem to contribute to stable marriages. Validators usually discussed issues calmly; conflict avoiders accepted many differences as unimportant; and volatiles were highly emotional but tempered their anger with humor, sometimes in the midst of a disagreement and other times by drawing on an emotional bank account of previously deposited positive interactions (Gottman). Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1995) described one such happily married, volatile pair from their sample illustrating how a good marriage should provide a safe place for conflict, the eighth developmental task two individuals must accomplish to have a good marriage. Descriptions of interactions from other happily married dual earner pairs, however, seemed to follow the validator pattern in that they engaged in calm discussions and negotiations with empathy and respect for

each other's feelings (Schwartz, 1994; Wallerstein & Blakeslee; Zimmerman et al., 2003). Lauer and Lauer (1986b) endorsed the concept of "good fighting," where partners reach win-win through the use of clear, unceasing, considerate, and non-hurtful communication (pp. 113-135). Couples also engage in good fighting with good humor and enough flexibility to propose and accept compromise (Lauer & Lauer).

Gottman (1999) also distinguished between perpetual problems and solvable problems for happily married couples. Perpetual problems appeared to constitute issues of quirky character traits; the solvable problems fell within the realm of issues many dual-earner couples faced and often solved well, particularly regarding who did what when (Gottman; Haddock et al., 2001; Stevens et al., 2001; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995; Zimmerman et al., 2003). The skills, attitudes, and qualities that satisfied partners displayed in all studies of happy marriages cited thus far, whether dual-earners or not, most often resembled those of validating couples handling solvable problems: couples were "good friends . . . [who] tend to emphasize 'we,' . . . [have] a strong sense of mutual respect . . . [and] are very skilled at compromise" (Driver, Tabares, Shapiro, Nahm, & Gottman, 2003).

Summary and Purpose of the Study

Dual-earner couples with children appear to suffer multiple stresses and strains associated with this lifestyle (Perry-Jenkins & Turner, 2004). When the stresses start to affect the marital relationship and partners express dissatisfaction with each other or their situations, they may turn to marital therapy (Fraenkel, 2003). Some researchers believe that marriage and family therapists may be inadequately trained to deal with the specific

issues facing dual-earner couples and, thus, have asked successful dual-earners to outline what facilitates their felicity so that MFTs may use that information to guide distressed couples (e.g., Haddock et al., 2001). Much of this research and the therapeutic guidance that flows from it tapped into the experiences of couples in the midst of these lifestyle and lifecycle woes. To add to the overall lifecycle literature and broaden knowledge of the dual-earner lifestyle in couple's midlife and later stages, Perry-Jenkins and Turner suggested that more data is needed from dual-earner couples who have weathered the work/family tempest. McGoldrick and Carter (2003) believe that taking such long-range perspectives can aid dual-earner couples in the throes of distress, just as research on long-term satisfactory marriages may help younger or newly married couples find their way (e.g., Kaslow & Robison, 1996). An exploratory study of dual-earner couples in self-identified great marriages whose children are now grown may help us fill this gap in the literature, just as studies of long-term successful marriages in general have provided empirical support for therapy and family life education.

Research Questions

For this study, couples in the empty nest stage of the lifecycle discussed their great dual-earner marriages. Their narratives and observations were used to address the following research questions:

1. Upon reflection, were these dual-earner marriages consistently great throughout the years of marriage?
2. How did older dual-earner couples in great marriages reflect on what made and still make their marriages great? What qualities characterize these great marriages?

3. What challenges, stressors, or conflicts did these dual-earner couples face?
4. What skills, techniques, or strategies worked for these dual-earner couples?
5. How did these couples specifically nurture and protect the marital relationship and keep it vibrant through the years?

CHAPTER III

METHOD

The data for this qualitative, exploratory study were drawn from a subsample of the participants in the Great Marriage Research Project. Professors Linda Skogrand of Utah State University and John DeFrain of the University of Nebraska initiated this research project in 2004. The purpose of the larger study was to let married couples who identified themselves as having great marriages, in other words, the marital experts, tell in detail and at length about their marriages. Sixty-five couples from around the United States completed and submitted the 31-page, three-part questionnaire (Appendix D). Many participants noted that it took them many hours to document in writing the nature and history of their relationship, the highs and lows, how they loved, if and how they fought, and, in essence, how their great marriages worked. It is, perhaps, a testimony to the partners' commitments to each other that they devoted such a large amount of time to this project and were willing to share their experiences with the researchers.

Procedure

For the larger study, the researchers primarily solicited participants nationwide through newspaper advertisements. A letter explaining the project and a press release describing the study and asking for volunteers (Appendices A and B) were sent to 214 newspapers with various circulation numbers in both urban and rural areas in 23 states. Newspapers were chosen from nationwide listings in the *Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media* (Fischer, 1998). The study was also advertised on and accessible at

a University of Nebraska family strengths website located at <http://unlforfamilies.unl.edu>. In a further effort to obtain a diverse sample from around the country, the researchers and several research assistants also distributed copies of the flier via email to acquaintances around the United States. Information about the study was also disseminated through personal face-to-face contact and word of mouth.

Any couple who agreed that they had a great marriage and who were interested in and willing to participate in the study contacted either Dr. DeFrain or Dr. Skogrand for a copy of the questionnaire. The researchers then sent the questionnaires directly to the respondents along with a two-page cover letter that served as informed consent (Appendix C). Participants returned the questionnaires in postage paid envelopes. Volunteers were encouraged to keep a copy of their completed questionnaires as an enduring family record for their posterity. Couples were not reimbursed monetarily for their participation. The study had received approval from the Institutional Review Boards of both Utah State University (Appendix E) and the University of Nebraska.

Sample

The author of this thesis read through all 65 questionnaires to identify couples that met the criteria of being dual-earners during the years that their children were in school. Also, to be included in this analysis, the couples' children had to be at least 18 years old at the time the participants completed the questionnaires, to help lessen the chance that the couples were still intimately and intensely involved in raising any children or teenagers. Sixteen couples met the criteria for this study. Fifteen of them were living in an empty nest, their children grown, mostly married, and many with children of their

own. One couple was imminently poised to reside in an empty nest, with an 18-year-old daughter preparing to leave for college. Fifteen couples were also in their first marriages, had been married between 33 and 67 years, and ranged in age between 55 and 88 years for the women and 55 and 90 years for the men. Only one of these fifteen couples had cohabited prior to their marriage. The couple with the 18-year-old daughter (wife aged 45, husband aged 53) had been married for five years after cohabiting for seven years. It was the husband's first marriage and the wife's second. Table 1 summarizes the age range, education level, and employment status of the people in the sample.

Table 1

Age Range, Education Level, and Employment Status of Respondents

	Wives (n = 16)	Husbands (n = 16)
Age Range	45-88 years	53-90 years
Education Level		
High school	2	3
Associates	3	3
Bachelors	6	4
Masters	4	5
Doctorate	1	1
Employment Status		
Employed fulltime	7	7
Semi-retired	2	5
Retired	7	4

These dual-earners lived in various places around the United States and labored, either currently or before retirement, in a variety of vocations. Thirteen people identified themselves as educators, teachers, or professors. Ten worked in the non-agricultural business world as secretaries, accountants, managers, and the like. Six were or had been farmers or ranchers. Four devoted their working lives to government employment, two worked in the health care field, and one man was a minister. Several people were holding down two jobs or had switched from one type of work to another along the way. In terms of race or ethnicity, 14 couples identified themselves as Caucasian and two wrote that they were European-American.

Based on the previous research findings about dual-earner couples cited in the literature review in chapter 2, it was reasoned that these couples, who identified themselves as wedded in great marriages, had also experienced some of the trials of being dual-earner parents when their children were still living at home. With the children residing or, in one case about to reside, away from the family home, the reflections of these empty-nest dual-earner couples may help therapists and current dual-earner parents gain a useful and more long-term perspective (McGoldrick & Carter, 2003). Stories of these great marriages unfolded throughout the 46 open-ended questions in the qualitative survey. Themes emerged from the analysis of these narratives to answer the exploratory research questions posed in chapter 2.

Instrument

The questionnaire contained three parts that elicited specific demographic information, descriptive and reflective answers to open-ended questions about the

marriage, and couples' self-ratings of their marital strengths. The demographic information included current ages, age at marriage, length of marriage, ethnic background, current income and employment status, vocations, and children's ages. The second section of the survey included the 46 open-ended questions about the couple's relationship. Ample space was provided for both husband and wife to inscribe their answers, but many couples also continued writing their responses on the backs of the survey pages. The third section of the questionnaire included eight inventories on which husband and wife rated their perceptions of their marital strengths.

The data for this research study on substantially empty-nested dual-earners came from the first two parts of the survey instrument. Children's ages and parents' employment information helped narrow down which participants were dual-earners. Since the questionnaire elicited current rather than past work status for the participants, however, it was necessary to examine responses to all of the questionnaires in full to determine which pairs had worked during the child-rearing years. Because many of the respondents waxed eloquent on many questions, gleaning information about who worked when was not difficult. When work status during child-rearing years was not clear, the questionnaire was eliminated from consideration.

The open-ended questions were phrased in a fashion that allowed participants to consider several aspects of any particular issue. For example, question 32 asked about stress, one of the issues that is often central in dual-earner families. The question had four parts: "How do you manage stress and crisis in your marriage? Could you please describe some of the stressors you face, and how you deal with them. Have you had a major crisis or crises in your marriage in the past few years? How did you deal with

them?" Respondents could pursue several topics when answering this item and many did just that.

Analysis

The 16 questionnaires were analyzed using standard qualitative methods as described by Bogdan and Biklen (2003). After reading through all 65 questionnaires and selecting the ones that met the criteria for this study, the author of this thesis read the 16 chosen questionnaires carefully again several times in uninterrupted segments of time in order to get a broad idea of how couples expressed their thoughts about their marriages. The next step was to build a data set relating to the five research questions. The data set created from the questionnaires included the couples' comments about conflict, stress, communication, care for each other, support, togetherness, we-ness, autonomy, negotiation, balancing work and family, as well as others (e.g., Fraenkel, 2003; Gottman, 1993, 1999; Haddock et al., 2001; Schwartz, 1994; Wallerstein & Blakesless, 1995; Zimmerman et al., 2003). Some of the concepts chosen for this part of the process were based on the themes and concepts discussed in the review of current literature on the topics of (a) dual-earner couples with children and (b) long-term, happy marriages in general, including their conflict styles. Other themes became evident as the author read through the questionnaires. Some themes, such as marriage as a process, were suggested from the wording of the questions; other concepts, such as positive attitudes, emerged from the words of the respondents themselves.

In the next step, this researcher organized the data into categories and subcategories that could be used to answer the research questions. For example, one

subcategory relevant to the fourth research question was *support for spouse*, a concept highly valued by successful dual-earner pairs and other happily-married couples (e.g., Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995). The data compiled for this subcategory further distinguished among emotional support, instrumental support, and personal encouragement. Another category, pertaining to research question 5, for example, was *time spent together*. Data in this subcategory included couples' descriptions of how, and how often, they physically managed to do things together. Also included in this subcategory was how respondents viewed the effect of their spending time together.

Before determining the final categories and subcategories to be coded, two additional researchers familiar with qualitative methods in general and this project in particular reviewed some of the questionnaires. The three researchers then conferred to reach a consensus about the data and categories related to the research questions. The next step in the analysis was to code the data according to the coding categories. Again, one other researcher coded a sample of the data to help ensure the accuracy of the coding process. The two researchers then compared the results of their separate attempts to code some of the data. It was determined that the coding scheme was sufficiently developed and discrete to allow the author of this thesis to compile the data and write up the results.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This chapter will present the results of the qualitative analysis. Findings from the 16 surveys include themes and subthemes that relate to the research questions. Thus, data will shed light on five interrelated topics: consistency of couples' marital happiness; qualities of their great dual-earner marriages; issues they faced; skills, strategies, or techniques couples used to face challenges and resolve conflict; and how couples maintained coupleness throughout the life cycle and, especially, in the empty-nest years. Throughout the surveys, individuals wrote about their great marriages in general and about issues specific to dual-earnship. Both will be reported here.

Research Question One

The first research question was about whether these great dual-earner marriages had always been that way: Upon reflection, given the typical issues dual-earners face, were these dual-earner marriages consistently great throughout the years of marriage? To answer this question, individuals whose children were grown were asked to graph their marital happiness over time and to state how long it took them to develop a great marriage. Respondents also wrote about the process of creating and/or maintaining a great marriage. While spouses stated that it took them anywhere from no time to 30 years to achieve a great marriage, they wrote about the marital process in several ways. Two themes emerged from their graphs and narrative responses: (a) marriage was a

process that often contained peaks and valleys; and (b) spouses experienced personal transformations, growth, and contentment from being in the marriage.

Marital Happiness Graphs

Twenty-eight individuals drew or described graphs of their marital happiness. Just over half (15) drew straight lines across the top of the graph or lines ascending steadily over time, indicating a marriage that not only started well but also either stayed at the high level or improved throughout the years. Thirteen graphs included dips at various points that some respondents explained with a variety of labels marking events such as problems with children, job losses, or debilitating injuries. Specific common dual-earner stressors will be outlined below under research question three. Nevertheless, these graph lines recovered from the dips and seemed to soar at the end. Respondents explained that the empty-nest stage gave them time to devote to each other:

I think our married life could be considered even "greater" after our children left home and established their own homes. Thereafter, we had more time to concentrate on each other's desires and needs. (Husband 2)

We went through a lot raising the boys, taking care of and burying grandparents and parents. Things are more mellow now, not so many people need us and we can enjoy each other and our interests. (Wife 9)

In fact, many spouses stated that the current moment was the best time of their marriages "now that life isn't so busy and demanding" (Wife 12). This man summarized the upturn, perhaps as his good marriage climbed towards great: "We had a good marriage but after the children left home, we rediscovered each other and it gets better and better" (Husband 6).

Marriage as a Process

Regardless of whether marital happiness wavered over time or remained steady, 22 people wrote about marriage as a continual process. In some cases, the process included both peaks and valleys, reflecting the dips in the graphs described above. For example, one man described the marital process "as a series of passages" (Husband 1) and a woman noted that "it has been a very happy journey for me" (Wife 7). Others described the process in more detail, implying incessant change:

Great marriage . . . is in constant growth and adjustment. (Wife 10)

Creating a great marriage takes a lifetime. It's the journey that counts and not the destination. Marriages are built one day and experience at a time. (Wife 6)

The thought of a good marriage really never came up [when we dated]. Neither one of us had any idea of what a good marriage was. We worked it out as we went. (Husband 9)

Individuals were not shy about discussing low points, though only three people from three different marriages admitted ever considering divorce. More of them acknowledged how occasional distress is part of the marital experience to be worked out by each committed couple. One man noted that marriage "is an ongoing day to day, week to week process. There are ups and downs at the beginning but it's a life long process" (Husband 3). Another husband advised couples to "accept the fact that every marriage has peaks and valleys, but work to reduce the valleys" (Husband 6). Married 56 years, a woman acknowledged that together she and her husband have "shared many ups and downs. Keeps getting better and better, lucky to be alive. Sure, there have been valleys but we are positive people. . . . You continue to make your marriage great. Never-ending process" (Wife 16).

Some individuals noted that the difficult times, as indicated by the low points, strengthened the marital bond. One woman said that taking care of infirm elderly parents meant that she and her husband “had to make decisions that have been difficult, but they have brought us closer together” (Wife 10). Another man discussed the totality of the annealing process:

We got through the early sparkle years, became parents, faced the challenges of division of labor, career establishment. Each phase strengthened our marriage to where I feel we can weather any storm. (Husband 1)

Others noted that their great marriages allowed them to weather those storms from the beginning of their relationship. In one man’s words, “Each test we’ve been through has been a re-affirmation of how great our marriage is. The greatness has just been there” (Husband 4). A woman noted that:

It takes a strong marriage to withstand children. Sometimes I marvel at the fact that we are still together after rearing our four. I am proud of the fact that we survived it all. It was fun when the kids were young, but teen years certainly were a challenge. (Wife 14)

Findings for research question four below will further detail just how the couples in these dual-earner great marriages handled the specific challenges, stressors, or conflicts they faced.

Eleven individuals also wrote of their union as a personally transforming experience. They seemed to find the marital process exciting (“adventurous” in the words of Wife 8) and fulfilling, contributing to their own personal growth and sense of contentment. One man considered a “willingness to learn, to grow, to change as was necessary” (Husband 7) as critical to a successful marriage. Similarly, a wife remarked that “overall, I’ve tried to forget low things or used them to build good” (Wife 4), and

another used “challenges as a way to grow” (Wife 11). Spouses also made the following observations about the importance of the marriage to their own sense of growth and evolution:

Our marriage has been an awesome journey of personal growth and ongoing dialogue. . . . In the last few years I read *His Needs, Her Needs* and *Five Love Languages*. We both are readers. (Wife 7)

[Living together] was helpful in many ways, and one time hurtful for the kids. But we grew from that one experience. We were cautious, knowing the divorce statistics. (Husband 5)

One couple in particular saw personal growth and fulfillment as integral to a great marriage:

[Our marriage] is a source of pleasure, reward and fun as well as frustration and challenge. It is a relationship which, as a result of having, I am a better person. [Are there better terms than great?] Fulfilling? Rewarding? An environment for individual and couple growth. (Wife 1)

A great marriage should make each partner feel more confident, more secure, and more content. I feel we do that for each other. . . . I felt better/happier and more confident and capable (e.g., as a student) with her in my life than when she was not. . . . I see a lot of my spouse and I in [my son and daughter-in-law]. They lift each other up and make each other better people. (Husband 1)

There also appeared to be a recursive relationship between individual and marital development in that the marital relationship improved in response to the spouses’ personal development and growth. To illustrate this point, one wife wrote that the “marriage grew as we grew” (Wife 10). Finally, personal transformations and marital growth appeared ongoing for many into the empty-nest years: Wife 7 above, married 49 years and reading about love, was still working to improve herself and her marriage at age 72. One husband also summed up this process well: “We really began growing

together when we hit the empty nest time. The quiet togetherness was really wonderful" (Husband 3).

Research Question Two

The second research question concerned qualities that these dual-earners identified as part and parcel of a great marriage, or in at least two cases, a "perfect" marriage. Spouses appeared to imbue their marriages with a sense of unity and purpose, especially with regard to their children. Four main themes emerged from the individuals' comments: mutual love, compatibility, and friendship; a solid commitment to the marriage and each other; shared values and goals; and an optimistic and positive orientation toward the future tempered with realistic expectations. Many reflections had a back and forth quality as well, for as subjects wrote about what made their marriages great and even why they married, they also remembered how their optimistic and forward-looking outlook helped maintain their commitment throughout the years of marriage. Few individuals recalled ever considering divorce, even in the one reported case of infidelity.

Love, Friendship, and Compatibility

Twenty-eight individuals spoke about their marriage as reflecting both love for and friendship with their spouses. One man stated, "We are not 'sentimental' or 'sappy,' but we have a long lasting love that basically goes back [over 40 years]" (Husband 2). Many described their spouses as their best friend. Wife 11 echoed the sentiments of many respondents: "I would say it's a *perfect* marriage. We enjoy each other and are truly each

other's best friend." Another woman said, "My husband is my other half. I hurt when he hurts, I feel joy when he does. . . . We need each other to enjoy life at its fullest" (Wife 9). Describing the close friendship he had with his wife, one man stated, "I feel lost and at loose ends when she isn't around to share things with" (Husband 9). As friends, spouses embodied people who would be there for each other and provide both emotional and instrumental support, as in the words of this woman:

I try to be positive about most things, but it's great to have someone at home you can vent unhappiness to over something that has happened. I know he'll listen, not repeat anything, and not condemn any action I've taken. (Wife 11)

Indicating how they depended on each other, one husband spoke of "not letting the other spouse down" (Husband 10) and his wife said she only has to "ask once to get the job done" (Wife 10).

Many individuals also spoke of being "best friends as well as lovers" (Husband 13). One woman described her marriage as "an intimate, sexual friendship":

My husband is faithful to me, unlike my father to my mother. My parents were dual earners as have been my husband and I. My husband and I are more respectful and loving than my parents were to each other. (Wife 1)

Sexuality was not the whole of these great marriages, or in the words of one woman, "love outshines sex when it comes to long-term relationships" (Wife 3).

Many respondents made clear that other aspects of their relationship, such as compatibility of interests, were just as or even more important:

My husband was a gentle considerate partner which made sex enjoyable for me. . . . Now we are both impotent due to medications and age so it's good that we love each other more than sexual attraction. (Wife 8)

Deb and I have had a very compatible relationship since the moment we met. Our likes and dislikes are very similar. We enjoy travel, the mountains, seafood, bike

riding and movies. We dislike arguing. . . . Our physical relationship was comfortable, compatible. . . . We accept each other as we are. (Husband 1)

Describing how they are friends, many spouses talked of having common interests such as traveling, reading, etc.

My wife is my best friend! We enjoy traveling and go somewhere almost every weekend. We have similar interests (travel, grandkids, nice restaurants, gambling, reading, etc.) so that adds to the harmony of marriage! (Husband 2)

Thus, friendship, love, and compatibility ran high in how these spouses viewed what made their marriages great.

Commitment

Twenty-six individuals characterized their great marriages as the result of mutual commitment to the marriage and to each other. Several individuals spoke about how "marriage is for the long haul" (Wife 4 and Husband 9). Others stressed how commitment meant "staying together through the good times and the bad" (Wife 16) and "a working through, not a walking away" (Wife 7). Wife 12 noted that "We had our ups and downs but hung on with both hands and feet and heart." The sense of commitment kept these individuals in their marriages and helped them to focus on working out any problems that arose. Most individuals wrote that they never considered divorce as a solution to any difficulties they had. Writing about commitment, Wife 2 noted, "I have thought about [divorce] years ago at times when we argued about something the other one did, but would always tell myself you don't just fall out of love unless it could never be worked through." Husband 11 defined commitment in more positive language: "Commitment is giving everything you have to the success of a project or endeavor. We do this without question."

Commitment to each other also gave individuals reasons to be supportive towards their spouses. One man's story illustrates how his spouse's commitment worked in his marriage:

I always figure that my wife will stick with me whatever happens. I walked off a job once, a low point in my decision making. She stuck with me through it all. Luckily I found a new job before we lost our house. (Husband 14)

Another man wrote about his and his wife's mutual commitment to each other: "Our commitment to each other is so strong that it accepts the need of each to achieve personal success and have personal recreation. Our commitment is based on trust and understanding of who we are and need to be" (Husband 1). A woman summed up what many seemed to be saying about commitment in their marriages:

It's a big word, but if you have it in your marriage, you have a lot. It means you stick together even if you don't agree. It means you have to see the other side and respect it. It's when you love someone so much and so deep, you will be there for them NO MATTER WHAT. It's a bond you don't want to get away from, and if it's true, it grows as your relationship endures. (Wife 5)

Shared Values and Goals

Twenty-three persons in these great marriages credited shared values and goals for much of their success as couples. Many described having common ethical, social, religious, and financial values in common. Goals they aspired to included attaining educations for themselves and their children and saving for their retirement years. Sharing values seemed to allow these couples to follow a unified course in their marriages and to act as a partnership team. As one woman commented:

We came from different Protestant denominations, but we have always belonged to church together. We have strong social justice values we share: peace, eliminating poverty, tithing to our church, education, honesty. Because we share them there is little doubt where we want our money and time to go. (Wife 4)

Several individuals believed that coming from similar families and circumstances, particularly farming backgrounds, helped keep their marriages strong. Staying out of debt was also highly valued. One wife noted that “We had a lot in common—our farming background, our love for the Gospel . . . our knowing how to work, our love of children, our frugal living” (Wife 8). Another concluded, “We have old fashioned farmer values based on being close to nature and following the Golden Rule” (Wife 9).

Spouses also seemed to share like-minded parenting philosophies and goals. Many people commented, as did this husband, that when it came to discipline “. . . we sometimes disagreed, but were usually ‘on the same page!’” (Husband 2). Another man echoed these sentiments and also included the values he and his wife wanted to instill in their children:

We were completely in agreement on our religious and spiritual beliefs and brought up our children by example in faith, honesty, fairness, concern for others, respect, and love of country. . . . We always seemed to think alike on parenting. (Husband 15)

These men and women often appeared to recognize early in their relationships, usually while dating, that they shared these values and goals. For example, one woman and her husband “both wanted to adopt foreign children and talked about this before we married” (Wife 14). They ended up adopting four.

Optimistic Orientations and Positive Attitudes

Fifteen people clearly wrote with and about an optimistic orientation toward the future that characterized the tenor of their great marriages, currently as well as in the past. Many explicitly described approaching their marital lives with a positive attitude. One wife wrote how she and her husband had been “determined to make our marriage a great

thing . . . to make a happy marriage" throughout their life together (Wife 15). Another noted that "We live for the future. . . . I hope we enjoy future stages and empty nest as we've enjoyed previous stages" (Wife 5), and a husband noted how he was "excited about our future as a couple" (Husband 1). This wife's comments were particularly positive:

I think right now is the very best time in my marriage. I am more in love now than I ever have been. Tomorrow's "right now" will be better than today's. We will be more of a couple and more in love tomorrow. . . . No matter what, Adam is my past, my present and my future. (Wife 4)

One husband said that "when things were difficult, we both realized that there would be light at the end of the tunnel" (Husband 6). Optimism, an orientation towards the future, and positive attitudes permeated most of these great dual-earner marriages.

Nevertheless, individuals did not confuse optimism about the future with unrealistic expectations. Spouses believed that it was important to be realistic, particularly about finances and avoiding debt. In addition, many realized, as noted above, that there would be peaks and valleys, and disagreements, but as this husband advised, "Be patient. Don't expect perfection" (Husband 13). Thus, along with remembering the qualities that attracted them to their mates and that were still important, many respondents reflected on the long-held optimism about their future that allowed them to translate their verbal commitments into action when faced with the difficulties described in the next section.

Research Question Three

What challenges, stressors, or conflicts did these dual-earner couples face?

Survey respondents wrote clearly and eloquently about the challenges and stressors they faced during their years of marriage. Some challenges, such as financial woes, seemed to create conflict between partners; other challenges, such as caring for younger or older dependents, appeared to be more jointly shared stressors. Individuals specifically wrote about work-family issues such as juggling time for work and family and finding time to nurture the marital relationship. They also ruminated about struggles with various aspects of money and finances. For many couples, health issues also loomed large. Thus, the prominent themes throughout the surveys regarding challenges, stressors, and conflicts were negotiating finances, facing their own or dependents' infirmities, and juggling work-family responsibilities and time, including finding time to spend with one's spouse.

Negotiating Finances

Twenty individuals wrote about money management as a stressor or a challenge within their marriages. The financial trials included how to manage with little money, how to earn more money, how to decide on spending, how to avoid debt, and how to deal with unexpected financial crises. Many fewer mentioned conflicts about money, a reflection perhaps of the shared values about money that were discussed in research question two. Finances were a sore point for one couple on their first Christmas together, and the wife in another couple acknowledged "differences of opinions on money matters to some extent" as her husband "doesn't want to spend money on the house, thinking it's a waste of money" (Wife 2). Another husband could only recall one conflict over spending:

The big battle over money I remember involved my wife's desire to have the kitchen remodeled. We did not have the money and I did not want debt. In the end she inherited a bit of cash and, over my objections, used it to get the kitchen remodeled. I thought we should save the money to send the kids to college, but it was her money. (Husband 14)

Others indicated, as this next man did, that they felt "pretty lucky in that we have never had disputes about money" (Husband 13).

More often, people wrote about experiencing stress over managing the little money they had, especially in the early years of marriage, and figuring out how to earn more:

First years of marriage called upon us to manage our money very closely, which was stressful and challenging. To increase earning power and stability, we went on to graduate school. Him full time, me while working full time. We were busy people juggling many roles and responsibilities. (Wife 1)

As this woman has noted, solutions to these problems often required sacrifices, delayed gratification, and the optimistic, goal-oriented attitudes discussed above. One couple talked about the stress of dual-earnership from the standpoint of trying to coordinate their employment goals as they tried to become financially stable. The wife took advantage of a job opportunity in an area where her husband could not find employment very easily:

He went to school then for six years, primarily because he could not find work in the area when I had a great opportunity. We had to live on one salary—mine. It was tough but those were happy years. . . . I have never been unhappy. I probably was happiest in Kansas although we were beset by financial problems. . . . Both of us [later found] suitable career opportunities in the same geographical area. (Wife 14)

Her husband said that "goal-oriented" nature of these financially bleak years rendered them his happiest as well, a reflection of the importance of being forward-looking.

In some cases of job losses or the fickleness of farming operations, couples faced monetary crises that they dealt with together and with a positive vision. Here are several examples:

Loss of job during the 80s by husband was causing us to sell our home and move to Pennsylvania away from family. It made him take a lower paying job with the university than staying in the private industry. All of our extra money was used to keep up our home and getting daughter through college without student loans. (Wife 10)

We had a hard time making a go of it dairy farming. Our buildings were all in need of repair and our machinery was all old. Milk prices were terrible. So we decided to sell part of our farm. It took a long time to do it, but finally happened and now we are free from debt. (Wife 12)

We were older when we married, 24 and 31, and we had known each other about 3 years. There have been challenges like financial difficulties, change of husband's profession, husband beginning college at age 45, moving from the farm to the city, and illness. However, we have worked through things together. . . . If things didn't work out we changed directions. Farming didn't work so we relied on my teaching until my husband got his education. (Wife 8)

Finally, spouses wrote about their current joint financial goals. One husband wants to make sure that there is enough "money to afford a wedding and send a child to college" (Husband 5). Relying on an optimistic orientation toward the future, a woman wrote that she and her husband have a goal:

After 33 years of marriage, [of] paying off consumer debt and working at getting our finances in order before we retire, [and] trying to arrange for special trips/events financially. (Wife 4)

Facing Infirmities

Nineteen dual-earning individuals mentioned the stresses of caring for dependents, some of whom had serious medical issues. They recalled tending to mentally and physically handicapped children and emotionally troubled teens, and in

some cases having to face a child's or grandchild's death. Though these dual-earner respondents no longer had children at home, many were now at a point where their parents needed assistance. Many of the dual-earners were still in their earning years, still working, and were also facing health issues of their own. One wife described the current challenges for her and her husband:

Health issues (husband has had open heart surgery and I have had two knee surgeries), retirement (when and health insurance), and . . . caring for both mothers that had strokes and were moved to senior centers without help from other siblings. Mother-in-law had her stroke at age 65 and my mother at age 79. (Wife 10)

Another woman recalled:

My husband has joined me in nearly every effort I put forth to care for my father as he battled cancer. . . . My husband's mother is increasingly dependent upon us as her macular degeneration worsens. . . . Each of our children have experienced some form of behavior problem—our daughter, hair pulling; our son, ADD. (Wife 1)

Spouses were quick to state, however, that these challenges and stressors did not stress the marriage in the long run. Couples faced these issues together, with a positive attitude, and gained strength through the process, as discussed above. Two men related stories typical of this sample:

We get strength from each other. I've mentioned the loss of two sons and the accident and long recovery of my wife. These are life stressors that stressed us individually or together but I don't think ever stressed the "marriage" as such. (Husband 13)

When our son was in 7th grade our lives were very much in turmoil. Every day was a major conflict. He was struggling in school and every night was a battle over homework, television time, bedtime. Our home had always been very peaceful, but the constant conflict put a strain on our relationship, the relationship with our daughter, and our relationship with our son. There were many loud arguments and many tears. We knew he was an intelligent child, but the school was no help and suggested he was just not capable of our expectations. My wife and I pulled together to find our options and to search out a solution. We were at

a breaking point with him. After finding private help and professional testing, he was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder. We found a course of treatment and very quickly things changed for the better. Our son found focus, success in school and confidence. The harsh conflict subsided to more normal teen/parent relationships. FYI, he will complete his Ph.D. in June. (Husband 1)

Juggling Work-Family Responsibilities and Time

Sixteen individuals described the juggling act that dual-earning entailed. For many, time and money appeared to be intertwined. In other words, the need for money, and thus the need for both spouses to work, appeared to lead to less time to spend with families. In several cases, the need for both spouses to provide income led to a triple juggling act as one of them also attended school for an advanced education.

When my husband got his Ph.D., I knew he was finally through going to school. Then it was my turn with his cheering me on to get a B.A. and a master's while having five kids. (Wife 13)

We farmed for 17 years. It was not profitable. I taught school for 12 of those years. My husband was hurt in an accident so we sold the farm to pay the bills and he started college at age 45. He trained in social work and then in education. Afterwards he taught for 10 years. (Wife 8)

Couples with offspring at various stages in the life cycle had to find ways to meet the children's needs while both parents worked. A husband described how he and his wife managed childcare when their children were young: "Finding reliable childcare sometimes was a problem. Sometimes I took the kids to work with me and they played quietly in the back of the classroom while I taught a college math class" (Husband 14). Respondents noted that handling the many roles dual-earnings thrust upon each member of the couple was often a delicate balancing act. They spoke about the stress it placed on them as well as about how they admired others who were coping well. One

woman noted how couples struggle because of “jobs that demand many hours of work and allow very little family time,” and also commented:

Our greatest joy is watching our children and their spouses raise our grandchildren. They are doing such a good job of balancing family and careers and the many responsibilities that go with it. We now have time and resources to travel when we want. (Wife 6)

Another woman, who came from a dual-earner family, described what it meant to create one:

I have tried to incorporate all the good things my parents did and be even more involved with their [children’s] lives. Since I only had two children and I have had to work full time all their lives, I’ve had to juggle time and career. I had good parental role models and want to be a good role model for my children. . . . We are glad to have two and no more than two! . . . We enjoy seeing them grow and learn. The stress is part of the process. (Wife 5)

As part of a dual-earner household with children, a husband acknowledged the “extra work, demands on your time, and . . . the need for taking responsibility for the care and development of the child” (Husband 7). Another mother talked about the added stress of having a new baby:

I was a little crabby after Roger was born. Chad had to start helping around the house. It ended up that he would make breakfast while I got me and Roger ready to go. Chad took the baby to Grandma’s house and I went to work. . . . His grandmother was a very domineering woman but a great help with the babies while I worked. (Wife 9)

Those with older children juggled roles as well. This wife described her greatest challenge:

Time management. My mother never had a job. I found that I wore many hats and had to organize carefully. I had a full-time job, 3 children with the demands of many individual interests and activities when two were in high school and one in junior high. Our daughter and son in varsity choir, in musicals, involved in youth groups at church, and I had responsibilities as a minister’s wife. Resolution—I hired a lady to clean my house. (Wife 7)

Other individuals also wrote about approaching the stresses of dual-earnernship with the positive and optimistic attitudes that permeated their marriage, as discussed above in research question one. Here are two examples:

Another [high point] was the satisfaction and pride I felt watching my wife get her doctorate. She work hard to earn it and I know I played a part in it through child care, meal prep, etc. . . . During those child-rearing years, I think we did not think in terms of happiness. It was more focused on children and career growth. Stress of those things limited our "happiness." Note we were never unhappy! (Husband 1)

When the kids were young and there was so much that needed to be cared for, I would sometimes be unhappy because I wanted more help. But I always said, "I wouldn't dream of divorce. Why would I trade a little help for none?" Seriously, I could never imagine life without Adam. (Wife 4)

Eleven people also wrote specifically about the difficulty of finding time to spend with a spouse:

Communication was difficult in the early years of our marriage because we were so busy we had little time to talk. . . . When our children were young, Tom was teaching full time. He would leave for the farm as soon as school was out and get home about 10:00 pm. He worked at the farm every Saturday and many Sundays. I felt like a single parent. I'm surprised our marriage survived. (Wife 6)

The demands of children and juggling the parental roles with work responsibilities kept many individuals in these great marriages from finding time to be spouses. In other words, dual earnernship sometimes meant couples could not be couples while children were still at home. One person who mentioned this issue noted that the "arrival of 1st [child] brought more expenses and less couple time. A bit more chaos and less sleep" (Wife 1). Another wife echoed those remarks:

Adjusting to having children in the house after five years of *just us* put a strain on the relationship. . . . The first child made me more tired than I ever dreamed. I was amazed at the time she took away from Adam and me—that was strain after five years together. But we outgrew that problem. (Wife 4)

This phenomenon also appeared to be a challenge into the empty-nest stage for individuals who had not yet retired. Many talked about still wanting more time together. One husband complained that “due to our schedules—I work nights, Debbie works days—finding time to spend time together requires some effort” (Husband 9). Another man talked about how he had been unhappy, even considering divorce at one low point in their relationship, because “my wife was teaching and spending hours and hours at school with FHA, sports, and other school events” (Husband 10). Despite identifying themselves as enjoying great marriages, some individuals saw room for improvement in their relationships in terms of couple time:

I would like to see our lives become less hectic. The intensity of our professional lives can interfere with our relationship. As we became empty-nested, we committed more time to our professions. We need to be better at allowing time for us. (Husband 1)

Echoing this theme, another couple recognized this issue as a joint concern. The husband regretted that “right now [there is] not enough togetherness” (Husband 4) and his wife rued not “having time for each other when we both work 50 or more hours a week. . . . Time, or the lack of it, is a stressor” (Wife 4). Another wife wants to make sure that she and her husband will spend “enough quality time together and away from work . . . balancing time as we age and are more tired” (Wife 5).

Research Question Four

Strategies, techniques, or relationship skills that helped dual-earner couples deal with challenges, stressors, or conflicts are considered in research question four. Spouses in great dual-earner marriages divulged what worked for them in their answers to

questions 28, 32, and 33 on the survey, and also as they wrote about solving the specific challenges they faced. The vast majority of individuals saw good communication as a critical and essential element in their great marriages. Several additional themes related to skills, techniques, and strategies became evident in the surveys as well: how dual-earner spouses helped each other out and thus worked as a team; how they took care of each other by providing instrumental and emotional support; and how they specifically encouraged each other to pursue and achieve personal goals. Finally, many individuals also touted the importance of flexibility and humor when facing problems or challenges.

Communication

Almost everyone (28 of 32 respondents) credited good communication skills with helping them solve problems, deal with stress, face challenges, resolve conflict, or make decisions. When writing about communication, survey respondents included such concepts as honesty and openness, and skills such as negotiating and compromising. Also delineated in this category were specific techniques couples employed when in conflict such as never going to bed angry.

Honesty. One husband and wife pair stressed the importance of honesty. She wrote, "We believe in honesty and in telling the truth and in treating others as we would like to be treated" (Wife 11). Her husband stated, "I feel we have great communication with each other. No secrets. What you see is what you get" (Husband 11). Several other individuals echoed these sentiments about being honest and eschewing secrets between husband and wife. In the one case of infidelity among these great marriages, both

husband and wife believed that being able to communicate honestly helped build back trust and strengthened their relationship. According to the wife, "lots of talking and showing I was sorry helped us through it" (Wife 2). Her husband concurred: "When I discovered my wife's infidelity . . . we talked it out over the weeks and months! I think that the communication strengthened our marriage" (Husband 2).

Openness. Individuals remarked, as one wife did, that "we did a lot of talking during our dates" (Wife 3). This pattern of openness as couples were getting to know each other before marriage also served them well during the tenure of their marriages as they communicated about topics such as money, children, sex, and in-laws. Wife 10 emphasized how it is essential for couples to "TALK!! Communicate the good and the bad." She also implied that such ongoing openness in communication helps maintain closeness, for being in an empty nest "makes you become better at communication skills with your spouse. You're not just talking about children's activities" (Wife 10).

Communicating openly about one's needs also helped some respondents handle stress, as this wife replied: "My husband's mother is increasingly dependent upon us as her macular degeneration worsens. We manage by talking to each other. . . . Sometimes I cry" (Wife 1). One man believed that even in the face of reticence, couples should push themselves to communicate what is on their minds: "We both realize that it's vitally important to talk about issues even when we don't want to discuss a certain topic" (Husband 3). Communicating concerns did not seem to cause problems for these couples. One husband affirmed that communicating openly involved "feeling free [to talk] without fear of causing a problem if expressing a dissatisfaction" to a partner who listens well (Husband 7).

Talking through conflict. Many respondents simply stated that they talked their way through any conflicts that occurred. Others claimed outright that they just do not fight with their spouses. Some specifically avoided issues they knew would create problems and a few admitted that at least one party would flare up at the other. Here is how one woman described what happens in the great marriage at her house:

I talk. He listens. He knows where I stand on things. I usually know where he stands. I believe our communication is mostly positive—we don't belittle each other or bicker. We don't fight like yelling or screaming. We talk. I have been known to slam cupboard doors or walk away when I felt not under control, but that didn't/doesn't happen too often, I hope. (Wife 4)

The majority of this sample affirmed, however, that they excelled at communicating their needs, wants, feelings, values, and goals, and that such openness and honesty led to fruitful discussion rather than conflict. Many husbands and wives expressed thoughts similar to this 88-year-old woman:

We never went to sleep angry or without talking over problems. . . . We nearly always learn to express ideas and if we at first didn't agree we "talked it out" until we agreed! . . . We learned very early in marriage the importance of communication with each other. . . . We always talk things over and *do not* fight. We find it easy to handle any disagreements we may have. . . . We always settled any disagreements before they became problems. *Never* did we think of divorce. . . . Try to see more than one side of the problem. Talk it over. Keep your "cool." (Wife 15)

This man discussed the communication pattern he and his wife enjoyed:

Sometimes my wife tries to anticipate my needs ("reading my mind"). We work this through relatively easily. . . . We really don't fight. We may have words but it is always in the moment and we deal with it then and move on. The strongest words my wife has ever said to me was "shut up!" and that was at the 23 mile mark of a marathon when I told her she was on her way to a personal record. (Husband 13)

Another man chalked up conflict to miscommunication and a failure to listen to each other:

On a scale of 1-10 we are probably an 8. Our communications are positive for the most part. If we have a communication failure, it most likely is an act of laziness or omission. Specifically, we get too busy to make sure we were heard by the other. When serious issues arise, we are good at expressing our feelings, listening to the other's side and working on solutions. . . . We seldom have conflict. Most is due to a misunderstanding, not a true difference of opinion. Clear communication, assuring that as much listening takes place as talking takes place. (Husband 1)

Negotiation and compromise. Most individuals were able to talk out their disagreements or differences of opinion in a give and take process of negotiation and compromise that included being empathetic and, as noted above, listening well. Spouses wrote about solving problems by discussing options, clarifying concerns, compromising, and finding common ground, or, as one wife said, "a place to meet" (Wife 5). Another wife described negotiating this way:

He talks and I listen. I talk and he listens. We do not always agree but we both are willing to hear and consider both points. . . . Or, we do it his way sometimes and my way sometimes. (Wife 7)

At least 13 people agreed with her that their "habit is to compromise" (Wife 7)

Mutual decision-making. The respect these spouses showed to each other by actively listening and talking about issues carried over into how they made decisions about children, finances, and other spheres of their lives. Many individuals noted that they shared in the decision-making process with their spouse and did not consider one spouse more powerful than the other. A few noted, as this woman did, that after talking "if we don't concur, we usually go with the decision of the person who feels stronger" (Wife 11). Another wife summed up the basic and necessary elements of communication:

Constructive communication and conflict resolution: listening, thinking before speaking, considering options and choices, apologizing, forgiving, and

compromise. Through our ME [Marriage Encounter] support group, we practice PR (personal reflection) and CD (couple dialogue) on a regular basis. (Wife 1)

Teamwork and Helping Out

Twenty-one respondents felt that their great marriages embodied the qualities of partnerships. Spouses talked in terms of having joint purposes and goals and thus considered themselves to be working as a team. Spouses referred to themselves "life-long partners" (Wife 7) and to the marriage as a "husband and wife team" (Wife 3). Wife 1 stated that her marriage was "a team of two that shares resources and companionship," and her husband talked about dedicating "our lives to this partnership." Wife 4 summed up the unity of purpose that her marital partnership symbolized, especially in regard to children, a theme that flowed throughout many of the survey responses:

We really are "one for all and all for one" in our marriage. . . . Our major goals in life have focused on our now adult children. . . . each milestone in their lives has increased our pride and joy and further cemented our "unit." (Wife 4)

Even though all the survey questions asked couples to respond individually, people answered in terms that revealed how they thought of the marriage as an indivisible partnership. In response to a question about commitment, one husband corrected himself, crossing out the word "my" in favor of "our." Individuals often replied as a unit and spoke as "we," as in "we had a goal to retire from our professions of nursing and ministry by age 58" (Wife 7). This "we"-ness was particularly evident in remarks about the children they had raised:

One of the best things we ever did was adopting four children and giving each a chance at a better life. (Wife 14)

Our children and now grandchildren make it all worthwhile. Our children were wanted and loved. We had high expectations for them and communicated that to them. They have always been one of the very significant things we have in common. (Husband 6)

We have been a good example to our kids. One is happily married and one just got a great scholarship. We look forward to welcoming sons-in-law and grandkids. This will further cement our relationship. (Husband 5)

One couple spoke poignantly about the challenges they faced together, including the loss of two children:

Early we were faced with raising kids wondering if we were doing all we could for them. (Wife 13)

We've struggled together through the raising of four living children, the loss of two special handicapped children, the travails of graduate school. I think the key is that we are a team. (Husband 13)

This couple's separate responses—couched in the language of “we”-ness—expose implicitly and explicitly their sense of themselves as intertwined in a marriage and a partnership.

Spouses also described how they performed as partners and teammates in their day-to-day lives. Dual-earning individuals described how they shared, as this man did, “household chores, child-rearing responsibilities, and meal preparation” (Husband 1). Another man noted that “I clean the house and do the dishes. She does the yard work. Each of us does what he/she dislikes the least” (Husband 14). A woman stated this idea more positively saying that she and her spouse “assumed the roles in the area we enjoy most” (Wife 8). Duties or chores were sometimes divided according to who was around to do them: “the jobs all blended together into what it takes to make a home ‘go’” (Wife 4). Traditional roles often evolved into something else:

Both of us work outside the home. At times I've been a stay-at-home dad, getting meals, watching the kids. I don't think we assign roles, we assume roles. They may not be traditional in some cases or they may be traditional in others. (Husband 4)

We are retired dairy farmers after 42 years and now work outside the farm helping others. We've always worked side by side as farmers. Now we have a big vegetable garden and fruit trees and lawns to keep beautiful. . . . We share every role there is. He is just as good a cook or house cleaner as I am and I can do almost everything outside. . . . We work for each other. (Wife 12)

Other respondents chronicled how spouses helped out in responsibilities that went beyond just dealing with childcare or household chores, the typical work-family stressors for dual-earner couples. For example, some individuals told of how their spouses joined in the caretaking of ill parents, as in this woman's story:

My husband . . . helped with funeral planning [for my father] and has been along my side as I care for a seriously ill/frail mother. . . . He has done so with patience and respect—little or no complaining or second guessing me. (Wife 1)

Helping out also meant spouses filled in for each other during times of illness, joined in the extra work of busy planting and harvest seasons, or attempted to alleviate the stress of one of them working two jobs or attending school. As one woman wrote,

Our marriage is one of helping each other whenever we could. While I was attending college, we shared many duties. I guess I do more cooking, but Oscar does a lot of helping with housework and doesn't cook much, but helps. . . . We share, help each other cope with events. Neither one is 'boss.' (Wife 15)

Care, Support, and Encouragement

In addition to supporting the marital mission or partnership, 21 spouses expounded on the importance of caring for, supporting, and encouraging each other. Individuals responded to their partners' physical and emotional needs, personally sacrificing as they did so. Many advised others, as these two women did, to "think more

of your spouse's happiness than yours" (Wife 12) and to think "of what is best and right for the other partner's feelings" (Wife 10). A husband considered how personal sacrifice made for a good marriage: "A good marriage doesn't just happen, it takes work, putting each other first. It's not about me, it's about we or us" (Husband 3). Ironically, completing this survey seemed to make one man realize just how much his wife put him first while caring for him and that he just might want to reciprocate: "I wouldn't characterize my wife as passive, but sometimes she works too hard to please and I would like her to think of herself more. I guess I have to work to make that possible" (Husband 13).

Individuals also discussed different ways they gave or received care and support to or from a spouse, instrumentally and emotionally. One husband recalled how his wife supported him when he faced unemployment:

When I found out I was losing my job in Oklahoma, Jan was in Nebraska visiting her mother. Within hours she was back in Oklahoma having driven 80+ miles per hour to get to me as soon as she could. (Husband 4)

Another husband commented on a time he and his wife dealt with a crisis concerning one of their children:

We found strength in each other, if nothing more than a place to vent our fears and frustrations. Having someone else there to help cope was very valuable. It was after we had some resolution that we came to realize how important it had been to have each other to lean on. (Husband 1)

Two wives related very touching accounts of physical care and emotional support received from sensitive spouses:

One day I worked 2 hours overtime and he did not. When I came home, he drew a bath for me (with Calgon), took the kids out for dinner and videos and brought some dinner home for [him and me]. He was very understanding of my long day

and though very simple, his gift was genuine and caring. Look at what that must have taught my young daughters. (Wife 5)

I can come home from a tough day at work, look at Alan and say, "I need a hug." No matter what kind of day he's had, he'll give me that hug, and it really does help. It may not solve any problem, but feeling his physical presence strengthens me. . . . Job losses and deaths of close family members were the greatest challenges. Just hanging on to each other, physically, emotionally was the best way to deal with each of them. Being strong for each other. . . . Alan is very good to my mother and helps me stay on an even keel as her health fails. He alone (besides my religious faith) got me through the illness and death of my father. (Wife 4)

Throughout these questionnaires, individuals expressed appreciation for how spouses cared for and supported a partner's needs.

Eleven individuals specifically reflected on how their spouses encouraged and helped them achieve personal and vocational goals. Men and women both talked about how spouses spurred them on to complete advanced educations and then to follow their intended career paths. One man described this concept clearly: "We both pursued our fields successfully and that did not interfere with our love and caring for each other. We supported each other" (Husband 15). A woman who said she feared that marriage would result in a loss of freedom and independence found that she has "lost little of either because my husband supports me as we travel life's road together" (Wife 14). Another wife praised her husband's efforts at encouraging her:

He was willing to help me achieve my goals and dreams. I wanted to finish college before I got married. I wanted to teach again after our children started school. I like to be involved in activities at church and in the community. He has also been very supportive of my ideas and ambitions. I wanted to get my master's degree. (Wife 6)

The following husband also praised his wife:

Patti supported me in getting more education after marriage. I supported her to continue her career as a nurse and to move ahead in her profession. . . . We

encourage each other. Patti has always given me confidence in my ability to reach my goals and dreams. . . . I think we want to continue to listen to each other and support and encourage each other. (Husband 7)

Finally, husbands and wives urged their significant others to participate in avocations as well, as this woman gushed:

I like to travel and I go to a different foreign country every year. . . . He stays home and takes care of our place. I appreciate his encouraging me to travel. . . . He used to like to go fishing with his brother and I encouraged him to do that. We have supported one another's differences as well as enjoying many things together. (Wife 8)

Overall, dual-earners in great marriages appreciated not having to face roadblocks at home while chasing their dreams. As one wife acknowledged, her husband "listens to me and has helped me develop as a woman—professionally and privately" (Wife 4).

Flexibility and Humor

Two final themes emerged from survey responses about how couples handled challenges and stressors. Ten individuals stressed the importance of being flexible and seven believed that humor leavened the potentially detrimental effects of many problems. Respondents regarded flexibility as a personal trait necessary to keep a relationship going. One woman explained that her husband "is flexible and we both care more about the relationship than who is right or who wins!" (Wife 7). Flexibility allowed for adjustments and change as needed to maintain a commitment to each other. One man wrote that his great marriage grew from "lots of trial and error and making adjustments. Marriage is not something that works smoothly overnight" (Husband 9). One empty-nested working wife recognized the need to be "tolerant and flexible most of the time" as she and her husband looked forward to "planning for retirement, implementing plans and

probably finding we have to readjust initial ideas” (Wife 1). Several individuals also wrote about being flexible enough “not to sweat the small stuff” (Wife 5).

Individuals also wrote about using humor “to deflect the issues or confrontation” (Husband 10). They loved to “laugh at and with each other” (Husband 11) and to “approach our problems with a sense of humor” (Wife 6). Respondents expressed appreciation for a spouse’s sense of humor and displayed some of their own as one wife demonstrated:

A sense of humor helps. My husband had beautiful blonde, wavy hair when we were married. After a few years, he got a “butch.” I kissed him on the top of the head and said “You’d better hurry and leave. My husband will be home any moment.” (Wife 11)

Research Question Five

How did these dual-earner couples specifically nurture and protect the marital relationship and keep it vibrant through the years? Individuals described both doing for and doing with each other. In other words, respondents noted how they paid attention to and showed appreciation for each other, and how and why they spent time together, time that some still found precious and/or hard to come by even in their empty-nest years. Many also noted that they appreciated a balance of time together as well as apart. Companionable activities included expressions of physical affection and shared interests such as travel. Many spouses stressed the importance of recreation, relaxation, and having fun, as mutual goals that had served to cement their marital relationship in the past. They continued to nurture the relationship with these activities well into the upper decades of their marriages. Finally, individuals shared their ideas about how being

attentive, expressing appreciation, respecting each other's wishes, and being able to forgive contributed to protecting their great marital relationships.

Time Together and Apart

Twenty-eight individuals described how and why they enjoyed spending time with each other. They took pleasure in many shared interests including attending movies, concerts, and church together, exercising, visiting children and grandchildren, or just sitting together reading or watching TV. Several reported that they ran businesses together. Empty-nesters particularly enjoyed traveling. As one man observed:

I feel the best times in our marriage are when we travel. . . . When we are away from the demands of work, aging parents, home, etc., we are more attentive to each other. . . . We connect much better than when we are home. We can even read the same book simultaneously when we fly. (Husband 1)

Another man described a cross-country bicycle trip with his wife: "Forty-five days when the only time we were apart was the ten minutes each day while showering. No arguments, no complaints, just helping each other. Still filled with joyful memories."

(Husband 13). More commonly spent times together were daily activities closer to home, as this woman related:

We walk three miles a day (having breakfast halfway through). We worship at the same church. We play cards with other couples about once a week. We travel. Activities apart do not usually take us away more than 4-12 hours a week, but it is important to have other interests and activities. (Wife 11)

The time together was a way to take pleasure in each other and provided a means to enhance communication. One woman wrote about taking a "long scenic drive with no destination and no time restraints. We truly relaxed and enjoyed every moment. We talked and laughed and enjoyed the quiet" (Wife 5). On some of these drives, they would

buy lottery tickets and “talk of how we will spend the ‘millions’ and how we will improve our community. We talk about our kids and future grandkids. We joke about our future and retirement” (Wife 5). Several individuals noted that making time for each other was a priority, even when their children were small. One wife commented that “Unlike the family I grew up in, as a couple we still did a lot of things without kids at least once a week. . . . Never take your marriage for granted” (Wife 13). Another woman advised that couples should “never let the romance die. Even when the children were young, we made time for each other, going on a date or a week-end getaway” (Wife 3). For one man, the time he and his wife spent together appeared to be both relationship-saving and life-saving: “If my wife were not around, I probably would not do many things that I do. We are in an exercise program together. I probably would not do this alone and I would be dead” (Husband 14).

Individuals touted the importance of having fun with their spouse and advised others to do the same. One wife offered advice to others to “learn to relax and just have fun instead of always working so hard” (Wife 6). Even the one woman who seemed the most independent of all (“I like much more time apart”) reveled in the fun of sparring with her spouse: “We have different perspectives on many issues—the value of unions, capital punishment, etc. The discussions are fun” (Wife 14).

Respondents noted that a balance of time together and time apart was also important. Time apart seemed to help most individuals stay active, interested, and interesting to their spouses. One man noted that even though “we make an effort to spend time with each other, even on our busiest days,” he and his wife “understand the

need to have interests outside our relationship” (Husband 1). Reflecting back on over 65 years of marriage, this man summed up the meaning of time together and apart:

We love to be together, whether at the store, game, reading the mail, and even writing for this document. We’re not separated much these days. I do have some meetings to attend and she has some church activities. During WWII our separation was difficult. When our daughter was in Peru, Evelyn spent a month with her, and we missed each other very much. The visit was good for Margaret and Eileen, and it helped me to know how much I missed my wife. (Husband 15)

Spouses also wrote about their intimate times together and expressions of physical affection. Twenty individuals expounded on the significance of the closeness of sexual relations as a way of “showing love and caring” (Husband 4), something that “gets better with age” (Husband 11). Many people remarked that daily hugs and kisses and telling their spouse that they loved them were also important. The comments of two women were typical:

Sex is a beautiful, intimate part of marriage and it is a joy to love and affirm the value of each other. I believe kind and loving words are powerful, but to give your husband physical love is critical for a happy, fulfilling union. (Wife 7)

Sex can be fun. It can promote communication. It promotes relaxing and letting go of the cares of the world for the joy and pleasure for us together. . . . We are always physically close in bed even when sex is not involved. Kisses, hugs, holding hands—we do a lot of that as facets of our sex lives. The biggest sex organ is the one between our ears and we have always taken care of that part of our marriage, too. (Wife 4)

Another woman wrote about how she likes “to be told I’m loved and appreciated, so I tell him I love him. I love to cuddle!” (Wife 2). Couples in great marriages seemed to follow the admonition of a husband who wrote “Never let the romance die. Whatever you did to court her and win her over, continue doing it all of your married life” (Husband 3).

Thus, attending to their sexual relationship throughout their married lives was important for maintaining coupleness and keeping these empty-nest dual-earning marriages vibrant.

*Appreciation, Attentiveness,
Respect, and Forgiveness*

Twenty-six individuals also credited expressing appreciation, being attentive, respecting each other's wishes, and being able to forgive as crucial tools in the marital vibrancy toolbox, tools that help hold the committed couple together. Most individuals wrote that expressing appreciation helped them stay connected with their partners. Several counseled others to never take one's spouse for granted and that appreciation "must be [both] expressed and heard" (Wife 3). As one man reminded us, a marital partner "shouldn't have to guess. The expression of appreciation and your affection is very important. And continue to say it, so you don't close the door" (Husband 15). Some people noted, however, as this woman did, that "at this point in time, much of this [appreciation of each other] is understood. Every once in a while, he thanks me for marrying him. I like that" (Wife 14).

Sprinkled throughout the surveys as well were spouses' comments about being attentive to each other. One wife remarked:

We always every day find something to do or say to please one another. Little acts of kindness. Special things know each other enjoys like a 4-leaf clover, a bouquet of wild flowers. His favorite meals, socks that match together, finding things he's misplaced. (Wife 12)

Many spouses told stories of doing things for each other and receiving thoughtful gifts that reflected how partners both paid attention to needs or wants and acted on this knowledge in order to please the significant other and let them know they are loved.

Here are two tales from a man and a woman:

About 16 years ago, my wife inherited \$10,000, lots of money to us at that time. She spent the money to make one of my dreams come true—a trip to Egypt. I loved it! She hated it but was a good sport. (Husband 14)

We had looked at pianos earlier, but had not decided to buy one. However, one day I arrived home from my day of teaching in a country school and somewhat out of sorts because I had to drive in the mud. When I walked in the house, there was a beautiful spinet piano in the living room, with a big red bow. What a wonderful gift. We have had a piano ever since. (Wife 15)

Remembering acts of kindness, large and small, added to the appreciative words and seemed to help marital partners stay committed. These comments reflected the positive outlook that so many of these respondents wrote about and with, as reported in research question one. In addition, being attentive to each other seemed to be ongoing in these great marriages. One woman marveled at her husband's continuing kindness: "While I was working on this [lengthy questionnaire], he just brought me an ice cream cone" (Wife 11).

Finally, several respondents pointed out the value of being respectful and considerate towards spouses. They touted forgiveness as well, even for rather large transgressions such as this man's: "My wife forgave me for cutting down some trees without consulting her" (Husband 5). Harm done and forgiven, he "learned from getting married [in his forties] and how the give and take process works. That is true love" (Husband 5).

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to determine what marriage and family therapists (MFTs) and family life educators (FLEs) can learn from long-term, dual-earner couples in great marriages. A great marriage was defined in broad terms as one that was strong, satisfying, happy, and of high quality. In this study, couples in or nearing the empty nest stage of their marriages expounded on how they kept it together and kept togetherness in the face of the typical stressors of dual-earnership. Dual-earner couples often confront the challenge of managing work and family responsibilities simultaneously, sometimes leading to handling neither very well (Fraenkel, 2003). The stress of this lifestyle, one that is deliberately selected by some couples and chosen by default by others, can lead to marital distress, unhappiness, or even separation and divorce (Fraenkel). Because marital discord and dissolution can have dire consequences for children and adults in these unions, studying the marital processes of dual-earner couples who are successfully and happily married is helpful and illuminating (ACF, 2006). Marriage and family therapists and family life educators may then teach such successful dual-earner strategies to struggling dual-income couples who hope to stabilize their marriages. Studying the process from the vantage point of the empty nest paints a more complete picture of these dual-earner marriages. This life-cycle inspired portrait takes into account changing roles and morphing family systems.

Professionals who help distressed couples focus on developing more satisfactory relationships usually turn to a standard set of therapeutic tools that include teaching

communication skills and/or prescribing behavioral interventions (Haddock & Bowling, 2001). Other scholars have suggested reframing couples' expectations that they see as stemming from outdated societal mores or ideologies (e.g., Haddock & Rattenborg, 2003). Are satisfied couples who have figured out what works already doing what marital therapists advise, teach, or prescribe? Or are there other techniques or strategies therapists and family educators can learn from these successful couples?

Major Findings

Previous studies of *dual-earner* marriages have surveyed married couples with children still at home (see e.g., Haddock & Rattenborg, 2003). Previous studies of *long-term* marriages and/or *happy* marriages have not always focused on the problems of dual-earners (e.g., Kaslow & Robison, 1996). This study explored how *happily married dual-earner* couples whose children were grown reflected back on what made their marriages great, including whether they had always been happily married. The couples in this study discussed the challenges and stressors they had faced throughout their marriages, what helped them cope, and what strengthened their relationships. Not all of the couples named the problems of dual-earnship, but all had faced stressors that confronted them in the context of dual-earnship. Thus, the strategies that helped them cope with time binds or rebellious children or muddle through other crises served them well throughout their marriages and even served to strengthen their marital bonds. Individuals also recalled the qualities that drew them to their mates and that continued to buoy them through the years, a strategy reminiscent of maintaining a double vision, the 9th developmental task of marriage that Wallerstein (1996) outlined. In other words, they

approached current failings with rosy recollections of past romance with idealized partners. The recollections helped couples cope and renewed their resolve and commitment to work through their problems (Wallerstein).

The findings in this study of the great marriages of dual-earners past the childrearing years substantially affirm those of previous studies that focused on dual-earners who functioned well and also studies of enduring happy marriages in general. Individuals in this study talked about their spouses as their best friends and their marriages as partnerships. Spouses willingly put the marriage and the partner first and above themselves and their own needs. They willingly served, cared for, supported, and encouraged each other instrumentally and emotionally. Couples attempted to communicate in sensitive ways and handled disagreements lovingly. Good communication skills and compromising were highly valued, along with humor and flexibility. They were very committed to working through difficulties and that commitment paid off in the empty-nest years as they looked forward to a happy retirement having honed consummate marital skills.

The stressors, challenges, and conflicts these successfully married men and women wrote about were both related to the fact of their dual-earner status, juggling roles for example, and/or related to the human condition in general as they buried parents and children. The sensitivities spouses afforded to their mates were highly appreciated as well. Spouses wrote about the importance of expressing care and concern in words and behavior. Individuals praised their spouses for many activities that mimicked the therapeutic intervention of "caring days," a strategy Kaslow and Robison (1996) recommended for disconnected couples in therapy. Couples also savored time spent

together, including time devoted to sexual expression. Even when their families were young and dual-earner stressors ran high, these partners made time to spend together without children. As noted in previous research as well, a happy marriage incorporated having fun and enjoying laughter.

While the findings of the present study are similar to those of other studies of successful dual-earner marriages, the value of this study lies in seeing how the strategies of these successful dual-earner marriages played out in the long run. The couples in this study did not all have consistently satisfying marriages, not did they escape typical dual-earner problems. Yet they all weathered the years to wind up in great marriages. What can marriage and family therapists and family life educators learn from them? In what ways can this knowledge be applied?

Therapeutic Implications

The results of this study support therapeutic implications noted in prior research and refute others. In addition, the findings point to therapeutic interventions that may be particularly salient for dual-earners with children still at home. Previous studies contained both stated and implied suggestions and implications for marital therapy for dual-earner couples who were suffering from marital discord due to the effects of this lifestyle (e.g., Haddock et al., 2001; Wallerstein, 1996; Zimmerman et al., 2003). The Colorado research team, for example, advised therapists to educate clients about the importance of equality in a strong marriage and about the empirically-supported benefits of dual-earnership for individuals, couples, and families (Haddock & Rattenborg, 2003; Haddock et al., 2001, 2002; Zimmerman et al., 2001, 2003). Individuals, especially

women, reported gaining self-esteem from being able to pursue both work and personal interests; couples apparently profited from the closeness of working as a team; and children fared better intellectually and emotionally, in addition to learning egalitarian values from the marital style their parents modeled for them (Haddock & Rattenborg). Qualitative analysis of the words and musings of the dual-earners in the current study of empty-nesters supported these conclusions regarding the therapeutic intervention of discussing the benefits of more role equality in marriage. Regardless of initial expectations, interchangeable roles evolved for these dual-earning men and women over the life course of their marriages.

Haddock and her colleagues (2001) theorized also that mothers would experience less stress from guilt if they were more informed about research that showed how the presence of an employed mother benefited children. In the opinion of the Colorado research team, societal messages for mothers to stay at home lagged behind the reality that the majority of mothers worked for pay. These therapist-researchers admonished therapists and clients to catch up with reality and learn about the benefits of dual-earnership rather than concern themselves with relationship skills training (Haddock & Bowling, 2001; Haddock & Rattenborg, 2003; Haddock et al., 2001, 2002; Zimmerman et al., 2001, 2003). The dual-earners in the current study, however, did not talk about having felt guilt while working and raising their children. Couples focused instead on working as a team in rearing their children. The results of the current study suggest that therapeutic conversations about teamwork and partnership expectations might be more helpful as a therapeutic strategy than assuaging guilt or “(re)defining manhood” (Zimmerman et al., 2003, p. 121).

The empty-nesters in the current study conveyed strong, obvious messages about the importance of being able to communicate clearly and to maintain a sense of commitment to the marriage, as did the respondents in other studies (e.g., Haddock et al., 2001). There was little discourse in the analyses of the Colorado study, however, that specifically dealt with conflict resolution in face of the inevitable challenges of this lifestyle (Haddock et al.) The suggested therapeutic interventions from the Colorado team seemed to ignore that couples acknowledged experiencing some strains. The Colorado couples appeared to pride themselves on open communication styles, however, which may be one answer to how they resolved inevitable conflicts when they occurred. Lauer and Lauer (1986b) also suggested throughout their how-to book on marriage that couples improve patterns of communication and conflict resolution. In the current study, older dual-earner married pairs valued honest and open communication and used it liberally and advantageously when resolving conflicts or making sure each partner felt cared for and understood. Respondents also described reflective listening, a skill often taught to couples in therapy rooms and marriage education classes. The results of the present study imply that therapists should continue to use these standard interventions to help shore up the communication processes of dual-earner couples as they talk over the problems of this lifestyle. Focusing on communication may also help couples develop more "trust, candor, consideration, and compromise" (Kaslow & Hammerschmidt, 1992, p. 35), qualities that the 20 couples in Kaslow and Hammerschmidt's study named as essential ingredients for long-term good marriages.

In addition to process issues, such as how couples talk to each other, therapists may also want to guide couples towards talking about certain content areas. In the

current study, respondents noted that a clear understanding of shared values helped them maintain their resolve and commitment to work as a team. Thus, couples in therapy may profit from thorough consideration and clarification of their particular values as well as how to act more consistently in accordance with those values, a strategy Lauer and Lauer (1986b) also endorsed.

One particularly noteworthy finding from the present study of empty-nested, dual-earner couples in great marriages, was their collective and pervasive sense of optimism. Even in the face of marital and/or family troubles, individuals were flexible, resilient, and convinced that problems could be solved and happiness eventually achieved or reestablished. While the individuals in this study may have been inherently optimistic, therapists can also teach and engender optimism (Seligman, 1991). Therapists who practice positive psychotherapy also help clients increase happiness and have more pleasant, engaged, and meaningful lives (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006). Bachand and Caron (2001) echoed Kaslow's (1982) advice to marital therapists nearly two decades earlier about instilling hope at the outset of therapy that healthy and fruitful long-term relationships are attainable, the ostensible assumption and finding behind all of these studies, including the present one. Indeed, orientation towards the future, an element of hopefulness, was one characteristic of partners in the long-term good marriages Kaslow and Hammerschmidt (1992) analyzed. Kaslow and Robison (1996) as well specifically recommended helping couples "let go of anger and adopt a more positive attitude" (p. 167).

Nevertheless, the dual-earner couples in the present study tempered their optimism with realism. They noted in their graphs of marital happiness that the marital

process contained peaks and valleys. One therapeutic implication of this outlook would be for therapists to help couples normalize the stressors in their dual-earner lives. Despite experiencing some problems throughout their married lives, these couples reached the empty-nest stage characterizing their marriages as great, strong, successful, and satisfying. Lauer and Lauer (1986b) and Lauer et al. (1990) also implied in the discussions of their findings the usefulness of normalizing some difficulties for couples in marital distress. In other words, great marriages contained some not so great moments, or even years, that individuals should probably expect (Lauer & Lauer; Weiner-Davis, 2006a). Kaslow and Robison (1996) as well advised therapists to counsel partners to allow for flexibility in their expectations for their marriages and Weiner-Davis has written that in the end, after experiencing the normal stressors of marriage during various stages, couples can expect to like each other again.

Therapists can help couples keep this end in mind as spouses deal with various life cycle issues in their marriages. Wallerstein (1996) also conceptualized marriage as an ongoing, changing, and ever-developing process. The nine psychological tasks of marriage that Wallerstein delineated provide a framework for marital therapists to assess problems in the dual-earner marital system, and may help particularly psychologically-minded partners see where they can strengthen the boundaries around their relationship and/or view their problems developmentally. In other words, following McGoldrick and Carter's (2003) observation that couples coming to therapy fail to take the long-term view, concentrating on the relevant tasks they have yet to master may help dual-earner partners gain perspective on their problems or issues just as much as Haddock and Bowling's (2001) suggestions about contextualizing them by confronting societal norms

that are no longer truly normative. In the current study of dual-earners whose children were grown, the process of reflecting on the process of marriage is instructive. Therapists can help clients take this long-term view to envision their lives with the problems solved and the marriage strengthened.

Individuals in the current study also extolled the importance of spending time together, without children present, throughout their marriages. This finding clearly validates Weiner-Davis's (2006b) prescription for couples to prioritize closeness at all stages of their relationship. In the current study, spouses wrote over and over about the loving attentiveness they received from their mates and the appreciation they returned for these specific behaviors. Marital partners also wrote about how they encouraged each other to succeed in their respective fields, educational pursuits, hobbies, etc. Knowing that a spouse supported individual efforts served to reduce role strain one might otherwise feel. Therapists can encourage spouses to express such support for each other's efforts and goals, and to do it often. As noted above, Kaslow and Robison (1996) stated that instituting "caring days" would help couples develop more sensitivity to each other's needs (p. 168). Presumably couples might then end up nurturing each other, the 8th task in which the couples in Wallerstein's (1996) sample excelled.

Based on the overall findings of this study, two additional therapeutic interventions suggest themselves for dual-earner couples experiencing stress directly or indirectly related to this lifestyle. Particularly evident in the words of the survey respondents was their collective sense of optimism and hopefulness. Even though they wrote retrospectively about concerns that affected them earlier in their marriages, couples in great marriages wrote about how they viewed such problems as challenges rather than

obstacles. They not only knew there was a “light at the end of the tunnel,” as one man said, they also were convinced they could reach it and were committed to do so in partnership with spouses. Reflecting about this optimism was another example of Wallerstein’s (1996) double vision: it was there in their past and kept them from falling or failing in their future as they looked forward to empty-nest activities and togetherness. Thus, one intervention might be for marital partners to write not only about their expectations for the future, as therapists often ask clients to do, but also to write “retrospectively.” In other words, with therapeutic hopefulness, a therapist might ask clients to write “when you look back from several years hence, what would you want to be able to say about how you and your spouse confronted your problems and how they were solved.” As an alternative strategy, therapists might also use a modified version of this questionnaire itself for clients to both reflect on their initial attractions to each other and to think about how they wanted to write the narratives of their future together. Murray and Murray (2004) promoted a similar intervention, the Couple’s Resource Map, for premarital couples as partners endeavored to stay on track towards the marriage they envisioned creating.

Limitations and Strengths of Study

As with most of the studies cited in this thesis, the sample was ethnically homogeneous. Respondents were primarily white and European-American. What distinguished this sample from the high-achieving, upper middle class, dual-earner pairs the Colorado team attracted, however, was their diversity in terms of vocation and perhaps socioeconomic status during the years their children were growing up. This

diversity can be considered a strength of the study because it broadens the generalizability of the findings. Quite a few individuals labored in agriculture, public school systems, small businesses, and government jobs, employment sectors not usually known for paying high wages. Many of these individuals talked about their lives as much in terms of both parents *having* to work as much as *wanting* to work. Maternal employment was a given for financial security, not a luxury. Some people also talked about having to hold two jobs to make ends meet, particularly when the children were small. Financial concerns loomed large for these respondents but did not always cause conflict. In many cases, the financial woes bound partners to each other as their sense of commitment and forward-looking orientation meant that they worked to tackle financial problems together and avoid debt altogether. Thus, the more socioeconomically diverse nature of this sample may mean that the therapeutic implications would apply to a wider swath of MFT clientele who are dual-earners, not just those who are well educated and well off.

Another limitation of this study was that the questionnaire couples completed did not specifically ask these older respondents what dual-earner stressors they had while they were raising their children. But this is also a strength of the study because the fact that many of these dual-earners mentioned the stressors after the fact without being asked affirmed that these were important stressors and challenges not easily forgotten. Couples in great marriages managed to deal successfully with their stressors and challenges, both specific to dual-earnership and not. MFTs and FLEs can thus learn from the strategies these couples used throughout the life cycle, not just during the childrearing years. In

this study we get to see the whole picture of the marriage from the experts as they looked back on the lives they had lived so far.

A third limitation of this study, however, was its retrospective rather than truly longitudinal design. Analyzing a one-time qualitative survey of educated and financially secure volunteers from the vantage of an empty nest raises questions of whether dual-earner trials strengthened these marriages or if strong marriages buffered the trials. Perhaps the process was recursive as the married dual-earner couple system traveled through time, becoming stronger from dealing with trials and using the enhanced strength to face future ordeals. A longitudinal study of dual-earner marriages spanning the child-raising years and beyond might provide a better answer to that question. For now, at least, the findings in this study revealed some elements of how dual-earner couples lived and came to enjoy great marriages.

REFERENCES

- Administration for Children and Families. (2006). The healthy marriage initiative. Retrieved November 3, 2006, from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/about/mission.html>
- Amarapurkar, S. S., & Danes, S. M. (2005). Farm business-owning couples: Interrelationships among business tensions, relationship conflict quality, and spousal satisfaction. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues, 26*, 419-441.
- Bachand, L. L., & Caron, S. L. (2001). Ties that bind: A qualitative study of happy long-term marriages. *Contemporary Family Therapy, 23*, 105-121.
- Becvar, D. S., & Becvar, R. J. (2000). *Family therapy: A systemic integration* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2003). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Brown, T. L., Graves, T. A., & Williams, S. A. (1997). Dual-earner families: The impact of gender and culture on this normative family structure and the implications for therapy. *Family Therapy, 24*, 177-189.
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2006, April 27). Families with own children: Employment status of parents by age of youngest child and family type, 2004-05 annual averages. Retrieved June 30, 2006, from <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/famec.t04.htm>

- Dahl, C. M., & Boss, P. (2005). The use of phenomenology for family therapy research: The search for meaning. In D. H. Sprenkle & F. P. Piercy (Eds.), *Research methods in family therapy* (2nd ed., pp. 63-84). New York: Guilford.
- Driver, J., Tabares, A., Shapiro, A., Nahm, E. Y., & Gottman, J. M. (2003). Interactional patterns in marital success and failure: Gottman laboratory studies. In F. Walsh (Ed.), *Normal family processes: Growing diversity and complexity* (3rd ed., pp. 493-513). New York: Guilford.
- Ehrenberg, M., Gearing-Small, M., Hunter, M. A., & Small, B. J. (2001). Childcare task division and shared parenting attitudes in dual-earner families with young children. *Family Relations*, 50, 143-153.
- Fischer, C. A. (1998). *Gale directory of publications and broadcast media* (Vols. 1-2). Detroit, MI: Gale Research.
- Fraenkel, P. (2003). Contemporary two-parent families: Navigating work and family challenges. In F. Walsh (Ed.), *Normal family processes: Growing diversity and complexity* (3rd ed., pp. 61-95). New York: Guilford.
- Frisco, M. L., & Williams, K. (2003). Perceived housework equity, marital happiness, and divorce in dual-earner households. *Journal of Family Issues*, 24, 51-73.
- Gottman, J. M. (1993). The roles of conflict engagement, escalation, and avoidance in marital interaction: A longitudinal view of five types of couples. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 61, 6-15.
- Gottman, J. M. (1999). *The marriage clinic: A scientifically-based marital therapy*. New York: Norton.

- Haddock, S. A. (2002). A content analysis of articles pertaining to therapeutic considerations for dual-income couples (1979-1999). *The American Journal of Family Therapy, 30*, 141-156.
- Haddock, S. A., & Bowling, S. W. (2001). Therapists' approaches to the normative challenges of dual-earner couples: Negotiating outdated societal ideologies. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy, 13*, 91-120.
- Haddock, S. A., & Rattenborg, K. (2003). Benefits and challenges of dual-earning: Perspectives of successful couples. *The American Journal of Family Therapy, 31*, 325-344.
- Haddock, S. A., Zimmerman, T. S., Current, L. R., & Harvey, A. (2002). The parenting practices of dual-earner couples who successfully balance family and work. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy, 14*, 37-55.
- Haddock, S. A., Zimmerman, T. S., Ziemba, S. J., & Current, L. R. (2001). Ten adaptive strategies for family and work balance: Advice from successful families. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 27*, 445-458.
- Kaslow, F. W. (1982). Portrait of the healthy couple. *Psychiatric Clinics of North America, 5*, 519-527.
- Kaslow, F. W., & Hammerschmidt, H. (1992). Long term "good" marriages: The seemingly essential ingredients. In B. J. Brothers (Ed.), *Couples therapy, multiple perspectives: In search of universal threads* (pp. 15-38). New York: Haworth.
- Kaslow, F., & Robison, J. A. (1996). Long-term satisfying marriages: Perceptions of contributing factors. *The American Journal of Family Therapy, 24*, 153-168.

- Lauer, R. H., & Lauer, J. C. (1986a). Factors in long-term marriages. *Journal of Family Issues*, 7, 382-390.
- Lauer, R. H., & Lauer, J. C. (1986b). *'Til death do us part: A study and guide to long-term marriage*. New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Lauer, R. H., Lauer, J. C., & Kerr, S. T. (1990). The long-term marriage: Perceptions of stability and satisfaction. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 31, 189-195.
- Marshall, N. L., & Barnett, R. C. (1993). Work-family strains and gains among two-earner couples. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 21, 64-78.
- McGoldrick, M., & Carter, B. (2003). The family life cycle. In F. Walsh (Ed.), *Normal family processes: Growing diversity and complexity* (3rd ed., pp. 375-398). New York: Guilford.
- Murray, C. E., & Murray, T. L. (2004). Solution-focused premarital counseling: Helping couples build a vision for their marriage. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 30, 349-358.
- Perry-Jenkins, M., Repetti, R. L., & Crouter, A. C. (2000). Work and family in the 1990s. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62, 981-998.
- Perry-Jenkins, M., & Turner, E. (2004). Jobs, marriage, and parenting: Working it out in dual-earner families. In M. Coleman & L. H. Ganong (Eds.), *Handbook of contemporary families: Considering the past, contemplating the future* (pp. 155-173). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Schwartz, P. (1994). *Love between equals: How peer marriage really works*. New York: The Free Press.

- Schwartz, P. (2002). Maintaining relationships in the millennium. In J. H. Harvey & A. Wenzel (Eds.), *A clinician's guide to maintaining and enhancing close relationships* (pp. 303-312). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Seligman, M. E. P. (1991). *Learned optimism*. New York: Knopf.
- Seligman, M. E. P., Rashid, T., & Parks, A. C. (2006). Positive psychotherapy. *American Psychologist*, *61*, 774-788.
- Stevens, D., Kiger, G., & Riley, P. J. (2001). Working hard and hardly working: Domestic labor and marital satisfaction among dual-earner couples. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *63*, 514-526.
- Tatman, A. W., Hovestadt, A. J., Yelsma, P., Fenell, D. L., & Canfield, B. S. (2006). Work and family conflict: An often overlooked issue in couple and family therapy. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, *28*, 39-51.
- Tsang, L. L. W., Harvey, C. D. H., Duncan, K. A., & Sommer, R. (2003). The effects of children, dual-earner status, sex role traditionalism, and marital structure on marital happiness over time. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, *24*, 5-26.
- Wallerstein, J. S. (1994). The early psychological tasks of marriage: Part 1. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *64*, 640-650.
- Wallerstein, J. S. (1996). The early psychological tasks of marriage: Part 2. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *66*, 217-227.
- Wallerstein, J. S., & Blakeslee, S. (1995). *The good marriage: How & why love lasts*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Weiner-Davis, M. (2006a). The marriage map. Retrieved April 15, 2007, from http://www.divorcebusting.com/a_marriage_map.htm

Weiner-Davis, M. (2006b). Time together. Retrieved April 15, 2007, from

http://www.divorcebusting.com/a_time_together.htm

White, J. M., & Klein, D. M. (2002). *Family theories* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA:

Sage.

Yogev, S. (1986). Relationships between stress and marital satisfaction among dual-earner couples. *Women & Therapy, 5*, 313-330.

Zimmerman, T. S., Haddock, S. A., Current, L. R., & Ziemba, S. (2003). Intimate partnership: Foundation to the successful balance of family and work. *The American Journal of Family Therapy, 31*, 107-124.

Zimmerman, T. S., Haddock, S. A., Ziemba, S., & Rust, A. (2001). Family organizational labor: Who's calling the plays? *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy, 13*, 65-90.

APPENDICES

Appendix A. Letter to Newspapers

Newspaper Name
Address

Dear Family Life Editor:

We are beginning a new research project at Utah State University and the University of Nebraska about *Great Marriages*, and would appreciate your help by publishing the enclosed news story. The press release can be published at any time that is convenient for you.

The purpose of this study is to better understand how couples develop highly-successful marriages. A diverse sample of several hundred couples is being sought with the help of the media around the U.S. We are looking for couples who perceive they have a strong, satisfying, happy, high-quality relationship with each other. We will send them a questionnaire in order to gain an in-depth understanding of highly-successful marriages. The findings will be used for Cooperative Extension program development in our respective states and nationally, and educational efforts to improve the quality of marriages.

The questionnaire has both open-ended questions and closed-ended questions. We encourage couples to keep the original questionnaire as an important document, a self study of their marital relationship to date and encourage them to make a copy and send it to us.

We would be happy to send you a copy of the instrument, if you would like to see it. You can also call either of us to get more information for a more complete story about our marriage research to publish in your newspaper.

We have more than 30 years of experience in the family field and together have authored 17 books and a multitude of articles about marriage and family life.

Sincerely,

Linda Skogrand, PhD
Assistant Professor, Extension Family Life Specialist
Specialist
Utah State University
Phone: (435) 797-8183
E-mail: Lindas@ext.usu.edu

John DeFrain, PhD
Professor, Extension Family Life
University of Nebraska
Phone: (402) 472-7211
Email: jdefrain1@unl.edu

Appendix B. Press Release

Great Marriages Needed for Research Project

Logan, Utah and Lincoln, Nebraska – Couples who believe they have a *Great Marriage* are needed for a new research project at Utah State University and University of Nebraska, Lincoln. This research is being conducted by Dr. Linda Skogrand at Utah State University and Dr. John DeFrain at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. Dr. Linda Skogrand, Extension Family Life Specialist said, “We need the help of several hundred couples nation-wide to tell us how they have created a strong, satisfying, happy, high-quality relationship.” Dr. DeFrain added, “The folks who have great marriages are the experts. We need to learn from them how they did it.”

The research will be used for Cooperative Extension program development and educational efforts to improve the quality of marriages in our respective states, nationally and internationally.

Volunteer couples are encouraged to contact Dr. Linda Skogrand, via e-mail at Lindas@ext.usu.edu, by phone at (435) 797-8183 or by mail at the following address to receive a questionnaire:

Dr. Linda Skogrand
Utah State University
2705 Old Main
Logan, Utah 84322-2705

Volunteers will be sent a questionnaire to complete together and return postage-paid. Couples will be able to view the questionnaire before they decide to participate anonymously in the study or not.

The questionnaire consists of 46 open-ended questions about various aspects of a strong marriage, plus an inventory of couple strengths. The questionnaire takes anywhere from an hour to three hours to fill complete. The questionnaires will be analyzed seeing what the researchers can learn from each couple, and what can be learned from all the couples as a group. Couples are encouraged to keep the original copy of the questionnaire as an important document, a self-study of their healthy marital relationship to date, and something to be passed down to their children.

Over the past 30 years Dr. Skogrand and Dr. DeFrain have co-authored 17 books and a multitude of professional articles on family issues. They have both have a strong desire to enhance marriage and family life.

Appendix C. Consent Letter

Dear Participants,

The purpose of this study is to better understand how couples develop highly-successful marriages, and the qualities of those marriages. A diverse sample of volunteer couples, who perceive they have a strong, satisfying, happy, high-quality relationship, are being invited to participate in this study to gain an in-depth understanding of highly-successful marriages. The findings will be used for Cooperative Extension program development and educational efforts to improve the quality of marriages locally, nationally, and internationally.

The questionnaire mainly consists of 46 open-ended questions, plus an inventory of couple strengths. I ask that you complete the questionnaire as a couple; there is a place for the husband and the wife to respond after each question. The questionnaire will take from an hour to three hours to complete. The completed questionnaire will be a *story* of each great marriage. You can choose not to answer specific questions and at any time you can choose not to participate in the study. If you choose to complete the questionnaire, you can then mail it in the enclosed post-paid envelope. The information you provide will be anonymous.

The stories will then be analyzed by the researchers. There will be an analysis of all the couples' stories as a group, seeing what general principles or themes can be ascertained from the group of couples.

In many previous studies using this type of approach, I have found that participants often gain a good deal of satisfaction in passing on to others what they have learned about life. In this particular study, your marital successes will be used as examples for others to learn from.

Risks involved are minimal, because you are volunteering for the study and can withdraw at any time. You are encouraged to contact me to ask any questions about the research you might have at the phone number listed below, and I will answer them honestly. I encourage you to keep the original copy of the story as a valuable document describing an important part of the life of your family. I do not ask for your names and identifying details which could identify you will never be used in any written or presented accounts of the research.

The results of the study will be published in journal articles, presented at scholarly meetings, and used in developing educational programs for couples and families. I have worked for many years with state and national professional organizations helping to strengthen couples and families, and the results of this study will be very influential in the creation of marriage and family programming.

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject that have not been answered by the investigators, feel free to contact True Rubal, Utah State University Institutional Review Board, at (435) 797-1821.

Please send a copy of the questionnaire to me in the enclosed, post-paid envelope. By returning the questionnaire, you are indicating your consent to participate in our study.

Thank you for your kindness and your contribution to a better understanding of the creation of strong marriages in our country.

Sincerely,

Linda Skogrand, PhD
Assistant Professor and Extension Family Life Specialist
Principal Investigator
Department of Family, Consumer and Human Development
College of Education and Human Sciences
2705 Old Main
Utah State University
Logan, Utah 84322
Office: (435) 797-8183
E-mail: Lindas@ext.usu.edu

Appendix D. Questionnaire

GREAT MARRIAGES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY***Questionnaire******Principal Investigator:***

Linda Skogrand, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor and Extension Family
Life Specialist
Department of Family, Consumer and
Human Development
Utah State University
Phone: 435 797-8183
E-mail: lindas@ext.usu.edu

GREAT MARRIAGES, PART I:**General Information**

1. Your ages:

___ *her* age

___ *his* age

2. This is *her*:

___ first marriage

___ second marriage

___ third marriage

This is *his*:

___ first marriage

___ second marriage

___ third marriage

3. The number of years you have been in this marriage.

___ years

4. In your own words, please describe the ethnic/cultural group to which you belong:

_____.

5. Highest level of education you have achieved (please describe):

_____ *her* education.

_____ *his* education.

6. Are you in paid employment?

___ *husband*, yes

___ *husband*, no

___ *wife*, yes

___ *wife*, no

7. How many hours per week do you work for pay?

___ hours of *husband*

___ hours of *wife*

8. What do you call your job?

_____ *husband*
_____ *wife*

9. What kind of work do you do on your job?

_____ *husband*
_____ *wife*

10. Approximate yearly gross household income:

What percentage of your yearly gross household income does each partner contribute?

_____ % *wife's* contribution

_____ % *husband's* contribution

11. Age of children (if you are parents):

_____ years

_____ years

_____ years

_____ years

_____ years

_____ years

GREAT MARRIAGES, PART II

Open-Ended Questions

Three key points for couples to consider while filling out this part of the questionnaire:

- *This questionnaire looks really long. But, on careful examination, you will see that I'm simply leaving you a lot of space to express your thoughts. Depending on how much time you wish to devote to the process, I am confident you can fill out the questionnaire in an hour's time up to three hours. Since this can be an important document for you as a couple to keep, I believe the time you invest will be well spent.*
- *Answer questions without worrying about spelling, punctuation, grammar, or correct word usage. Just write freely. Tell me the story of your marriage in your own unique way. Also, add extra pages or write on the back of the pages if you need more space.*
- *So that you don't influence each other's responses to the questions, I suggest that each of you to complete the questionnaire before you look at what the other person has written. After you're finished writing, I encourage you to enjoy discussing your individual perceptions about your marriage with each other.*

1. You have volunteered for a study of great marriages. Tell us about your great marriage. What's it like, and why is it so good? Is *great* marriage the best term for you? Can you think of a better one?

Her response:

His response:

2. Why did you get married?

Her response:

His response:

3. Please describe what you consider to be your *family* and the environment in which all of you live. For example, who are the members of your family, and how old are they? (Be sure to include yourself.) What does each family member do? Please describe the places in which your family members live, and how all of you fit into the larger community.

Her response:

His response:

4. Please describe the family you grew up in. How would you compare it to the family you are creating today?

Her response:

His response:

5. Beside the family you grew up in, are there other families you lived in before creating the relationship you are now in? (i.e., has either partner been divorced, widowed, and so forth?)

Her response:

His response:

6. How did you meet? Please tell the story. Was it love at first sight? Were you friends first, then lovers? Details, please.

Her response:

His response:

7. What were the qualities that attracted you to your mate? Are these qualities still important to you today, or has your thinking changed on all this?

Her response:

His response:

8. What was it, while you were dating, that led you to believe you would have a good marriage?

Her response:

His response:

9. How did the age at which you got married affect your marital relationship?

Her response:

His response:

10. Did you live on your own before marriage, or did you go from your parents' home straight to marriage with your spouse? Please discuss.

Her response:

His response:

11. Did you live together before marriage? If so, was this useful to do or not?

Her response:

His response:

12. It has been said that, "You don't marry an individual. You marry a whole family." Could you describe the ups and downs of blending two different extended families into one marriage. How do you get along today?

Her response:

His response:

13. What are the strengths of your marriage? Please list and write about each strength.

Her response:

His response:

14. What are the areas of potential growth in your marriage? In other words, what are some things that you would like to see change? Please discuss each.

Her response:

His response:

15. How did you learn about what it takes to have a strong marriage?

Her response:

His response:

16. How did you prepare for getting married (marriage education classes, books, talking with clergy, etc.)? How was it useful or not?

Her response:

His response:

17. What preparation do you wish you had?

Her response:

His response:

18. Do you know other couples that have strong marriages? If so, what makes them strong?

Her response:

His response:

19. Do you know couples that are having difficulties? If so, what causes these difficulties?

Her response:

His response:

20. How many months or years did it take before you two had created a great marriage? Please describe the process.

Her response: _____ Months **or** _____ Years

His response: _____ Months **or** _____ Years

21. Were there high points in your marriage? Please tell a story. And low points? Please tell a story.

Her response:

His response:

22. What are the challenges you face in your marriage today? Please describe each.

Her response:

His response:

23. Please tell a story that best illustrates the strengths of your marriage.

Her response:

His response:

24. Please tell a story that best illustrates the area or areas of potential growth of your marriage.

Her response:

His response:

25. Please describe the challenges you have faced together. How did you deal with these challenges?

Her response:

His response:

26. Please define the word *commitment*, and describe the level of commitment you have for each other. Could you explain this for us in a way we could understand in our heart?

Her response:

His response:

27. Could you describe your thinking on the importance of expressing appreciation and affection in a marital relationship?

Her response:

His response:

28. Could you describe communication patterns in your marriage? Do you do a good job communicating with each other? Are you generally positive with each other? When you have a conflict over some issue, how is it usually resolved? Please give some examples.

Her response:

His response:

29. Do you like to spend time together? What do you do together that is enjoyable? How would you describe the balance you have between togetherness and separateness? How much apart time do you each need, besides the time you spend at work?

Her response:

His response:

30. Please describe the very best time in your marriage. A special time in which you were the happiest and most connected to each other; the most engaged as a couple and in love.

Her response:

His response:

31. Do you share religious, spiritual, ethical, or social values and beliefs which are important to your marriage? Please describe these values and beliefs. What is important about them that contributes to the strength of your marriage? Are there areas in which you have different perspectives on these issues?

Her response:

His response:

32. How do you manage stress and crisis in your marriage? Could you please describe some of the stressors you face, and how you deal with them. Have you had a major crisis or crises in your marriage in the past few years? How did you deal with them?

Her response:

His response:

33. How do you manage conflict or fight?

Her response:

His response:

34. To whom would you go if you had a problem in your marriage?

Her response:

His response:

35. Have you ever thought of divorcing and/or come close to divorcing? What was going on at that time, and how did you patch things up? Looking back, how do you feel about this experience now?

Her response:

His response:

36. Would you describe your marriage as a traditional marriage or a more contemporary marriage? (To explain further, does the man perform traditionally male roles in the marriage, and the woman performs traditionally female roles? Or, do you assign roles on a different basis?) Please explain. And, would you say your marriage is like your parents' marriage in this regard, or different?

Her response:

His response:

37. How is power divided up in your marriage?

Her response

His response

38. Talk about money. Disagreements over money are perhaps the most common type of disagreements couples have. How do you manage money? How do you deal with debt? Who is in charge? What conflicts do you have over money, if any, and how do you resolve them?

Her response:

His response:

39. [For those couples with children] How old were you when your children were born? How long were you married? Were they planned pregnancies? How did the arrival of your first child affect your marital relationship?

Her response:

His response:

40. [For those couples with children] Couples sometimes disagree over approaches to parenting. Are your approaches to parenting generally in agreement? What is your philosophy of parenthood, and how is it similar to or different from that of your spouse?

Her response:

His response:

41. [For those couples with children] Children bring joy to a marriage, and also can put a strain on the marriage. What do you think? How have the children brought you closer together? And, in what ways have they added stress to your marriage?

Her response:

His response:

42. Tell us about the part sex plays in a great marriage.

Her response:

His response:

43. Are there any ethnic or cultural issues or differences that affect your marriage relationship? Please discuss these if applicable.

Her response:

His response:

44. If you were to draw a graph of your marital happiness over the years, what would it look like?

Her response:

His response:

45. What will the future bring for you as a couple and for your family?

Her response:

His response:

46. What would be most useful in helping couples prepare for and continue to have good marriages? Your advice please.

Her response:

His response:

GREAT MARRIAGES, PART III***Marital Strengths Inventory***

On the next pages, rate each quality in your marriage on a five-point scale:

5 = very high

4 = high

3 = undecided

2 = low

1 = very low

Or, note that a particular quality does not apply to your marriage :

NA = not applicable

APPRECIATION AND AFFECTION

(5 = very high; 4 = high; 3 = undecided; 2 = low; 1 = very low; NA = not applicable)

Husband Wife

- ___ ___ caring for each other
- ___ ___ respect for each other
- ___ ___ respect for individuality
- ___ ___ physical and emotional affection
- ___ ___ tolerance
- ___ ___ playfulness
- ___ ___ humor
- ___ ___ put-downs and sarcasm are rare
- ___ ___ we are both committed to helping enhance each other's self-esteem
- ___ ___ a feeling of security
- ___ ___ safety
- ___ ___ we genuinely like each other, and we like being with each other
- ___ ___ *Over-all rating of appreciation and affection in our marriage*

COMMITMENT

122

(5 = very high; 4 = high; 3 = undecided; 2 = low; 1 = very low; NA = not applicable)

Husband Wife

trust

honesty

dependability

fidelity or faithfulness

we are one

we are family

sacrifice

sharing

Over-all rating of commitment in our marriage

POSITIVE COMMUNICATION

(5 = very high; 4 = high; 3 = undecided; 2 = low; 1 = very low; NA = not applicable)

Husband Wife

- | | | |
|-----|-----|---|
| ___ | ___ | open, straightforward communication |
| ___ | ___ | discussion rather than lectures |
| ___ | ___ | positive, not negative communication |
| ___ | ___ | cooperative, not competitive |
| ___ | ___ | non-blaming |
| ___ | ___ | a few squabbles occur, but generally are consensus building,
rather than a winner and a loser |
| ___ | ___ | compromise |
| ___ | ___ | agreeing to disagree on occasion |
| ___ | ___ | acceptance of the notion that differences can be a strength in
our marriage and that we do not have to be exactly the same |
| ___ | ___ | <i>Over-all rating of <u>positive communication</u> in our marriage</i> |

ENJOYABLE TIME TOGETHER

(5 = very high; 4 = high; 3 = undecided; 2 = low; 1 = very low; NA = not applicable)

Husband Wife

_____ _____ good things take time, and we take time to be with each other

_____ _____ we share quality time, and in great quantity we enjoy each other's company

_____ _____ serendipitous (unplanned, spontaneous) good times

_____ _____ simple, inexpensive good times

_____ _____ *Over-all rating of the time we share together in our marriage*

SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING

125

(5 = very high; 4 = high; 3 = undecided; 2 = low; 1 = very low; NA = not applicable)

Husband Wife

____ ____ happiness

____ ____ optimism

____ ____ hope

____ ____ a sense of peace

____ ____ mental health

____ ____ a functional religion or set of shared ethical values which guide us through life's challenges

____ ____ oneness with God

____ ____ oneness with Nature

____ ____ supportive extended family members

____ ____ involvement in the community, and support from the community

____ ____ the world is our home and we feel comfortable in it

____ ____ *Over-all rating of spiritual well-being in our marriage*

THE ABILITY TO MANAGE STRESS AND CRISIS EFFECTIVELY

(5 = very high; 4 = high; 3 = undecided; 2 = low; 1 = very low; NA = not applicable)

Husband Wife

_____ share feelings

_____ understand each other

_____ help each other

_____ forgiveness

_____ "don't worry, be happy"

_____ growing through crises together

_____ patience

_____ resilience (the ability to "hang in there")

_____ Over-all rating of our ability to cope with stress and crisis.

OVER-ALL RATINGS OF THE MARITAL RELATIONSHIP

(5= very high; 4 = high; 3 = undecided; 2 = low; 1 = very low)

Husband Wife

- ___ ___ The degree of *closeness* in my relationship with my spouse.
- ___ ___ The degree of *satisfaction* in my relationship with my spouse.
- ___ ___ The degree of *happiness* in my relationship with my spouse.
- ___ ___ The degree of *strength* in my relationship with my spouse.

OVER-ALL RATINGS OF PARENT/CHILD RELATIONSHIPS (IF APPLICABLE)

(5= very high; 4 = high; 3 = undecided; 2 = low; 1 = very low)

Note: Relationships may be different between parents and individual children. If you would like to make separate ratings for each child, please do so.

Husband Wife

- ___ ___ The degree of *closeness* in my relationship with my child or children.
- ___ ___ The degree of *satisfaction* in my relationship with my child or children.
- ___ ___ The degree of *happiness* in my relationship with my child or children.
- ___ ___ The degree of *strength* in my relationship with my child or children.

Appendix E. IRB Approval

**Utah State
UNIVERSITY**

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD OFFICE
9530 Old Main Hill
Military Science Room 216
Logan UT 84322-9530
Telephone: (435) 797-1821
FAX: (435) 797-3769

USU Assurance: FWA#00003308
Protocol # 1227

SPO #:
AES #: UTA00

2/6/2007

MEMORANDUM

TO: Linda Skogrand
Reva Rosenband

FROM: True M. Rubal-Fox, IRB Administrator

SUBJECT: Continuation Approval of your Protocol:
*Strategies Couples Use to Deal with Difficulty in
Marriage*

UMC: 2705



This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file. Any change affecting participants must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation. The Institutional Review Board originally approved your protocol on 3/10/2005. As required for yearly continuation review, you have received another year's approval through 2/1/2008. All approved protocols are subject to continuing review at least annually, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Injuries or any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the IRB Office (797-1821).

Prior to involving participants, properly executed informed consent must be obtained from each participant or from an authorized representative, and documentation of informed consent must be kept on file for at least three years after the project ends. Each participant must be furnished with a copy of the informed consent document for their personal records.

Please note that the data cannot be used for another study or an extension of the current study without IRB approval either through modification (addendum) or a new application.