Strong Marriages in the African American Community: How Religion Contributes to a Healthier Marriage

Lucy K. Shirisia

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STRONG MARRIAGES IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY: HOW RELIGION CONTRIBUTES TO A HEALTHIER MARRIAGE

by

Lucy Shirisia

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

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Family, Consumer, and Human Development

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2014
ABSTRACT

Strong Marriages in the African American Community: How Religion Contributes to a Healthier Marriage

by

Lucy Shirisia, Master of Science
Utah State University, 2014

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Department: Family, Consumer, and Human Development

This qualitative study investigated how religion contributes to or strengthens strong African American marriages. This study was conducted within the family strengths framework. In order to develop an in-depth understanding of how religion contributed to their marriages, five couples who talked extensively about religion in their marriage were selected out of the total sample of 39 couples and were presented as case studies. Six themes emerged across all five case studies: couples consistently practiced their religion, religion was the foundation of the marriage, religion strengthened personal growth, couples had exemplars for a strong marriage, couples turned to religion during difficult times, and religion transcends race. These findings indicate that these couples practiced their religion in all aspects of their lives. The study provides an explanation of why a paradox may exist within the African American community in terms of religion and divorce. Implications of the findings are discussed.

(123 pages)
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Strong Marriages in the African American Community: How Religion Contributes to a Healthier Marriage

by

Lucy Shirisia, Master of Science

This study examined how religion contributes to or strengthens strong African American marriages. In order to understand how religion contributed to their marriages, five couples who talked extensively about religion in their marriage were selected out of the total sample of 39 couples and were presented as case studies. Six themes surfaced across all five case studies in answer to the research question: couples consistently practiced their religion, religion was the foundation of the marriage, religion strengthened personal growth, couples had exemplars for a strong marriage, couples turned to religion during difficult times, and religion transcends race. These findings indicate that these couples practiced their religion in all aspects of their lives. The study provides an explanation of why a paradox may exist within the African American community in terms of religion and divorce.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to acknowledge my Heavenly Father, who plays an enormous part in my life. I could have not done it without you! He has guided me and given me strength in various ways, so I will forever follow Him. I then would like to thank my mother, whose words of encouragement have echoed in my mind so many times. I have never felt alone because I have always felt her love, support, and prayers. In addition, thank you, Linda Skogrand. You have taught me how to write a thesis! Thank you for your guidance, support, and for making me a priority in your life. Also thank you to the rest of my committee, Kay Bradford and Tom Lee. Special thanks to Tom Lee, without you I would have never chosen to attend Utah State University. Neither would I have gained all the experiences I have acquired living in Utah, both academically and spiritually. In addition, I have felt your support during my education years here. Lastly, thank you to all my dear friends. With your many words of encouragement, love, and support you have always put my mind to ease.

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Lucy Shirisia
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Historically, religious institutions have played a central role in marriage and families (Christiano, 2000). Affiliation with religious institutions seems to promote psychological well-being, social support, and pro-social norms among couples which, in turn, strengthens marriages (Amato & Booth, 1997; Ellison, 1994; Gottman, 1998). Many studies also indicate that religious practice is associated with increased levels of marital quality (Call & Heaton, 1997; Christiano, 2000; Greeley, 1991; Wilcox & Nock, 2006). According to a study by Wilson and Musick (1996), couples who attend church together stay together.

We find, however, an interesting paradox in the African American community. African Americans attend church far more than any other ethnic group (Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). Yet, African Americans have the highest divorce rate compared to other ethnic groups (Blackman, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colon, & Roberts, 2005; Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, & Landry, 1992; Patterson, 1998). This is completely contradictory to many research findings since religion is usually associated with marriage stability (Call & Heaton, 1997; Lehrer, 2000; Wilcox, 2004). We do find, however, that African Americans have other stressors that other ethnic groups may not encounter, such as the legacy of slavery, discrimination, male unemployment, incarceration patterns, and poverty (Blackman et al., 2005; Patterson, 1998; Wilson, 1996).

Roots of slavery have played a significant part in African American marriages today. An African American root refers to African Americans that come from a lineage of slavery in the United States. Not all African Americans have roots of slavery such as
those who are Caribbean African or those from Hispanic backgrounds (Fincham & Beach, 2010), or many parts of Eastern Africa. But for those who have this lineage, the roots of slavery have played an important role in the African American community. Their link to a heritage of slavery has taken a heavy toll on marriage in this community in ways that other immigrants have not experienced (Pinderhughes, 2002). Unhealthy psychological and physical circumstances that occurred during the time of slavery still influence the lives and thinking of African American individuals today. According to DeFrain and Asay (2007) “[within a marriage and family] unhealthy or dysfunctional relationships can create serious problems that may persist from one generation to the next” (p. 3). Results of oppression include couple relationships that were forcibly broken due to selling family members, women being sexually oppressed (Furstenberg, Hershberg, & Modell, 1978; Jordan, 1971), and men who were “regarded as over-sexed” and perceived as aggressive and unable to manage their temper (Pinderhughes, 2002, p. 271). Many researchers argue that this perception still occurs today (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 1999; Pinderhughes, 2002). In addition, when African American couples were forcibly brought to the new America, they lost a sense of African identity (Billingsley & Morrison-Rodriguez, 1998; Lawson & Thompson, 1994; Pinderhughes, 2002), and it is speculated that the roots of slavery created the new African American identity. Several researchers argue that the continuous absence of environmental support has, consequently, “left African American marriages fragile and extremely vulnerable to societal shifts and changes” (Pinderhughes, 2002, p. 269).

Eighty percent of African American families were intact in 1880 (Billingsley, 1992), which was about 15 years after slavery ended. In the 1960s couples were still
intact and then African American families and marriages declined in stability (Pinderhughes, 2002). It is speculated that the decline of stability in marriage is due to *historical trauma* which refers to “the lingering and presumably negative effects of traumas experienced by previous generations on contemporary peoples” (Jervis et al., 2006, p. 529). Because of slavery, this historical trauma may play a role in the lives of African Americans. It is speculated that perhaps this trauma of racism has been “generalized, internalized, and institutionalized” (p. 526) from generation to generation. Leary (2005) calls this *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*. Leary (2008) stated, “People who have experienced a traumatic experience directly or indirectly can end up with stress related disorders” (p. 12). Other speculation of the decline of stability in African American marriages are Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943) were not met, and the move from collectivism to individualism during Civil Rights movement.

Other issues may contribute to this decline in marital stability in the African American community. For example, it is estimated that one-half of African Americans live in inner-city neighborhoods “typified by poverty, poor schools, unemployment, periodic street violence, and generally high levels of stress” (Lassiter, 1998, p. 37). Negative factors do not apply to all inner-city citizens (Anderson, 1999). However, in these communities marriages are less likely to occur and when they do occur, divorces are far more likely to result (Clayton, Mincy, & Blankenhorn, 2003; Tucker, 2000). In inner-city areas, men often lack steady jobs and skills to keep a marriage intact (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007), therefore, getting married is often delayed or avoided. Some inner-city men in low-income communities fall into a lifestyle of “the street” (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, p. 571), which can include illegal activity and substance abuse
(Anderson, 1999; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Wilson, 1996). Perhaps those living in inner-cities, regardless of religious practices, a lack of opportunity, etc., may still feel socially influenced to continue negative behaviors.

African American churches have helped African Americans with social support and with material needs (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Nightingale, 2003; Picot, Debanne, Namazi, & Wykle, 2003), which can contribute to healthier marriages. In addition, the African American churches often educate children about their heritage (Haight, 1998), promote kinship relationships (Mosely-Howard & Evans, 2000; Taylor, 1988), and increase self-esteem and worth (Taylor, Jackson, & Chatters, 1997), which can positively affect a marriage. However, due to stressors in the environment, one study found that many African American churches manifested a “conspiracy of silence” concerning issues such as sexual activity, cohabitation, and childbearing before marriage (Franklin, 2004, p. 16). Researchers speculate that these churches do not openly discuss these problems “because of the tension between churches’ own moral traditionalism and some members’ relationships and sexual activity” (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, p. 573). Leary (2008) states that these perceptions that persist today are called Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, where “unhealed trauma was passed down from generation to generation” (p. 13). She states that when “the significant people in our environment, such as parents, teachers and preachers, . . . if these people are broken, then we learn broken behavior and we pass it along” (p. 15).

Despite all the limitations and stressors that the African American community may have, strong marriages do exist in the African American community. These marriages have strengths such as high church attendance rates (Littlejohn-Blake &
Darling, 1993), strong kinship networks (Marks, Nesteruk, Hopkins-Williams, & Swanson, 2006), power to expand or contract within the family (Hall & King, 1982), strong self-esteem (Banks, 1984; McRoy, Zurcher, Lauderdale, & Anderson, 1982), strong achievement and work orientation (Billingsley, 1992; Hill, 1999) and strong egalitarianism (Marks et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 1997).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate how religion contributes to strong African American marriages. Data were collected by interviewing African American couples who had strong marriages. These couples spoke of many factors that contributed to healthy marriages with one of these contributors being religion (Chaney & Skogrand, 2009). This study will explore in-depth how religion impacts these marriages.

Couples were recruited in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, using flyers, emails, and word of mouth to recruit couples with strong marriages. Demographic information was collected from the couples (Appendix D). These couples were encouraged to share their thoughts and opinions on what made their marriage strong by way of open-ended interview questions (Appendix A). Dr. Cassandra Chaney from Louisiana State University and Dr. Linda Skogrand from Utah State University were the two principal investigators.

Within this larger study, a smaller sample was analyzed which included couples who talked extensively about the impact of religion on their marriages. It is important to “gather extensive material from multiple sources of information to provide an in-depth picture of the ‘case’” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). Five couples are described as individual
case studies, and themes across the five cases are identified. This research is exploratory and is not intended to represent or be generalized to a larger population. Themes identified bring new knowledge and insight that will inform further research. These themes bring a new understanding to what contributes to strong marriages when religion plays a part in these African American marriages. This brings an understanding of why the African American paradox occurs.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study uses the family strengths framework (DeFrain & Asay, 2007), which is designed to investigate the strengths within families and not focus on weaknesses. The opposing framework would be deficit-focused; this framework would only focus on the negative aspects within a family, and would not describe a positive model of a healthy family. If researchers only focus on the problems within a family then problems will only be found, but if one focuses on the strengths, then the strengths will be found (Stinnett, Sanders, & DeFrain, 1981). One of the assumptions about the family strengths framework is that in order to have a strong family one must have a strong marriage (DeFrain & Asay, 2007). It will help researchers observe how families and marriages succeed and not focus only on how they struggle; this approach provides a “positive and optimistic” (p. 3) viewpoint. This study focuses on how religion is viewed by couples as they describe their strong marriages.
Summary Statement

In summary, despite the limitations and stressors that African American couples may encounter, there are strong marriages in the African American community. One of these strengths is their high religious attendance (Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993), which contributes to healthier marriages (Brown, Orbuch, & Bauermeister, 2008). This research will investigate African American couples who have strong marriages and learn how religion contributes to their success in marriage. The framework used to investigate this research will be the family strengths framework. This framework focuses on the positive aspects of marriage. This research provides insights about strong African American marriages and provides a foundation for future studies about strengths in African American couples which are needed in the African American communities.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers indicate that couples who attend church together tend to stay together (Wilson & Musick, 1996). This is due to the positive resources that religion provides such as teachings about the importance of commitment and stability (Kaslow & Robinson, 1996), conflict resolution and communication (Butler, Gardner, & Bird, 1998), forgiveness (Wineberg, 1994), and good parenting (Varon & Riley, 1999). Religion also provides a social network (Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, & Waite, 1995; Wilcox, 2004) and several other resources that are not available to non-church attendees. These positive outcomes occur not only for certain groups but for all cultural groups, including African American couples (Brown et al., 2008). However, in the African American community there are many stressors that other groups may not experience such as the legacy of slavery, discrimination, male unemployment, incarceration patterns, and poverty (Blackman et al., 2005; Patterson, 1998; Wilson, 1996). These may explain the high divorce rates within a community that attends church regularly. However, within this African American community there are strengths that the general population may not possess. Such strengths include high religion attendance rates (Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993) strong kinship networks (Marks et al., 2006), power to expand or contract with the family (Hall & King, 1982), strong self-esteem (Banks, 1984; McRoy et al., 1982), strong achievement and work orientation (Billingsley, 1992; Hill, 1999), strong egalitarianism, and many others (Marks et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 1997). This study
examines strong marriages in the African American community and explores how religion contributes to a happier and healthier marriage.

**Religion and Marriage in the General Population**

Approximately 90% of Americans consider themselves religious and rank religion as very influential in their lives (Stark & Finke, 2000). This has led to great curiosity about religion and has piqued an interest in research concerning the relationship between marriage and religion. Can religion truly contribute to a happier marriage? Surprisingly, studies have found that religion does, indeed, contribute to a healthier and happier marriage (Christiano, 2000; Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004; Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001). Researchers have found that couples who are religious are more likely to have happier and stable marriages compared to couples who are not religious (Sullivan, 2001). In addition, couples who attend church regularly are more likely to have higher marital satisfaction compared to those who do not attend church often (Wilson & Musick, 1996). Another study completed by Ellison, Bartkowski, and Anderson (1999) found that religious partners who attended church services regularly in the United States were less likely than non-religious partners to participate in domestic violence. Researchers have found that the higher the worship attendance, the higher marital satisfaction (Dudley & Kosinks, 1990). Religion can provide social support, psychological well-being, and positive social norms which are associated with higher marital happiness (Amato & Booth, 1997; Ellison, 1994; Gottman, 1998).

Religion gives couples the opportunity for shared beliefs, values, activities, and support groups (Ponzetti, 2003). Perhaps mutual involvement in church gives members of
families and marriages a sense of purpose and similar standards, which can increase family commitment and togetherness and, in return, decrease divorce (White, 1990). When couples attend church, it gives them “a sense of purpose and meaning in life in general and their relationship in particular” as individuals and as a couple (Ellison, Burdette, & Wilcox, 2010, p. 965). This general sense of purpose and meaning is critical for a healthy relationship in that it can ease stressful times in a relationship (Ellison, 1994).

According to Marks and Dollahite (2001) religion can be comprised of three dimensions. First, faith communities, which is the participation in church meetings, mosques, and synagogues. Second, religion encourages religious practices such as scripture study, fasting, prayer, and rituals. The third dimension is having spiritual beliefs. Marks and Dollahite (2001) have argued that all three dimensions must exist in order to have a satisfying marriage. Older, but still cited findings, indicate a positive correlation between marital satisfaction and active participation in a faith community (Bahr & Chadwick, 1985; Willits & Crider, 1988).

Depending on the religious affiliation, some studies have found that mixed-faith marriages can contribute to disharmony and dissolution within the marriage (Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993; Vaaler, Ellison, & Powers, 2009). This may be due to serious disagreements concerning family or relationship choices, whereas couples with the same religion, termed religious homogamy, have better relationships (Ellison et al., 2010). Studies have also found that marital happiness and satisfaction are slightly higher in same-faith relationships (Heaton & Pratt, 1990; Vaaler et al., 2009; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008). This may be due to little disagreement on decision-making and lifestyles due to
shared values (Curtis & Ellison, 2002; Schramm, Marshall, Harris, & Lee, 2012).

**Stability and Commitment**

Religious organizations can teach values such as stability (Kaslow & Robinson, 1996). Values such as commitment and love are critical in marriage. If these values are not present, taught, or practiced, a marriage can disintegrate rapidly. Numerous religious groups teach, “marriage is a sacred act that originates from a God or as the union of souls or spirits with the sacred realm” (Turner & Frese, 2005, p. 5724). Therefore, the sacredness of marriage can be a protective factor in marriage. Religious groups that practice wedding rituals, infant baptism rituals, and other worship rituals encourage couples to see marriage as a powerful and sacred ordinance (Durkheim, 1995; Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003). Therefore, rituals may provide couples with “strength, meaning, and direction when it comes to navigating the opportunities and challenges of married life” (Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008, p. 1318). For some religious groups such as Judaism, Catholicism, and Confucianism, marriage is considered a lifetime commitment (Ponzetti, 2003).

For couples who regularly attend church together, it lowered the risk of divorce, but wide differences in spouse’s attendance patterns within a marriage increased the risk of divorce (Call & Heaton, 1997, p. 389). Interestingly, wives’ perceptions of commitment and non-marital sex beliefs were more important to the stability of the marriage than the husbands’ beliefs. Other findings suggest that stay-at-home mothers also have a lower divorce rate compared to working parents (Call & Heaton, 1997). Perhaps stressors, the balance of work and family, and the lack of support at home contribute to these findings.
Another consideration is that stay-at-home mothers depend on their husband for income, therefore, making divorce less appealing.

**Prayer and its Effects**

Butler and colleagues (1998) found that when prayer was practiced during couples’ conflicts, stress and hostility decreased and empathy and understanding increased for the partners. This may occur because a “shift in focus” occurs from the partner to a “divine’s viewpoint,” selfishness is assigned elsewhere, and the spouse’s viewpoint is heard (Butler et al., 1998; Ponzetti, 2003, p. 1318).

In the last 30 years scientists have began to explore the neurobiological and clinical effects of spiritual practices and prayer (Newberg, 2011). These studies have examined “autonomic activity such as heart rate and blood pressure” and physical and psychological influences during mediation and prayer (p. 83). These findings indicate that prayer or spirituality can help improve mood and mental health, which can contribute to positive thoughts, positive communication, and conflict resolutions within the marriage.

**Reconciliation and Forgiveness**

Howard Wineberg (1994) conducted research on religion and reconciliation in the United States. His study focused on marital reconciliation for couples in seriously damaged marriages and wives who remained married for a year after attempting reconciliation. His findings indicated that religion was the biggest predictor of reconciliation. Further research and investigation needs to be conducted to confirm the correlation between religion and reconciliation (Ponzetti, 2003).
Religious beliefs can also be related to affection and forgiveness, which in return can help married couples build commitment, avoid conflict, and deal with their disagreements constructively (Greeley, 1991; Wilcox, 2004). Couples who regularly attend church are constantly reminded of the importance of affection and forgiveness in marriage, and this can contribute to healthier conflict resolution and encourage positive emotions, which are high predictors of relationship satisfaction (Gottman, 1998; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000).

**Parenting**

Parents influence children and children influence couples (Ponzetti, 2003). Most research reports that religion brings parents closer to their children. For instance, religiosity of parents increases positive quality of parent-child relationships (Varon & Riley, 1999) no matter the ethnicity (Barbarin, 1999). Children can also influence parents to become religious if they were not religious before (Palkovitz & Palm, 1998). This may occur because parents want to provide values that children can rely on, follow, and apply throughout adulthood. Furthermore, religion can educate parents to avoid alcohol, drug abuse, and other problematic behavior (Anderson, 1999; Ball, Armistead, & Austin, 2003; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; McRoberts, 2003), which can threaten marital relationships and cause stress within the marriage. This can become problematic since studies have found that stress is a major source of relationship problems (Conger et al., 1990; Rook, Dooley, & Catalono, 1991). Church attendance can also contribute to effective ways of parenting (Boyatzis, 2006; Mahoney et al., 2001; Wiley, Warren, & Montanelli, 2003) which can reduce stress in the home for both partners (Taylor et al., 1997).
**Divorce and Infidelity**

Research has found that religion can assist couples through hard times and may assist couples who are considering divorce to decide to remain together (Call & Heaton, 1997). Religion also teaches moral values such as not committing adultery or extramarital sex, which if committed, may lead to divorce (Amato & Rogers, 1997). Most religions oppose infidelity and, therefore, partners who are actively religious will be less likely to commit adultery (Call & Heaton, 1997). Therefore, they are less likely to experience harmful conflicts which are associated with marital infidelity (Paik, Laumann, & Van Haitsma, 2004).

**Social Network**

Religious institutions can provide couples with social support and encourage marriage-related norms, which strengthens marital relationships (Stolzenberg et al., 1995; Wilcox, 2004). These social norms and networks may encourage positive marital behavior and may discourage infidelity and domestic violence (Youm & Paik, 2004). These networks can also offer social support for couples facing marriage problems or difficulties (Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008). Religious social norms can provide honor or public recognition to spouses who are excellent examples to their religious community. This may help younger couples or struggling couples make their marriage work. Other findings have indicated that religion teaches the doctrine of staying together and not divorcing, and this may encourage a social norm to stay together (Edgell, 2006). Religion can also provide means for the members to meet mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual needs whether together as a congregation or as individuals (Koenig,
McCollough, & Larson, 2001; Taylor et al., 1997). Finally, religious organizations can contribute to personal and social identity (Chaney, 2008).

**African Americans**

African American couples who regularly attend church receive the benefits of a stable marriage (Brown et al., 2008). However, African-Americans also have the highest divorce rate (Blackman et al., 2005; Lichter et al., 1992; Patterson, 1998). This is a paradox since religion is usually associated with marriage stability (Call & Heaton, 1997; Lehrer, 2000; Wilcox, 2004). Several studies indicate that African American couples encounter several stressors daily that members of other races within the United States do not. These stressors may include African American roots from slavery (Pinderhughes, 2002; Pinsof, 2002a, 2002b), and inner-city living (Clayton et al., 2003; Lassiter, 1998; Tucker, 2000; Wilson, 2003).

**African American Roots**

Those who came to the United States as slaves have a unique history, which is sometimes referred to as the lineage of slavery or African American roots. Not all African Americans have a history of slavery in the United States. For example, people with African ancestry who came to this country from the Caribbean, those with Hispanic backgrounds, or those who came from many parts of Eastern Africa (Fincham & Beach, 2010). But for those who have the lineage of slavery, it has left African American marriages weak (Leary, 2008). It is speculated that some of these issues include, slave mistreatment (Pinderhughes, 2002), historical trauma (Jervis et al., 2006), Maslow’s
Hierarchy of Needs were not met (Maslow, 1943), and the move from collectivism to individualism.

**Slave mistreatment.** African American slaves were forced to be a part of the American nation, unlike other immigrants and refugees (Pinderhughes, 2002). African Americans who have a linkage to slavery descend from individuals who were mistreated physically and psychologically and were forced to live in unhealthy situations. In addition, the selling of family members forcibly broke up family and couple relationships. Because of these circumstances, every segment of slaves’ lives, particularly marriage was affected. During this period, help and support from their surrounding environment was not an option. As a result, African Americans struggled to support each other from the past, present, and future. Leary (2008) stated, “A victim that is physically shot by a gun is taken in the hospital and referred for counseling to heal the emotional scarring caused by the traumatic event and then the family is also referred for the same reasons” (pp. 12-13), but why not for African Americans? “When slavery officially ended, there was no treatment given, there was no intervention or assistance” (pp. 13). The continuous absence of environmental support has, consequently, “left African American marriages fragile and extremely vulnerable to societal shifts and changes” (Lawson & Thompson, 1994; Pinderhughes, 2002, p. 269; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995b). According to DeFrain and Asay (2007) “[within a marriage and family] unhealthy or dysfunctional relationships can create serious problems that may persist from one generation to the next” (p. 3). Hence, it is still an ongoing and unyielding disturbance that influences their efforts to develop healthy, stable marriages.

**Historical trauma.** Eighty percent of African American families were intact in
1880 (Billingsley, 1992), which was about 15 years after slavery ended and continued to be intact until the 1960’s (Billingsley & Morrison-Rodriguez, 1998). It is speculated that the decline of stability in marriage is due to historical trauma which refers to the lingering and presumably negative effects of traumas experienced by previous generations on contemporary peoples” (Jervis et al., 2006, p. 529). Because of slavery, this historical trauma may play a role in the African American community today. It is speculated that perhaps this trauma of racism has been “generalized, internalized, and institutionalized” (p. 526) from generation to generation. Leary (2005) called this Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS). Leary (2008) stated, “People who have experienced a traumatic experience directly or indirectly can end up with stress related disorders” (p. 12). PTSS is a “theory that explains the etiology of many of the adaptive survival behaviors in African American communities throughout the United States and the Diaspora” (Leary, n.d.). This condition occurs because of multigenerational oppression due to years of slavery.

**Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.** As stated before, African American marriages were intact from 1880s to the 1960s. What caused this stability to shatter? In 1863 President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, a declaration that all persons held as slaves were now to be freed. After the passing of this law, slaves were to be treated equal but separate. Laws such as the Black code, Jim Crow Laws, Black Exodus, and others continued to result in segregation and made African Americans feel inferior to White Americans. It was not until 1964 that the Civil Rights Act was passed which prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, or national origin. One might speculate that perhaps at this time PTSS could now be openly manifested. Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs “believes that humans arrange themselves in hierarchies of
predominance and the appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another more predominant need” (p. 370). In other words, in order to move to the next level, one must meet the level before. These levels are as follows: 1) The Physiological Needs, 2) The Safety Needs, 3) The Love Needs, 4) The Esteem Needs, and 5) The Need for Self-Actualization. Perhaps from the 1880s to the 1960s African Americans were stable in the level 1) Psychological Needs (water, food, shelter, clothing) but they were not stable in level 2) The Safety Needs (body, employment, morality, property), as lynching, burning, shooting, and other violent acts were still carried out by mobs at this era. Perhaps after the Civil Rights Act in 1964, African Americans were able to move to the next level, level 3) The Love Needs (Marriage, Family, Friendships). One might speculate that because of this third level of Maslow’s Hierarchy and the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans felt entitled to all of their rights including the right to leave unhappy marriages. Burgess and Locke (1945), historically well-known family researchers, stated that marriage was once a sacred institution with external authority keeping it together, but it now has become a social institution with internal authority keeping it together. In other words, individuals do not stay together for God, but instead they stay if the marriage meets their expectations.

**Collectivism to individualism.** In addition, after slaves were freed and before the Civil Rights movement, slaves may have been behaving in a collectivist manner to support each other during difficult times of being equal but separated from the Whites. But after the Civil Rights Movement it is speculated that they began to practice individualism, causing the pendulum to swing drastically to the other side and leaving
African Americans in a fragile state with no resources to help maintain a healthier marriage.

**African American Marriages**

During the 1960s, scholars became concerned about African Americans’ unstable marriages, decline in marriage, and divorce rates (Pinderhughes, 2002). Besides the African American roots of slavery, several factors influence the increase of divorce rates in America and other parts of the world. These factors include changes in women’s roles, longer lifespan, and the alteration in values and beliefs regarding marriage and divorce. These have all weakened marriage stability in the African American community (Pinsof, 2002a, 2002b) and, consequently, have brought about high divorce rates for African Americans and a greater decline in marriage rates than other groups (Pinderhughes, 2002). These issues have finally caught the eye of researchers and have impelled scholars to be concerned for the future and survival of African American marriages and families.

In 1960, 78% of African American family units were married couples, by 1970 this number had decreased to 64%, and in 1980 it drastically dropped to 48% of married couples in the African American community. This trend kept dropping and by 1993 there were only 39% of African American couples still intact (Billingsley & Morrison-Rodriguez, 1998). According to the 2007 U.S. Census Bureau, 31% of African Americans are married.

Limited employment opportunities, discrimination, and a loss of the African American identity are some of the other factors contributing to declining marriage rates (Billingsley & Morrison-Rodriguez, 1998; Lawson & Thompson, 1994). However,
researchers have not dismissed the impact of slavery on these individuals (Pinderhughes, 2002). Due to slavery, one may conclude that African American roots were lost and new roots were created in America. These new roots may have given a new definition of what being a Black man and Black woman means. Slaves were sold, tearing and separating families and relationships apart, while women were sexually oppressed (Furstenberg et al., 1978; Jordan, 1971). Men were “regarded as over-sexed, promiscuous, and incapable of marital commitment” (Pinderhughes, 2002, p. 271) and “males were invisible, except when perceived as aggressive and out of control, a perception that persists today” (p. 271; Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 1999; Pinderhughes, 2002). Leary (2008) stated that these perceptions that persist today are called Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, where “unhealed trauma was passed down from generation to generation (p. 13). She stated that when “the significant people in our environment, such as parents, teachers and preachers, . . . are broken, then we learn broken behavior and we pass it along” (pp. 15).

**Inner-City**

It is estimated that one half of African Americans live in inner-city neighborhoods “typified by poverty, poor schools, unemployment, periodic street violence, and generally high levels of stress” (Lassiter, 1998, p. 37). Consequently, many studies concerning African Americans are conducted in these settings. In these communities marriages are less likely to occur, and when they do, divorces are far more likely to result (Clayton et al., 2003; Tucker, 2000). Therefore, when studying African American marriages, environment must be considered since environment plays a tremendous role in the day-to-day life, opportunities, and disadvantages.
Researchers have found that many inner-city adults value marriage but do not feel obligated to follow the norms and beliefs that may encourage lasting and happy marriages (Anderson, 1999; Edin, 2000; Edin & Kefalas, 2005). In these inner-city communities, many individuals support marriage and want to get married, however, women report feelings of being afraid of marriage. These women are fearful because of the high levels of divorce rate among their families and friends. There is also a lack of men with steady jobs and skills to help a marriage last (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007). Women also report that inner-city males are irresponsible and prone to sexual infidelity (Edin, 2000). Men report that the women are too controlling, suspicious, and lack respect for their individuality (Forste, 2006). For many if trust, faithfulness, and other religious values are not present in a marriage, the marriage cannot persist in a healthy manner.

Other studies have found that many African American men in inner-city settings often approach relationships with a hope of securing many sexual partners (Anderson, 1999; Patterson, 1998; Youm & Paik, 2004). Some inner-city men in low-income communities sometimes fall into a lifestyle of “the street” which can include illegal activity and substance abuse (Anderson, 1999; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, p. 571; Wilson, 1996). In these poor communities, where lack of support and poor employment opportunities occur, these inner-city individuals may struggle. Perhaps these inner-city individuals regardless of religion may still feel socially influenced to continue engaging in these negative behaviors.

Negative factors do not apply to all inner-city citizens (Anderson, 1999). There are some citizens who work hard, have self-reliance, and promote civility in their community; these individuals receive great support from their church community.
Anderson (1999) believes that religious institutions are the key institutional sources to support relationships and encourage healthier marriages in these communities. Wilcox and Wolfinger (2007) found that inner-city mothers, who attended church several times a month, were almost two-thirds more likely to get married than mothers who did not attend church. They also found that mothers who were in a relationship with fathers who attended church, were particularly likely to marry. The study also found that all inner-city ethnic groups, including African Americans who attended church, were more inclined to marry than those who didn’t attend church.

**Religion in the African American Community**

There might be other considerations and variables within African Americans that are not considered regarding the paradox of high church attendance and high divorce rates within the African American community. For example African American marriages are shaped by a multitude of unfavorable non-religious factors (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007). Some of these factors are discrimination, legacy of slavery, male unemployment, incarceration patterns, and poverty (Blackman et al., 2005; Patterson, 1998; Wilson, 1996). These factors may take precedence over religious factors for many African American couples (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007).

**Advantages of the African American Church**

Traditionally, and in the present, religious institutions have helped many African Africans both psychologically and materially (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Nightingale, 2003; Picot et al., 2003). African American churches support African Americans in three
ways (Taylor & Chatters, 1988). First, the African American church “has been responsive to the needs of its community members, whose access to traditional social institutions has been restricted” (Chaney, 2008, p. 3). Second, the African American church makes available material supplies, spiritual and emotional assistance, and advice to its members (Marks & Chaney, 2006; Taylor et al., 1997). The church may provide organizations intended to aid church members with food, shelter, clothing programs, and visitations programs for the sick. And, thirdly, the African American church can provide its members positive self-appraisal, such as self-esteem and self-worth (Taylor et al., 1997).

The African American church also provides a positive support for mothers and children and a positive cultural identity (Young, 1970). It can also provide an educational atmosphere where children can learn about their heritage from other African American members (Haight, 1998). A kinship bond exists among these members, which can bring support to the families (Mosely-Howard & Evans, 2000; Taylor, 1988). Also in the African American church, children are taught loving messages and are given a positive cultural environment (Marks & Chaney, 2006). These findings indicate that the African American church supports both parents and children in several ways which may positively influence marriage.

**Limitations for the African American Church**

Several studies are finding that African American churches may “downplay” religious values (Anderson, Browning, & Boyer, 2002). Interestingly enough, one study found that many African American churches manifested a “conspiracy of silence” concerning issues such as sexual activity, cohabitation, and childbearing before marriage.
These churches do not openly discuss these problems “because of the tension between churches’ own moral traditionalism and some members’ relationships and sexual activity” (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, p. 573). Additionally, the messages delivered in the pulpit by the male clergy are contradictory to what the congregation knows about the pastor and the family, especially if the clergy has been a part of a public scandal. Leary (2008) may have an explanation of this scandal. She might argue that the pastor may also be a victim of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. Preachers are significant people in the lives of African Americans, however, they too are “broken” (p. 15) and have not dealt with Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome.

The African American church can also serve as a place for solidarity against racism and economic injustice among African Americans (Ellison & Sherkat, 1995; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; McRoberts, 2003; Pattillo-McCoy, 1998). Therefore, these churches may not have the same influences on church members concerning marriage and family values as other religious institutions. Instead, the members focus on the political and social matters of the church and fail to see the morals and values that churches promote. This is not the case for all members, but it may be true for the individuals who choose to pay attention to the political and social aspects of their religion (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007). This may be a possible reason that many African Americans do not associate religious practices with fostering stable marriage relationships.

**Marriage and Religion in African American Communities**

Holmberg, Orbuch, and Veroff (2004) found that African Americans who remained in a stable marriage for seven years were more likely than European-Americans
to mention religion in their marriage. Brown et al. (2008) also found that African American wives who attended church frequently were less likely to divorce than those who did not attend church over time. However, when problems within the marriage occur, African American wives may feel excluded by church members and feel supported by their social environment which may indicate marriage is not important; therefore, they may leave a troubled marriage (Broman, 2005). This is because few successful marriages are modeled in these communities (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007).

Another consideration is that the practice of religion may differ for African American couples compared to other religious institutions (Brown et al., 2008). African American churches may be a place of refuge from the world instead of a place to improve one’s marriage. In order to have a healthy and successful marriage, one must have key individual resources, education, communication skills, health (e.g. physical, emotional, and mental; Goodwin, 2003), and positive psychological traits (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007). Many African American couples do not have these individual resources due to other problems such as discrimination (Williams, 1994), health problems (Ellison, Boardman, Williams, & Jackson, 2001; Krause, 2006), economic injustice (Taylor et al., 2004), and challenging family processes (Taylor et al., 1997) that they face day-to-day.

As mentioned earlier, the educational and employment opportunities are some of the barriers for African Americans to establish a stronger marriage. Other barriers include an imbalanced gender ratio, shortage in male availability, and children from past relationships (Chapman, 2007; Tucker, 2000; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995a; Veroff Douvan, & Hatchett, 1995; Wilson, 2003). Many men do not want their wife to raise another man’s child, and the women do not want a husband who pays child support for
another child elsewhere. Additionally, among low-income African Americans, marriage is seen as the highest formal recognition of achievement (Edin & Reed, 2005). This is because low-income African Americans do not believe they have adequate resources to hold a marriage together, let alone start a marriage. For this reason, these individuals believe that marriage is linked with financial stability. If African American couples are financially stable, this achievement (marriage) may occur sooner.

**Strengths in African American Marriages and Families**

We know relatively little about the relationship between strong African American marriages and religion. However, there are several strengths that African American marriages possess and some of these strengths include high religion attendance rates (Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993), strong kinship networks (Marks et al., 2006), power to expand or contract within the family (Hall & King, 1982), strong self-esteem (Banks, 1984; McRoy et al., 1982), strong achievement and work orientation (Billingsley, 1992; Hill, 1999), strong egalitarianism, and several others (Marks et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 1997) that will be discussed.

**Religion**

One of these strengths is that, “rather than being a systemized set of religious beliefs or practices, the African sense of spirituality is woven into the very fabric of society and is a central characteristic of the African psyche” (Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993, p. 462). Religion is a “survival system” (p. 462) that plays a tremendous role in their daily life. African American couples who were married for more than seven years
reported that religion was more important to their marriage compared to European-Americans (Holmberg et al., 2004). According to the National Survey of Black Americans, 84% of African Americans considered themselves religious, and 76% reported that religion was an essential part of their lives (Billingsley, 1992). In addition, when couples attended church together, religion helped unify the husband and wife (Marks et al., 2008).

**Kinship Network**

Another strength in the African American families is kin-structured networks (Fine, Schwebel, & James-Myers, 1987). Kinship supports close relationships such as friends and families. Kinship can support people facing moral and economic difficulties during crisis or in simple day-to-day events. African American families rely on this network for a social atmosphere and for emotional support (Logan, 1996). However, in some circumstances kinship networks may become overwhelmed by the demands of the system (Cherlin, 1998). To insure less stress in this network, individuals within the network should be financially stable and pursue educational success (Marks et al., 2006).

**Power to Expand or Contract**

In the African American family, the family has the power to expand or contract due to eternal and internal pressures outside the family (Hall & King, 1982). This power to expand or contract can influence couples within the marriage. Informal adoption has occurred within this family system since slavery. This can occur by informally adopting children of relatives and friends when the caregiver is unable to provide for the needs of a child as a result of housing, financial, emotional, and other circumstances. This informal
adoption can be temporary or permanent, depending on the child’s need. It functions as a resource for childcare, out-of-wedlock children, unmarried mothers, foster care, and stability of income (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). It is speculated that this expansion of the home occurs to support the African American community as a whole and is not limited to individual families. This system does not occur in all African American communities.

**Strong Self-Esteem**

Building strong self-esteem is important in the African American family (Banks, 1984; McRoy et al., 1982). Regardless of discrimination and challenges in the African American community, this sense of self is a vital trait in the African American family (Coner-Edwards & Edwards, 1988). It is the dream for many low-income African American parents to possess better living situations for their children, therefore, parents will exhaust any means to provide a better environment for their offspring (Ball & Robbins, 1986; Hall & King, 1982). These families exhibit pride, self-esteem, and optimism in negative circumstances (Coner-Edwards & Edwards, 1988). Even though they are a minority group, they display pride in their culture and heritage and pride in themselves.

**Strong Achievement and Work Orientation**

When African American couples are married, the majority are well-educated, employed, and own a home (Billingsley, 1992). These African American families have strong achievement and work orientation (Hill, 1999). Parents also educate their children to become independent and competent adults (Peters, 2007). Children of the middle-income African American families mature to be competent adults at the same rate as their
Euro-American peers and have tremendous resources outside and inside the home compared to low-income children (Rutledge, 1988). When children are in a low-income situation, family stressors induce them to mature at a faster pace in order to assume important roles and responsibilities required in the home.

**Egalitarianism**

Schwartz (1994) conducted research on egalitarian marriage in which she defined egalitarian as a best friend relationship. Marks et al. (2008) found that egalitarianism, or equal roles in married couples, is practiced within African American marriages. The friendship includes equal economic power, and can also be defined as, “equally yoked” (p. 180). In this study, couples defined egalitarian marriages as husband and wife unified, using their own individual strengths to create a strong marriage. When couples share household tasks, African American couples appear to model signs of egalitarianism compared to White, Asian, and Latino partners (Landry, 2000). Research also indicates that sharing roles can reduce pressures related to raising a family, which in return can strengthen the family structure (Logan, 1996). When a family is strengthened, a positive correlation will occur in the marriage because household chores, market shopping, and other necessities in the home will be equally shared with the partner which may stabilize African American marriages (Marks et al., 2008). In these egalitarian marriages, we see some African American women providing financial support, childrearing, and at times, serving as the head of the family (Goldstein & Reiboldt, 2004). When couples managed to rise above stereotypical husband and wife roles, they indicated higher satisfaction and deeper love towards each other (Billingsley, 1992).
Other Strengths

African American couples strengthen each other and have a tighter bond during difficult times (Marks et al., 2008). For instance African American couples who experienced the death of a loved one brought the couple closer and enhanced their marriage bond (Veroff et al., 1995). African American couples do well on resolving intramarital conflict (Marks et al., 2008). The majority of African Americans desire marriage (Taylor et al., 1997). For several African American couples, the highest indicator of success in marriage is financial stability (Edin & Reed, 2005).

Summary

Within the general population we find that religion leads to a positive outcome for marriage and helps couples stay together (Wilson & Musick, 1996). Some of the positive resources that religion contributes to a marriage include commitment, conflict resolution, communication, forgiveness, good parenting, and a supportive social network that affirms the value of marriage; these can strengthen marriage tremendously (Butler et al., 1998; Greeley, 1991; Ponzetti, 2003; Wilcox, 2004). We notice this positive outcome in all ethnic groups, specifically the African American community (Brown et al., 2008). Even with stressors such as the roots of slavery (Pinderhughes, 2002; Pinsof, 2002a, 2002b) and inner-city living (Clayton et al., 2003; Lassiter, 1998; Tucker, 2000; Wilson, 2003), we continue to observe a positive outcome in African American couples who attend church regularly versus those who do not attend church at all (Brown et al., 2008). African American couples also exhibit strengths that the general population may not
possess such as high religion attendance rates (Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993) strong kinship networks (Marks et al., 2006), power to expand or contract the family depending on needs (Hall & King, 1982), strong self-esteem (Banks, 1984; McRoy et al., 1982), strong achievement and work orientation (Billingsley, 1992; Hill, 1999), strong egalitarianism, and many others (Marks et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 1997). Therefore, this study will examine strong African American marriages and how religion contributes to a happier and healthier marriage. The couples in this sample felt that they had a strong marriage; therefore, they were considered knowledgeable on this topic. For that reason, their thoughts and insights provide a great deal of information to better understand how this happens.

This research will be exploratory and is not intended to represent or generalize to a large population. Themes will be identified to develop new knowledge and insight that will be used to help practitioners who work with African American couples and to inform further research. These themes will add new understanding to how religion plays a part in African American strong marriages.

**Research Questions**

In the literature review researchers have found that religion contributes to a healthier marriage. This study will focus only on five African American couples with strong marriages who talked about religion extensively when they were interviewed about their strong marriages. The research question is: How does religion contribute to or strengthen these African American marriages?
CHAPTER III

METHOD

Introduction

We know that there are strong and healthy marriages in the African American community, but there are few studies examining them. The few researchers who examine the African American population tend to focus on the weak relationships, and an even smaller percentage of researchers focus on strong African American marriages. In order to respond to this negative tendency to concentrate on the weakness of this population, a qualitative study was conducted in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in May, 2008, that focused on the positive qualities of strong African American marriages. One of the themes evident in the data were God, religion, and prayer (Chaney & Skogrand, 2009).

This research further investigated the component of God/Church/Prayer. To classify this in a clearer and general definition, this contributor was called “religion” in this study. Several researchers have found that religion does contribute to a healthier and happier marriage (Christiano, 2000; Dollahite et al., 2004; Mahoney et al., 2001). Because few have investigated African American couples specifically, this study examined how religion contributes to strong African American marriages. Themes were identified to bring new knowledge, insight, and a new understanding of what makes stronger marriages when religion plays a part in African American marriages.
Design

The goal for this research was to examine African American couples who reported strong, successful, satisfying, and happy marriages. Therefore, the framework used for this qualitative study would be classified as a strength-based framework. The strength-based framework is a fitting theoretical framework for this study because the approach investigates the strengths or positive characteristics of successful marriages, instead of focusing on the weakness of marriages (Stinnett et al., 1981). Concentrating on the problems and weaknesses within a family will likely produce negative outcomes. However, focusing on the strength within a family should produce an understanding of how families and couples function when problems or difficulties arise within or outside the family (DeFrain & Asay, 2007). One of the assumptions about the family strengths framework is that in order to have a strong family, one must have a strong marriage. Using the strength-based framework, the objective of the present study was to examine how religion contributes to strong African American marriages.

The benefit of using a qualitative research design is that it can explore experience, and it allows researchers to have an in-depth understanding of a topic being examined (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research is an excellent method because it allows the researcher to attend to fairly new research topics. Qualitative research does not constrain responders from answering a list of answers; rather it allows the respondent to expand his/her thoughts and understanding towards a question. When qualitative interviews are used, themes emerge which can provide further understanding of the experiences of the responder (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).
For this study, five couples were selected who talked extensively about religion in their marriages, and their stories will be presented as individual case studies. Themes across the five cases were identified.

**Procedures**

There were two principal investigators for this research project, Dr. Cassandra Chaney from Louisiana State University and Dr. Linda Skogrand from Utah State University. An announcement in the form of a brochure was publicized at Cassandra Chaney’s place of employment and through email addresses obtained from her work and associations. Within the brochure, couples who were happily married were encouraged to share their perspective through an interview on what makes a strong marriage (Appendix A). Respondents to the study were recruited in numerous ways. Several couples replied via email addresses obtained from Cassandra Chaney’s employment and associations, which created a snowball effect. Word of mouth was another means of recruitment for this study. The first few couples were interviewed and then encouraged to recommend that other couples with strong marriages take part; this created future participants or another snowball effect.

Dr. Chaney contacted participants because the volunteers would more likely trust her since she is a faculty member at LSU; all of the participants lived in Louisiana, and worked in the same geographic area. Dr. Chaney contacted the participants by phone and set a time and location for the interviews. Dr. Chaney and Dr. Skogrand then conducted each interview separately and in person within a two-week period. Both of the interviewers followed an interview protocol intended to structure and systematize the
steps in the interview (Appendix B). The majority of the couples chose to be interviewed in their home, while others chose to be interviewed elsewhere, in places such as their place of employment, a restaurant, and a coffee shop. An Informed Consent Letter (Appendix C) was required to be signed before the interview began. This Informed Consent Letter was a two-page document that gave additional explanation of the purpose of the research and how the results would be implemented in the study and/or future studies. Next, the interviewers verbally collected the demographic data and using the form in Appendix D; the information was recorded. Lastly, the interviews were conducted using the Interview Schedule (Appendix E), which included 29 questions. All of the interviews were recorded and then later transcribed. The couples who successfully completed the interviews each were given a $40 gift certificate for a local restaurant of their choice. From this larger study, a smaller sample was studied. Five couples or ten individuals were selected. These couples were examined as five case studies. Couples were selected based on their extensive discussion of religion in their marriages. It was important to “gather extensive material from multiple sources of information to provide an in-depth picture of the case” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). In addition, it was important to identify data that is “most promising and useful” (p. 62) in this case data regarding religion (Creswell, 2007). This helps “maximize what we can learn” or to bring “understandings, to assertions, perhaps even to modifying of generalizations” (Stake, 1995, p. 4).
Instrument

The instrument used for this study was the Interview Schedule (Appendix E). The Interview Schedule measurement consisted of 29 open-end questions. The instrument was piloted, reviewed, and revised by Dr. Chaney and Dr. Skogrand, the principal investigators. Each interview took about one to two hours to complete. Questions about marriage preparation, extended family contribution, children, and religion in the home were asked. Examples of these questions were as followed:

1. How would you describe a strong marriage? What is essential for a strong marriage?

2. What is more important, your immediate family, your extended family, or your marriage? Please explain.

3. What were your feelings about having children?

4. Has the church or religion played a role in your marriage? Please explain.

5. What would be the most helpful in supporting Black couples to continue to have strong marriages?

Question four was particularly vital for this research and other thoughts concerning religion within the interviews were examined extensively. All of the couples who were chosen for this particular research were interviewed separately from their spouse. Doing so provided individual thoughts of what made a strong marriage. One may argue that because marriage is between two people, it may seem logical for couples to be interviewed together, however, doing so could inhibit some from sharing insightful thoughts or treasures because they feared interrupting other insightful thoughts from the
other partner. When interviewed separately, the couples were free to openly express their insights as an individual within the marriage.

Sample

The larger study consisted of 39 African American couples who had strong marriages. From this larger sample, a smaller sample of five couples was selected. The couples’ age ranged from 40 years to 80 years of age. The average length of marriage was 29 years. The average household income was $58,000. There were six high school graduates, one community college graduate, two four-year college graduates, and one graduate school graduate. Their religious affiliations consisted of: two couples were Baptists, two were Jehovah’s Witnesses, and one couple was Full Gospel. These couples were chosen because they extensively discussed religion in their marriage (Creswell, 2007).

Analysis

Case studies give a detailed “description of the case and its settings” (Creswell, 2007, p. 153). More than one case was studied, therefore, this was a collective case study (Stake, 1995). Themes across the five cases were identified. This helped determine if these couples had similar or different experiences regarding how religion influences their marriages.

“The setting is particularly important” (Creswell, 2007, p. 163), therefore, a context or background information for each case study for the five cases were presented which included demographic information. Coding was used to determine if there were
similarities or differences between the individuals interviewed. In order to code, the researcher must search through the data collected for patterns and regularities and topics that the data may enclose (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In this study, the researcher accomplished this by color-coding the themes within all five case studies.

Qualitative data can be considered valid if they are reasonable, or prone to be true (Huberman & Miles, 1994). These interviews were likely to be reliable, as they were based on the thoughts shared by participants. Reliability is an important quality in research methods. Reliability gives “the sense of stability” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 114). In order to assure that the participants’ statements were interpreted consistently, reliability was achieved, which in this case meant that two people saw similar themes in the data. In this case, one researcher (Lucy Shirisia) first coded and categorized the interview data, and a second researcher (Linda Skogrand) checked the work of the first researcher, which contributed to the reliability of the study’s findings. When discrepancies resulted, the researchers went back to the data to achieve consensus.
Case 1: Steve and Lonnie

Steve and Lonnie have resided in Baton Rouge, Louisiana for over 26 years. Steve and Lonnie are in their late 40s. This couple has been married for 26 years with no previous marriages. Together they have two sons, 22 and 17 years of age. Steve’s highest education is a four-year college degree and Lonnie’s is a master’s degree. Their household income is over $100,000. Their religious affiliation is Baptist.

Steve and Lonnie were raised in Christian homes and were taught Christian values that began at childhood and continue to this day. When the time arrived to select a spouse, they each knew they had to choose an individual who shared the same Christian belief, as they both felt strongly about their religion.

When they met, they were instantly attracted to each other because of these shared religions beliefs. When it came time to marry, there was no question for either of them about moving forward because to Lonnie, “This is what Christians do, they get married.” Steve had asked Lonnie’s father for permission to marry her, but her father hesitated to say yes because Lonnie’s mother had passed away the year before, leaving Lonnie to take her mother’s place in helping raise her sisters. If Lonnie left home, she would leave her father alone to raise the girls. He felt inadequate to handle this tremendous responsibility on his own. With many tears and prayers, Steve and Lonnie knew it was the right decision to get married. They were a “real strong Christian family and believed in the
power of prayer that God would lead and guide them to make the right decision.”

Because of this belief, they moved forward with the marriage.

Growing up in a small town gave Lonnie the opportunity to observe and watch several families and marriages. As she observed the marriage of her pastor and his wife, she noted that they had a “good” marriage. This gave her motivation to pray often for a “good” marriage. She “kept believing that whoever it was, he was going to be sent from God.”

Growing up, Steve did not have role models of a good husband or father, so Jesus became his “best friend.” “Because I did not have anybody else to tell me the truth, I started reading and studying the Bible.” As a young boy, Steve always believed there was a God; it gave him purpose to be on earth. Today it gives him purpose to be a good father and husband. He says, “It is for God’s sake that I’m such a fierce father, fierce husband, protector of my family, protector of my wife. Church is in the forefront of it all.”

When Steve and Lonnie started dating, Steve believed that “falling in love was such a unique feeling.” He continued to say that he knew it was from God because, “nothing else can make me feel that way. Just to be able to look in somebody’s eyes and become silly, it’s a wonderful feeling.” Lonnie believes that God was the creator of this wonderful match. According to Lonnie, a marriage that thrives is one that is centered on religion or God.

Before Lonnie married she received extensive advice from her minister and members of her church about marriage. Lonnie was adopted and felt like a “motherless child,” but because of her church affiliation, she felt that she had countless mothers. When problems occurred, particularly about marriage or raising her children, she would
call on her “church family” for assistance. She continues to do so to this day. She feels that the “church family” treats her two sons like their own, and the two sons feel that they have a “hundred” grandmothers. Today Lonnie feels that she has “the mother role with the younger ladies in the church.” She is grateful she can do so. When Steve gives counsel to members of his church, he teaches them that:

If you listen to me, it will only be good for a moment until another problem arises, and then you’ll search for someone else’s philosophy. But if you stick to God’s plan, it is eternal, it is designed for you to be victorious.

He believes this because the Bible teaches him that marriage is the first institution, before anything else. The Bible teaches, “A man needs to leave his mother and father and cling to his wife.” It also teaches that Eve, the first woman on earth, was from the flesh of Adam, the first man on earth. To Steve, this illustrates that a man and woman are one, created from the beginning as such and should remain on earth together continually. He believes that God prepares them to acknowledge circumstances that would occur in their life, such as the right time to have children. This is because God is always leading them. Steve says, “people may call me crazy” but he still believes he is being led. The fruits of his labor and the happiness in his marriage are due to having God as the foundation in their marriage. It is evident to him that God should be the foundation of all those seeking happy marriages.

Lonnie believes that a strong marriage consists of having good “Christian values and great communication.” Through church and sororities she is familiar with many strong African American marriages. She observed that they “base their marriage on Christian beliefs and religious beliefs, which has helped them withstand difficult times.”
She continued, “I know a lot of happily married people who have based their marriage on religious upbringing and their belief in God and belief in the sanctity of marriage” and, therefore, are happy today. Lonnie also believes that when couples have difficulties in their marriages, it is because, “they are not connected with a church and try to work on their difficulties on their own without a good strong religious base.” For example, when Lonnie and Steve found their first apartment without a job, they prayed together and knew things would work out in the end. Religion is their foundation for all the hard times.

Steve believes that for a strong marriage to flourish, Christ must be a part of the marriage. For him, marriage starts at the altar which allows God to make decisions in the marriage. Steve continues to say, “The most important thing about a marriage is the husband taking his rightful place, first of all, with God first, and then the family second, God first, and then the wife second, God first and then yourself.” He continued to say, “I’m the best husband, I’m the best father, I’m the best deacon, I’m the best financial supporter, I’m the best everything because, first of all, I try my best to be obedient in Christ.” He also added, “I try to make sure that I remain spiritually the head of the household.” Steve is not implying that he has certain privileges that other members of his household do not have, but he states:

Don’t think that it is the woman’s duty to wash clothes, to cook, to clean, to watch the kids when she is working as hard as you are. Drop the traditions, get rid of the traditions, and show her you love her. Show him you love him. I say, 70/30, and put the 70 on me. I rather take the heavy part so my wife can be the queen.
Steve believes that one should not “tell God, I want you to be my Lord and Savior and not truly believe those words.” According to Steve you must live your religion and truly practice it, you must take it at “face value.”

When asked if race matters in a marriage, Steve said, “No it does not matter, but God makes the marriage.” Lonnie agreed by saying, “I don’t think there’s any one particular thing that would cause a Black marriage to fail as in any other type of ethnicity. No, race does not matter. . . . I don’t see it any different than the marriage that I have with my White friends and colleagues.”

When it was time to have children, Lonnie and Steve planned ahead of time for the both of them. This way they could reassure their children that they were always part of their plan in their marriage. Lonnie also reminds their two sons how blessed they are to have a great father. He has taught and reared them well. Lonnie and Steve believe it is important to teach values so that their children could know right from wrong. They feel blessed that they “haven’t really experienced a whole lot of problems often associated with young Black males, because of a strong father figure in the home.” Steve did not grow up with a father figure in the home, so he pledged that he “was never going to let that happen with his children.” He guaranteed that by making a “promise to himself, to God, to Lonnie, and to the children, that he would pray and ask God for guidance to be a great father.” To this day he continues to be that great father he promised to be years ago.

According to Lonnie, “they have the strongest and longest going marriage probably on both sides of their family,” including couples who are older than them. Lonnie has always thanked God for having such a strong marriage. She has asked God, “Why me? Why was I blessed in a good marriage?” She believes it is because their
marriage has strong Christian values and they worship together. She continued to say, “We study the word of God, we read the word of God together, we are both Sunday school teachers. All of this makes a difference because our belief system is the same.”

When Lonnie was asked to define a family, she did not just include her immediate family or extended family. She said it is “beyond the DNA, it is relationships, my church family, they are family to me also.”

Religion plays an important part in this couple’s life. Lonnie says that “not just their marriage, but their life in general, how we live our life, how we treat others, how we rear our children, it’s been the foundation.” Lonnie says that without religion she cannot “imagine how they could still be together.” No matter how much they love each other, “we are so opposite in so many different ways, but we are the same in the things that matter and it’s because of the church, it is our foundation for just about everything.” She continued to say that, “I cannot imagine what aspect of our life that it does not play a part in, our growth, our teaching, our spiritual growth, our approach to our jobs, it’s everything.”

**Case 2: Lawrence and Abigail**

Lawrence and Abigail have resided in Baton Rouge, Louisiana for over 13 years. Lawrence and Abigail are in their mid 40s. This couple has been married for 19 years with no previous marriages. Together they have three children: one daughter who is 3 years old, and two sons who are 7 and 14 years of age. Both Lawrence and Abigail’s highest education level is a high school degree. Their household income is about $35,000. Their religious affiliation is Jehovah’s Witness.
Lawrence and Abigail first met in Baton Rouge. They became acquainted through a mutual friend who shared each other’s pictures with both Lawrence and Abigail. This sparked interest for both Lawrence and Abigail and led to letter writing, which led to long distance phone calls. After three months of the long distance relationship, these two people decided to meet in person. When they finally met in person, they were so impressed by one another’s personalities that they continued to date long distance for nine additional months. After this time, Lawrence realized he was, indeed, in love with Abigail, so he went to Birmingham, where Abigail lived. He wanted to surprise her by proposing to her, but first he had to ask Abigail’s dad for approval and he received the approval. Soon after, he went to Abigail and proposed and she excitedly accepted.

Before marriage, Abigail sought advice about marriage from two sources; her mother and the Bible. Her mother taught Biblical principles and so she continued to search for those principles and apply them to her life. Such principles included the husband being the head of the household and the wife being supportive in family matters, physically, spiritually, and socially. To prepare for her marriage, she used the Bible principles once again which included being a good person, being kind-hearted, being giving, and being a supporter.

Before marriage, Lawrence did not enjoy being at home alone, and so he wanted a companion. He explained that it was God who gave him this desire to marry, therefore, he always sought to satisfy this need. When he finally married Abigail, he felt complete as the Bible speaks of marriage. Now he enjoys having someone in the home.

Lawrence firmly feels that, “Without God I would get lost and be alone and feel no hope.” He feels that anyone would feel lost without God. He claims he is not perfect
but he uses the Bible to help him become a better man. Lawrence also says that God has directed him to make the right decisions in his life. Even when he was young, Lawrence stated:

    With God in my life, I never got in any trouble. Never had problems with the police or anything. I could have ended up as the guy who smoked, drank through hard times, going out to clubs, but I never did any of those things. Why? Because God told me about bad associations, 1 Corinthians Chapter Six. So it really shows that if you apply the Bible, it assures your protection for you. Some men think you win when you act otherwise. . . . And so I always credit Him, He protected me from a lot of heartaches.

Lawrence exclaims that God is what drives him. For example, when he gets upset, he does what God said, “You do it in a mild spirit, lovingly, with compassion and respect for each other.”

    When Lawrence and Abigail drove to another state for their honeymoon, there was a rainstorm with a blinding fog on the highway. The fog and the rainstorm were extremely dangerous. Steve prayed throughout the drive because he was not able to see through the windshield for miles. And that is when he “knew there really was a God.” He continued to say, “That was one of the most divine experiences I had right after I got married, we made it there safely.”

    Abigail firmly believes that a good marriage is one that “keeps God first.” She states, “God set the rules and standard for us to have a good marriage. And if we go by those standards that He has in the Bible for us, then we will prosper.” When Lawrence
was asked what makes a strong marriage, he says it is the ability to forgive in a special way:

It’s a spiritual way where God said we should forgive, and then replace it with loving care like Christ Jesus would do, with true love. Jesus would comfort the sick, He would feed the hungry, He would show love to them, He would cherish the kids and put them on His lap and show love to them.

When Abigail was asked how church, or God, or religion affected her marriage, she replied, “It is the first and foremost thing in my marriage and it is why we have been together for this long.” What kept them together were God’s words, the Bible, and then the congregation. She stated that various friends in her church congregation have been married for over 30 to 50 years, and these friends are excellent examples of couples in happy marriages. They teach and demonstrate a strong, happy, and lasting marriage. When she was asked to give advice about marriage, she states, “You must come to understand the Bible, try to have the same values or share the same values. This makes peace and happiness in the family.”

Lawrence states that race should not matter in making a strong marriage, because “God is equal and unified.” He continued, “If the whole human race put God and the Bible in their life, they would no longer be thinking about human reasoning, but they would begin to think about the Supreme Being, the one who created all things.” Abigail also agreed that race does not matter in making a marriage work, she states, “You need to keep it going no matter what ethnicity you are.”

Lawrence exclaims that there are a lot of stressors in marriage, and having God in his life, helps him to deal and cope with, and regulate these stressors. A good example of
this was when Lawrence and Abigail had a miscarriage. The death of a child caused much pain and it is difficult to cope. But Lawrence said:

    God tells me that He’s going to resurrect the dead once . . . so if I live to see that day, that would be nice to see who that kid was—boy or girl. And see if he or she is going to serve God like we try to do. And so that gives me comfort.

Lawrence believes the same is true about the society we live in. He says it is “a war-torn society, the disease-torn society, and its not going to last forever. It has a resurrection date that God has set to stop it. You have to have faith.”

When making decisions Lawrence always prays. He does, however, desire to pray more often with his wife, because he believes that it is very important to pray with a spouse. It is a goal that he has set, to improve his relationship with his spouse and with God who can guide him to improve in this area. He continues to say:

    If you don’t let the institution of marriage affect your marriage, then you’re missing out on the glue; it’s going to be torn apart. Because you’ve got an imperfect heart, and your wife has an imperfect heart, so the sin is going to pull it apart eventually. But with God, His word, it keeps it glued.

    If problems occurred in the marriage and Abigail needed advice, she would first turn to her mother and then to an elder in her congregation. These individuals would provide Biblical counsel on the adversities that one would go through in a marriage. If Lawrence needed advice about marriage he would go to the elders in his congregation also. The elders in his church would not necessarily tell him what to do, but they would provide advice on how to use the Bible and apply the scriptures to the marriage.

However, if the elders could not resolve the problem, such as emotional problems like
depression, then he would seek professional help. Unless truly needed, Abigail would not seek a professional counselor through difficult times. She believes that, “the best knowledge there is, is through God’s word, the Bible.” She continued by saying that the advantage of having God in your life is that, “God knows the person, the makeup of everybody, and He knows what it takes to be successful.” When couples need mentors before marriage, she advised using the pastor. Lawrence believes that God wants us to be happy and wants couples to stay together. On the contrary, the devil does not want couples together. That is why it is important to have God in your marriage so it can endure, according to Lawrence.

When raising their children, Lawrence said, “I do not ask them to do anything that I am not doing myself, so I cannot look at shooting and violence on TV. I have to be exemplary in it all.” He continued to tell his kids, “It is because God does not like it. You are not going to be in his Kingdom if you enjoy violence. And God does not want us to be entertained with such things.” While raising the children, Lawrence has gratitude for his wife Abigail. He says:

Spiritually she helps with the kids, with the teaching of the Bible, and going to the Bible meetings. Which I think that is the highest point in my life to me, to get my kids spiritually prepared for what they have to go through in this society. Because you have to have God in your life to really counteract all of the pressures and frustrations that are yet to come, and that have come.

When asked to describe a family, Lawrence said a family could be “yourself.” He said this is, “because you have God in your life. He still has to be an integral part of your life.” And when he describes his extended family he says, “I try to show love like Christ
would want me to, even if they step on my feet. And I treat my family like the Bible says, ‘Do unto others as you want them to do unto you.’"

When Lawrence gives advice to younger couples, such as his younger sister, he says, “Put God and Christ in your marriage and your courtship because they instruct you. They are the foundation of marriage.” When he gives advice to his children who desire to marry in several years he says, “Prepare yourself spiritually first. Do the things that you want to do for God before you decide to find your mate.” He continues to say, “God created marriage, He married Adam and Eve. They were the first two humans He married. So He knows how it functions more than anybody else.” Lawrence continues to say:

People don’t apply the Bible, God’s word. That’s why I tell people, more than anything, to put Him in your marriage. Because we are made in God’s image, and once you perceive and understand that, what it truly means, and then we are able to display His qualities, love, joy, peace, wisdom, and power, those are His strongest attributes. And once we have those attributes in our lives then we recognize Him as our governor.

Lawrence compares having God in a marriage to having a boss. An individual with a boss cannot deviate from certain regulations and procedures that are written. If they do, there are consequences and it is the same with marriage. “People say we are fanatic about God, but if you and your mate are God fearing, then it does not matter how we think, it’s how God thinks about it,” said Lawrence.
Lawrence continues to say that if couples put God in all things including secular things such as money, then they would understand that money is for the whole family and not for one individual in the family. Lawrence continued to say:

It is a threefold cord. You have my wife, my God, and me. A threefold cord is used to tie down ships and is not easily broken. No matter what waves come, no matter what ripples come, that ship is going to stay. It might drift a little but it’s not going away from the dock. And that is the way God is with us. He keeps us together.

To conclude Lawrence said:

If you allow God to be in a marriage, it becomes a strong marriage. I don’t care if that person has been married a billion years, if he does not have God in his marriage, even if he stayed married for a billion years, he has a lot of misery in that marriage. . . . It might have been nice to live with her, but wouldn’t it have been nice to have icing on the cake, not just the cake? So God is the icing, and it’s good to have Him with it and enjoy it even better.

**Case 3: Samuel and Rosie**

Samuel and Rosie have resided in Baton Rouge, Louisiana for over 54 years. Samuel and Rosie are in their early 80s. This couple has been married for 53 years with no previous marriages. Together they have three daughters, ages 44, 46, and 48 years of age and one son that is 53 years of age. Samuel’s highest education is a high school degree and Rosie has a four-year college degree. Their household income is about $25,000. Their religious affiliation is Baptist.
Samuel and Rosie met at a church in South Carolina. Rosie was singing in the choir and Samuel was stationed in the military in the same area. A group of soldiers which included Samuel came to worship on a Sunday. While Rosie was singing, Samuel spotted her face in the mist of all the other choir members. Romantically enough, Rosie also spotted Samuel in the midst of the 20 or 30 soldiers. His ears stuck out to Rosie and their eyes met. When the service was over Samuel went to speak to her, and Rosie invited him to come back to church. He returned soon after, and that is when the relationship began.

Samuel was later transferred to Pennsylvania in 1951 to train for the Korean War and they corresponded through writing. They would write to each other almost every day. After Samuel had been gone for a while, he wrote to Rosie telling her if she found someone else, she should feel free to move on to that relationship. But Rosie waited for him. When he finally returned home, he called her and invited her over at Christmas to meet his parents. Soon after that they married. Samuel believes that God put them together.

Growing up, Rosie watched her parents’ marriage and wanted the same kind of marriage in her life. She prayed to God for a good husband, because she had witnessed many unhappy marriages in her youth. Rosie asked God for someone that the Lord wanted for her. She would plead with God asking Him that if he was not a religious man, then at least he could be supportive of her attending church. God answered her prayers. She says, “As a matter of fact, my husband is a bigger church goer than I am! He is more energetic than I am. . . . As a matter of fact, we always go together.”

Growing up Samuel observed his parents’ marriage and noticed that it was a good marriage. His mother was a “praying woman.” He continues to say:
I knew it was a blessing from God that I had a mother, a real Christian lady, a Sunday school teacher, and everything else, and she was always a praying lady. In addition, she held us at high standards, and my dad became Christian when he was 60 years old.

Before they were married, Rosie and Samuel were involved with their church, and after they married they became involved even more. Rosie started teaching Sunday school when she was 12 years old and continued in college and into her married life. Samuel also taught a class about Christian marriage. He also taught Bible School and led Boy Scouts, hence these two individuals have both been highly involved in their church.

In addition, Samuel and Rosie pray and read their scriptures together. He says:

We don’t have to go to anybody but God, we have our daily devotion and we read the scriptures together and we are always praying, crying, and agonizing over the children and loved ones and whatever problems that occur. We know that God is going to work it out . . . . And on Sundays after church we have dinners together.

According to Rosie, one reason that a person should marry would be because the Bible speaks of Adam and Eve being married. Rosie adds that in order to have a strong marriage, before marriage, one must:

Pray and ask the Lord to help you choose someone who’s good for you . . . to ask the Lord to intervene in your marriage. To ask God to help you or show you the one. I believe if you ask God for guidance He will guide you and lead you. People should see God’s guidance in their marriage.

Rosie continues to say, “Seek God’s guidance. Don’t marry somebody because he is good looking or she is good looking or has money; ask for guidance in the marriage.”
After one is married, Rosie says, “Couples should ask God to help them stay married while still doing their part to stay married.” Samuel believes that when you get married, you need to find a faith-based church. He says that it was a blessing that his wife married him and he thanks God for her. He says, “She made me a whole lot of what I am as far as manhood.”

When Rosie was asked if race mattered in a marriage, she said, “No, I really can’t see why there should be a difference. It’s just two people, a White man’s love and White woman’s love is not any different. Love is love. It does not matter what color it is.” When Samuel was asked if race matters in a marriage, he said that we need to consider African American roots due to slavery, but this is not an excuse for weak marriages, and he continues to say African Americans have difficulties in their marriage because “most of them have left the church.”

Rosie considers her marriage “blessed,” even in difficult times. She says, “Well, I feel blessed, I don’t know if there were any high points or low points in our marriage. We never had any fussing or fighting, and I would call that a low point. But we are blessed.” If problems ever occurred in her marriage, she would go to her church and talk to her pastor. If they ever needed professional help, she would do the same. Samuel states, “I don’t believe in other professional counselors a lot because a lot of them don’t understand the origin of marriage, and it is a divine origin and institution.” He continues to say that professional counselors are good, “but when it comes to marriage, it’s a scary thing.” He has always admired the Catholic Church and their position on marriage, which is to still love people when they divorce but to not approve it. Samuels says, “God never approved divorce but he forgives, not approves.”
Samuel has witnessed many strong marriages in his church. He also knows couples that have difficulties in their marriages and he prays for them. He believes that what causes these difficulties in their marriages is the lack of commitment and not being faith-based. He says, “You have got to have a faith-based thing in your marriage, Baptist, Catholic, or whatever kind. It’s a Godly thing.” Samuel continues to say:

Marriage was here before we got here and it is ordained by God. It is the right thing to do. God wanted this. In fact, this is the first great institution. . . . And God ordained it Himself based on the fact that it is not good that man should be alone.

And so he gave him a woman, and he was pleased with her.

Samuel does not have many family members alive to seek advice from because his one brother and one sister are the only ones still living. Hence, the first person that Samuel would seek advice from if he had a problem in the marriage would be his pastor. He believes that his pastor “is a good counselor, he also counsels couples before they are married.” Samuel says that his pastor is also concerned about their family, and he knows about “Christian marriage and family life.” He gives this same advice to any couple that is struggling in their marriage and recommends they ask for help from other members in the congregation. Samuel says that his church also offers counseling. They also can pray for them and even come to peoples’ homes and keep matters confidential. Samuel also believes that God is always with us through difficult times, whether it is in a marriage, in the military, or losing a job. For example, when he was in Korea, Samuel felt that God was real, and He was with him during that difficult time in his life.

Rosie always wanted children, but she was raised to believe that you could not have children unless you were married. She states, “I always wanted children, and I knew
that for me to have children I had to have a husband.” When Rosie finally did have children, she exclaimed, “I thank the Lord for the four that He blessed us with.” While raising the children, Samuel has been so grateful for a wonderful wife. He says, “I thank God for my wife, she was a good teacher to all my children. And they were good students because they were able to read before they even went to school, due to Rosie’s experience teaching elementary school.” Samuel says that his children know Christ and of His second coming. It made him so proud when one of his sons called him to say, “Dad, I have learned that you have got to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.” This is important to Samuel because his son now knows where to go to for help and that is to his friend, Jesus Christ. Samuel says a couple can have a strong marriage without children but children are, “a reward, a blessing from God.” He also says, “The most important part of my life is my marriage and my kids, and God wouldn’t have it any other way.”

When describing a family, Rosie says, “Well, for me a family is a husband, a wife, and children. But for the couples that the Lord did not bless with children, a family can still be considered as two people.” She continues to say, “I would prefer a husband forever, if the Lord made me decide between my husband and my children, I would stay with him because I believe that my marriage is more important.” When Samuel was asked to describe a family, he said it was first “a man and wife, and then children, and a place where children are grown up and trained.”

Samuel has many friends because of his church, where he has attended for a long time. His friends have a positive effect on his marriage because they are all Christian like he is. But when he is surrounded by bad acquaintances, and he hears other married men
talk about women in their office, he does not join in or say anything because he “is a Christian man.”

Samuel declares that the scriptures, pastors, and the church teach “to love one another.” In his life Samuel has always put what he believes about scripture into practice. He says, “You have got to love people, because you love God and God loves you, and he commanded you to love one another. That is a badge of a Christian, you claim to be a Christian, but the badge of the Christian is just like a police badge, a military badge, it is love. That is our badge.” He continues to say that Jesus taught in St. John Chapter 15, “You should love one another as I have loved you. . . . Then all men will know that you are my disciple when you love one another.” Samuel strongly believes that people ought to make it a life goal to love each other, and the Holy Spirit will help them accomplish this goal even when there is evil around. He continues to say, “When you love one another, and do good, good will follow you. And good has followed me because I had a good mother and a hard-working father.”

Samuel concludes by saying that, “The number one thing or bedrock for a strong marriage is love, Godly love; John 3:16. . . . You have to be committed to Christ.” God has to be in you in order to love the other person and, in addition, prayer must be in the marriage.

Case 4: William and Sonia

William and Sonia have resided in Baton Rouge, Louisiana for over 13 years. William and Sonia are in their mid 60s. This couple has been married for 31 years with William having one previous marriage. They have one daughter, 33 years of age and one
son 25 years of age from this marriage. William and Sonia’s highest education is a high school degree. Their household income is about $35,000. Their religious affiliation is Jehovah’s Witness.

William and Sonia met at a wedding where they both knew the bride. Since William had been married and then divorced, he wanted to remarry. William saw Sonia from afar; she was tall and classy, wearing a white dress and, at that moment, he knew Sonia would be his future wife. At the wedding reception he arranged to sit with her. At first Sonia did not like William because he seemed conceited. But after some time he impressed her by conversing with her about the Bible. Since Sonia was very religious, this was quite attractive to Sonia. Unfortunately, they both lived in different states and had only met because of the wedding, but they decided to correspond by mail. This helped Sonia since she was 30 years old and had never been in a relationship until now. She had been too busy with work and had neglected her social and dating life. Letter writing helped her to be open with her feelings towards William and to share her likes and dislikes. William could read her letters, understand them, and was patient with her. This letter writing was a pleasant time for Sonia. After some time of letter writing, phone calls began and William pursued Sonia and convinced Sonia that he was the one for her. Five years later they finally married.

Growing up, Sonia learned that two people knowing the Bible makes a strong marriage. However, before marriage she wanted to explore the world, mature, and experience life. She did just that and then married when she was 30 years old.

Growing up, William saw that his parents did not have a strong marriage. Until William’s father became a Jehovah’s Witness, he was extremely violent. From this
experience in childhood, William decided that he would do the exact opposite from his father. William says:

I made an in-depth study of what it takes to make a successful marriage, and I found that the principles in the Bible were there for everyone to read and what gets in the way is yourself. Because you start to think, “I cannot do that, or this is unrealistic,” but when you put it to the test all the principles in the Bible work. If they work, then why argue with success?

For Sonia the reasons for getting married are, “First and foremost, so you can serve God better. Second, is companionship and feeling complete.” Sonia’s expectation about marriage was different before she married. Before she married, she was a missionary and very poor. She hoped that marriage would give her more materialistic things, but it did not. However, she said, “the spiritual things were there.”

To prepare for marriage, Sonia went to the elders in her church and to her parents to help her make the decision to marry William. She also read information about marriage and what is expected from a wife. In addition Sonia says, “I did a lot of research on my own, and a lot of reading.” William prepared for marriage by using the Biblical principles. He also found a scripture in 1 Peter helpful. It says, “Dwell with your wife according to knowledge.” To William this meant that, “I need to study my wife and know what makes her tick, what she likes, what she dislikes, that sort of thing.” William did not heed this scripture in his first marriage, but he did in his second marriage because he did not want to make the same mistake twice.

William teaches the Bible in Chinese to some congregation members. At times he would go to Louisiana State University to find Chinese students who would like to study
the Bible. These times are high points in Sonia’s marriage. Her heart melts to hear him speak Chinese. Also, she is very proud of his accomplishment to learn another language.

William knows of several couples who have strong marriages, and they “base their marriage on Bible principles.” He continues to say that, “Even though they may be at odds with one another, if they love God more than they love each other, then they have taken their marriage vows to another level.” William explained that it is because it is no longer about tolerating the person anymore, but it is about the promise made to God to stay together. When there is a misunderstanding in the marriage, William says:

Whatever the problem we are having, to settle it, whether it is to one’s benefit or the other, it is a matter of settling it. And once they settle it, you say to God, “Okay God, I did the right thing, even though it proved to be bad for me, I did what I knew was right.”

Sonia says that a strong marriage is:

. . . when you first of all love God and his principles. If that comes first, then no matter what happens between you and your mate, you have a higher person to answer to. So when I get angry with my husband, I still have to remember how Jehovah would want me to handle it. For me, that’s critical in a good marriage. You need someone stronger than just the two of you. There are men who love their wives who are unfaithful and there are women who love their husbands who become workaholics. All they have is to answer to each other. But when you answer to someone higher than you, then you have to go by His guiding principle. So for me that’s the strongest thing to make a marriage work.
In addition Sonia says a strong marriage includes these concepts, “There’s a three-fold chord: The husband, the wife, and God. If they are bound together, that’s what makes it strong.” Sonia believes that if she did not have a spiritual base in her marriage, she would not have stayed married for 30 years. When Sonia was asked if they had considered divorce, she said “no.”

If Sonia had difficulties in her marriage, she would first go to God and then to one of the elders in the congregation with whom she felt most comfortable. She would not seek a professional counselor because they would not have a spiritual base to their counseling. William is an elder in his church, but if he had a problem in the marriage he would go to one of the other elders in his church. They would seek the answer to the problem in the scriptures. However, William would never engage a professional counselor. In his first marriage William tried professional counseling, and the counselor told his wife to “have a boyfriend in addition to your husband.” William says:

This idea of having somebody adulterate your marriage was the way the counselor viewed the situation. These counselors do not deal with fidelity, they deal with what they have learned in some book. Most of the time, the authors who write these books are men who do not teach what the Bible teaches. And based on that, it never would work for me. If I ever had a problem, I would go to one of the other elders.

They have elders in the congregation who cannot intervene in their marriage unless they are invited to do so, according to Sonia. Neither is it their desire or place to do so, unless they are invited to be a part of the conflict. When the elders give advice, it is scripturally-based. Sonia does not frown on other sources such as marriage counseling,
however, she believes that they will not always teach Bible-based principles. At times, they may oppose what the Bible teaches.

Sonia knows couples with strong African American marriages in her congregation. She says, “When they have difficulties in the marriage, it is because one or both are not applying Bible principles.” She says:

The scriptures say that the husband is the head of the house. The woman subjects herself to that arrangement. So, if you get a husband who is not following his headship properly there are going to be problems. If you get a wife who wants to usurp that, there are going to be problems. So we solve it by doing that, by going back to the basics.

When Sonia was asked what kinds of problems would cause difficulties in her marriage, Sonia said, “An abandonment of the faith would be devastating. Beyond that I think we could work through it, but that would be monumental for me.” When making difficult decisions, Sonia says that they make it “bilateral. . . . We base it on how it is going to work out best for us spiritually, emotionally, physically, and usually in that order.”

William was asked if race matters in a marriage and he said “no,” but both individuals need to apply Biblical principles to make a solid marriage. When Sonia was asked if race mattered in a marriage she said:

No, the guidelines is across the board. . . . If I find a White couple, a Black couple, a Japanese couple, etc. that has a strong marriage, it is because they are applying Bible principles. Even with different cultures, I think they can be strong if they all go to the same source to get their information.
When William gives advice to married couples, he recommends using the Biblical principles in their marriage. In addition, William says, “You married this person and made these vows before man and God. You have to live up to those vows.”

William quotes the scriptures saying, “Whatever God has yoked together, let no man put apart.” He feels that our nation does not take that seriously despite the fact that we are a Christian country. When William teaches Chinese and his students declare that United States is a Christian country, Williams says:

No, it’s not. Because the Bible says when you marry, you marry for life, ‘til death do you part. But in this country, one out every two marriages ends in divorce. And most of those are within the first year.

**Case 5: George and Margie**

George and Margie have resided in Baton Rouge, Louisiana for over 13 years. George and Margie are in their mid 40s. This couple has been married for 16 years with no previous marriages. They have one daughter, 24 years of age and one son 20 years of age. George’s highest education is a high school degree, and Margie’s is a community college degree. Their household income is about $95,000. Their religious affiliation is Full Gospel.

During the Christmas holidays, George and Margie met. Margie had a daughter from a previous relationship, and George also had a son from a previous relationship. While shopping for a Christmas present Margie met George, who was employed at a toy store. When George saw Margie for the first time, he instantly knew “she was the one.” So he plotted a plan with his friend to obtain her phone number. Later that day he called
her at work. After a couple days Margie returned to the store, and George asked her out
for a date. However, Margie replied with a “no” to the date. He proceeded to ask her out
for the next day, “How about Thursday” he asked, she replied “no.” He then asked “What
about Friday? Saturday?” And again she replied, “no, but you are welcome to go to this
party with me.” He hesitantly said, “Well, I don’t really do parties.” She replied saying,
“It’s not that kind of party.” So, George decided to go to the Christian party with her.
This was the first time he heard her sing, and she sang so beautifully. A month later he
proposed, and six months later they were married.

Margie grew up with a single mother and grandmother. These women were strong,
independent women who raised her to believe that with God anything is possible. They
also taught her to set goals and to work towards them.

To prepare for marriage, Margie and George received counseling from their pastor
that lasted about 45 minutes. After marriage, she remembered the lesson that she learned
as a child in her younger church years, “the man is the head of the household.” This did
not mean that she could not be a strong, independent woman, but it did mean that she
could not be overbearing towards her husband. This was a difficult adjustment for Margie
because she had become accustomed of taking care of herself and her daughter. Margie
recalls:

When I was younger, I thought this meant to do whatever your husband said to
do. But it was not until I got married that I learned what submit really meant. It
was not taking instructions, but sometimes it was exalting, esteeming your
husband.
George also believes that he is the “head of the household.” He says, “I do not mean that in a domineering, ruling kind of way, because that’s not being a head. That’s not being a leader, that’s being a dictator.”

George says Margie was the example in his life in finding God. He said, “I met her, she was religious, and she was bound by religion. As she opened my eyes, I was able to open her eyes also.” George continued to say that he helped her question her beliefs, which she had never done before, asking questions such as why her church does not allow skating? Where does it say that in the Bible? She opened his eyes by living by example. Margie would take him places and show him things that he “didn’t know one could do and still be saved.” George continues to say, “I didn’t know you could have fun and live for God.”

Religion has played a great part in Margie’s marriage, she says:

Religion played a big role when we first got married because I had been in a strict denomination from the time I was three years old until my marriage. For example, the way I pray now is a major no-no. It was not until I got married that I understood why having a relationship with God is not a religion.

Margie continued to explain saying:

Growing up my religion was a strict religion. The motto was, “This is how we do it, don’t ask questions.” I didn’t wear pants, I didn’t skate, I didn’t go to the movies, and I was 31 years old. George asked me why I did not do those activities? I said because they told us not to. He said, “Well you should not do anything that you do not understand.” And I got angry with him for saying that! It made so much sense, but I did not want it to make sense because it had been a
great part of my life and he couldn’t come along and tell me anything different. As we began to grow, we actually started going to another ministry together, and I started learning how I really didn’t have a relationship with God at all. I didn’t really know Him as my personal Savior, I just knew of Him.

When George was asked if religion was an important part in their marriage, he answered saying, “I believe that religion is just what it is: a religion. I believe that a relationship with God and Jesus Christ is what makes the difference.” He believes that the core of their marriage is the relationship with God. George says that they attend church together, but the most important part for him is having the relationship with God. He states, “. . . because if I never step foot in a church, I will always have that relationship with Jesus Christ. That’s what’s important to me.”

When George was asked if they had ever considered divorce, he said, “yes.” In fact, they had separated for six months. It was during this time that Margie prayed a lot and allowed God to talk to her. Margie felt that she could not go to anyone at this point in her marriage except to God and He could help her. Margie said:

I allowed God to truly minister to my spirit and what I found out was I saw my role. I saw how closed up I had become and I saw how I had become so rigid and there were places in my heart that I never allowed George to be in because there were barriers that I did not know that were really there. . . . I really identified with the bitterness, the hurts, and really came to grip with it all. It was like a big breath of fresh air, or a big release. So it is different now.

Margie continued to say that she would seek professional help during difficult times. However, during this difficult time, she did not seek professional help, she only
sought help from God. If George ever had a problem in the marriage, he would go to his pastor, but in the past he would have dealt with the problem on his own.

Margie said that during difficult times God has been their strength. She says:

I see that God plays the ultimate role in the strength of our marriage, it is because of Him that I have been able to endure and get past a lot of things that were difficult to handle. And I think that we are still growing because of Him.

George would put his marriage first, and then his relationship with his children. Margie also would put her marriage first, her children second, and lastly her extended family. Her mother and grandmother still live with her.

Margie has many strong relationships with her coworkers and people who attend her church. George has friends who have strong marriages, and the “core of their marriage is God, the religion, and the relationship with Jesus Christ.” He says, “It does not matter the religion that one may belong to, but it does matter the relationship, the spiritual relationship that you have with Jesus Christ.” George continues to say, “. . . my belief is so strong in Jesus Christ and I believe what the Bible tells us about God. I believe that if this is how God is, and He loves me, and He wants me to love Margie.”

George continues to say that “faith without works” is dead. He says:

The works part is that you have to physically do something, so I can believe all day and not do anything, and nothing will happen. Couples should study one another and try to remember what tickled their fancy. . . . Or what makes them giggle and to be consistent about it. . . . I think the small things are what matters in a marriage.

When Margie was asked if race mattered in a marriage, she said “No, but be honest to each other and keep God first. This concept works for any race. I don’t care who you
are, your culture or how much money you have.” George believes that race does not matter as far as “skills” are considered in a marriage; it is all the same to him. However, he mentions that traditions do play a factor in the Black community, “some Black individuals have serious, deeply-rooted issues” due to undesired family circumstances, unfriendly environments, and/or financial difficulties that could bring difficulties to their marriage. He says we need to consider those disadvantages in the Black community, while other cultures may not necessarily deal with the same issues in their marriages.

When giving advice to her soon to be married son or to anyone seeking marriage advice, Margie would advise them to, “Please allow God to be the center point of your marriage. God says that the two flesh should become one, but God is the only one that can make that possible.”

**Themes**

There were six themes that held true across all the five case studies: couples consistently practiced their religion, religion was the foundation of the marriage, religion strengthened personal growth, couples had exemplars for a strong marriage, couples turned to religion during difficult times, and religion transcends race. All or almost all of the participants in the studies indentified these themes in their marriage. One or both partners had to indicate that the theme was a component in their marriage in order for the theme to be considered true for a couple. There were no major differences among the five case studies.
Theme 1: Consistently Practiced Their Religion

These couples with strong marriages consistently practiced their religion. All of these couples declared to be true believers of their faith and practiced prayer, scripture study, and/or attended church. Comments such as “we are a real strong Christian family and believe in the power of prayer” were shared by many of these couples. Prayer was highly influential in the marriage. A wife stated that during a difficult time in her marriage she felt that the only person she could turn to was God. In addition, during difficult times several couples indicated that they would find answers in the scriptures and use Biblical principles to guide them in their marriage. One wife agreed by stating that, “We study the word of God, we read the word of God together.” In addition, several of the individuals indicated that they and their spouse regularly attend church together. These couples are also highly involved within their church community; they serve as teachers, leaders, and/or as an example to other married couples. However, one husband declared that, “One must live the religion and truly practice it,” merely attending church is not enough, but having a relationship with God is everything. A husband stated, “It does not matter the religion that one may belong to, but it does matter the relationship, the spiritual relationship that you have with Jesus Christ.” A wife firmly pledged that people should seek God’s guidance in their marriage and ask God to help them stay married. These couples all agreed that marriage was between the individual, spouse, and God. Their faith was the highest priority and, in addition, they live and practice it in their daily lives and within their marriages.
Theme 2: Religion is the Foundation of the Marriage

As expected, all of the couples interviewed indicated that religion was the foundation in their marriage. A wife claimed that a good marriage is one that “keeps God first.” While another wife indicated that when one loves God first and His Biblical principles, it makes the marriage strong. A husband states that the “bedrock” of a strong marriage is Godly love. Another husband believes that the core of their marriage is their relationship with God. Other words used by these couples to describe the relationship of God to their marriage were, “base,” “center,” and “foundation.” These couples saw religion as the number one reason for marriage. In addition, several couples indicated that the Bible declares marriage to be the first institution, and therefore, an important commandment to follow. Other couples indicated that Adam and Eve were the first humans married, hence, an example to the whole human race to marry. While another husband stated that the Bible declares that, “It is not good for a man to be alone,” therefore, marriage is the right thing to do. Lastly, a husband stated that he felt “complete as the Bible speaks of” after marrying his wife. All of these couples seem to be putting God as the foundation in their happy marriages.

Theme 3: Religion Strengthens Personal Growth

A healthy marriage requires healthy individuals. Religion seems to be a factor in helping the individuals in these case studies to grow in areas that would affect their marriage. A husband stated that without the relationship with God he would feel alone, lost, and hopeless. Another husband stated that God gave him purpose to be on earth and
a “purpose to be a good father and husband.” He states that the Bible helps him become a better man and guides him to make the right decisions in his life. Also, several individuals indicated that religion plays an important part in how they treat others, rear children, approach their job, spend money, and how they love one another. In addition, these couples stated that religion helped them have compassion, respect, and love towards their partner. One individual indicated that religion taught him to “spiritually forgive” his spouse or to truly forgive by replacing it with love. Another husband indicated that when he is angry with his spouse he considers how the Savior would desire him to behave. Overall, all of these couples indicated that their belief in God contributed to being a good person.

Theme 4: Couples Had an Exemplar for a Strong Marriage

These couples had good role models of strong marriages such as parents, friends, and/or church congregation members. All of these couples had an example to aspire to in one or more of these categories. Several individuals stated that they observed marriages of their pastors, parents, and/or friends. One wife stated that through her church congregation she witnessed several strong marriages and noted that those marriages were based on Christian or religious beliefs. Another individual stated that their church congregation members “taught and demonstrated a strong, happy, and lasting marriage.” It seems that having good religious role models in marriage also encourages stronger marriages.
Theme 5: Couples Turned to Religion During Difficult Times

Within a marriage, difficult times do occur. However, finding the right sources of support is important to a lasting marriage. All of these couples indicated that they would turn to God, an elder, and or a pastor within the church during hardships in their marriage. A husband shared a story of experiencing a miscarriage, and during this difficult time he turned to God to help and comfort him. While a wife indicated that when problems occurred within the marriage, she would call her “church family” for assistance. A husband and wife stated that if they “needed advice about marriage” they would turn to the elders in their congregation. Several couples indicated that the elders in the church were helpful in that they would direct the couple to Biblical principles in the scriptures. These elders in the church give advice that is scripturally-based, while other resources may counter Bible principles. A good example of this would be infidelity in a marriage. One husband stated that in his first marriage a counselor encouraged infidelity, a concept that God does not allow. Several other couples receive help from their pastor. A husband states, “My pastor is a good counselor” and “is concerned about my family’s well being.” All of these couples believe in their faith, especially during difficult times, as they turn to God, an elder, and or a pastor for assistance.

Theme 6: Religion Transcends Race

This study examines strong African American marriages and what makes them strong. Although this theme is not directly a component of their strong marriages, it does indicate that religion transcends race in contributing to strong marriages. These couples made statements such as “race does not matter, but God makes the marriage” and “I don’t
think there is any one particular thing that would cause a Black marriage to fail as in any other type of ethnicity.” Other comments such as “God is equal and unified” and “Love is love. It does not matter what color it is.” These statements were shared by almost all of the individuals interviewed. However, one husband indicated that the roots of slavery do need to be examined within African American couples, but ultimately it is the relationship of Christ that matters the most. Another husband indicated that traditions in the Black community needed to be considered, but in the end the same skills are needed in the Black community as in any other ethnicity community. The rest of the individuals felt that if Biblical principles guided the marriage, it would contribute to a strong marriage regardless of culture, ethnicity, or race.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

Overview

Six common themes were found in the study on how religion contributes to or strengthens African American marriages:

1. Couples consistently practiced their religion in their everyday lives. This is done through prayer, scripture study, and/or church involvement with religion being the highest priority in their daily lives.

2. Religion is the foundation of their marriages. Couples used terms such as core, base, center, and bedrock to describe religious beliefs as the foundations of their marriages.

3. Religion strengthens personal growth. Religion helped individuals become better people, better husbands, wives, and parents.

4. Couples saw exemplars of strong marriages. They witnessed pastors, parents, friends, and church members who had strong marriages.

5. Couples turned to religion during difficult times. They indicated they would turn to God, an elder, and or a pastor within the church to address difficulties in their marriages.

6. Religion transcends race. They stated that religion was a more important contributor than race in developing a strong marriage.

The research question for this study was, how does religion contribute to or strengthen these African American marriages? Several researchers indicate that religion
contributes to strong marriages (Amato & Booth, 1997; Christiano, 2000; Ellison, 1994; Gottman, 1998). In addition, past research indicates that couples who attend church together tend to stay together (Wilson & Musick, 1996). In this study, however, church attendance was not the major force strengthening their marriages, but it was the actual practice of the religion in their daily lives that contributed to healthier marriages. These couples lived their religion. It is speculated that attending church will not reap the same rewards as deeply accepting and practicing their religious beliefs, as these couples seem to have done.

The African America Paradox

African Americans attend church far more than other ethnic groups (Taylor et al., 2004). However, African Americans also have the highest divorce rate in the United States (Blackman et al., 2005; Lichter et al., 1992; Patterson, 1998). This paradox is not what we would expect, since religion is usually associated with marriage stability instead of high divorce rates (Call & Heaton, 1997; Lehrer, 2000; Wilcox, 2004). One can speculate that this paradox occurs because some African Americans do not practice their religion as the couples in this study have. African Americans may not practice their religion because of circumstances such as inner-city living, the downplay of religious beliefs in their churches, and because they attend church for reasons other than to learn about improving their marriages.
Inner-City Living

It is estimated that one-half of African Americans live in inner-city neighborhoods (Lassiter, 1998, p. 37). Inner-cities are usually “typified by poverty, poor schools, unemployment, periodic street violence, and generally high levels of stress” (Lassiter, 1998, p. 37). However, the individuals who participated in this study did not mention typical inner-city challenges. Rather, they had above poverty level income levels, with an average household income of $58,000. Education levels ranged from high school degrees to a graduate school degree, and one or both individuals in the couple were employed. If the population were from a lower socioeconomic group we might have had different responses. African American couples who live in inner-cities may have challenges that couples living in other geographical locations do not have. For example, those who live in inner-cities may experience imbalanced gender ratio, shortage in male availability, and individuals may have children from past relationships (Chapman, 2007; Tucker, 2000; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995a; Veroff et al., 1995; Wilson, 2003). It is difficult to practice a religion daily if couples are experiencing other stresses. In addition, African Americans who do not have the opportunity to marry, due to imbalanced gender ratio or shortage in male availability, may, therefore, not pursue marriage at all. In addition, if marriage does occur, there may be few models of successful marriages in these African American communities (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007).

In this study we did not find couples describing the above mentioned challenges regarding their marriages. In fact, it was quite the opposite. Several individuals stated that their church congregation members taught and demonstrated strong and lasting
marriages. These couples witnessed pastors, parents, and friends, who lived as exemplars in their lives. Existing research indicates that religious institutions can provide couples with social support and encourage marriage-related norms, which strengthens martial relationships (Stolzenberg et al., 1995; Wilcox, 2004). These social norms and networks may encourage positive marital behavior and may discourage infidelity and domestic violence (Youm & Paik, 2004). These networks can also offer social support for couples facing marriage problems or difficulties (Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008). Other findings have indicated that religion teaches couples that they should stay together and not divorce which may encourage couples to reside together (Edgell, 2006).

**The Downplay of Religion**

Another reason that African Americans may not practice their religion in their daily lives in some communities could be because religion is downplayed. Researchers have found that African American churches may downplay or minimize emphasis on religious values (Anderson et al., 2002). One study found that many African American churches manifested a “conspiracy of silence” concerning issues such as sexual activity, cohabitation, and childbearing before marriage (Franklin, 2004, p.16). These churches did not openly discuss these problems “because of the tension between churches’ own moral traditionalism and some members’ relationships and sexual activity” (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, p. 573). Additionally, the messages delivered at the pulpit by the male clergy were contradictory to what the congregation knew about the pastor and the family, especially if the clergy had been a part of a public scandal.
In this study we found the opposite to be true. Several couples indicated they had received assistance from their pastor regarding their marriages and stated that clergy were good examples for their marriages. In fact, these couples turned to a clergyperson for assistance during difficult times and confirmed that they were helpful. This is not evident in existing literature. In addition, the clergy used Biblical principles to instruct and direct their marriages, and they disapproved of infidelity within marriage. Perhaps denominations that downplay religious principles may not encourage African Americans to practice their religion daily as the couples in this study have done.

When denominations do not downplay the importance of religious principles, research has found that religion can assist couples through hard times and may assist couples who are considering divorce to decide to remain together (Call & Heaton, 1997). Religion also teaches moral values such as not engaging in extramarital sex, which if committed, may lead to divorce (Amato & Rogers, 1997). Most religions oppose infidelity and, therefore, partners who are actively religious will be less likely to commit adultery (Call & Heaton, 1997).

**Reasons for Church Attendance**

Another reason that African Americans may not practice their religion daily would be because of their motives for church attendance. African American churches may be a place of refuge from the world instead of a place to improve one’s marriage (Brown et al., 2008). African American churches can also serve as a place for solidarity against racism and economic injustice among African Americans (Ellison & Sherkat, 1995; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; McRoberts, 2003; Pattillo-McCoy, 1998). These
churches in the studies cited above may not have the same influences on church members concerning marriage and family values as churches attended by the couples in this study (Ellison & Sherkat, 1995; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; McRoberts, 2003; Pattillo-McCoy, 1998). Instead, the members focus on the political and social matters of the church and fail to see the morals and values that churches promote (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007). This may be a reason that many African Americans do not associate religious practices with fostering stable marriage relationships.

The couples in this study attended church for worship reasons and not necessarily for a place of refuge or a place to deal with racism. In fact, these couples stated that religion was a more important contributor than race in developing strong marriages, which was not evident in past research. These couples generally stated that race was not a factor in having a successful marriage, but that God made their marriages flourish. They were highly involved in their church community; they served as teachers, leaders, and as examples to other couples. They consistently practiced their religion daily through prayer, scripture study, and or church involvement. Religion was the core, base, center, and the foundation in their marriages.

Religion was the foundation in their marriages because religion provided support for them to become better people, better husbands, wives, parents, and to make right decisions. In addition, research indicates that African American churches can provide members with positive self-appraisal, such as self-esteem and self-worth (Taylor et al., 1997).
Summary of the African American Paradox

Religion may be different for African American couples depending on the religious institution with which they affiliate (Brown et al., 2008). African American religious institutions may differ depending on their location and circumstances. Churches in inner-cities may need to provide support and resources to help their members survive and, as a result, may not focus as much on the spiritual aspect of marriage and family values. It may be that when these racial issues and survival issues become paramount, the paradox of high church attendance and high divorce rates results. However, when churches do not have to deal with these issues, they can, instead, help couples focus on religious beliefs as being the foundation of their marriages, thus, an explanation for the paradox.

Theoretical Framework

When studying African American marriages, much of the literature focuses on the deficits and problems with African American marriages. Very few studies focus on the marriages that are strong or doing well.

The present study focuses on strong African American marriages and how religion contributes to or strengthens African American marriages. This study uses the strength-based perspective, which indicates that all families or couples have strengths. Six themes were identified across the five case studies and these themes revealed that religion was the foundation or the strength within the marriages. This study clearly provides the context for not only understanding what makes African American marriages work, but
also delves deeper into how this happens. What do couples do regarding religion that builds them up, rather than tears them down? This study adds to the small, but growing, literature which looks at African American couples and families from a strengths perspective. It is hoped that how religion strengthened these marriages will be useful for other African American couples who want to have strong marriages.

**Limitations**

This study sought an in-depth understanding of how religion contributes to or strengthens African American marriages, with five couples represented as case studies. A limitation of this data is the demographic representation of these five couples. All of these couples lived in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Perhaps this location has religious beliefs or religious contexts that are unique to that city and region. A broader geographical scope might bring different results than those found in this study. For example, five couples from Boston, San Francisco, or Salt Lake City might result in different findings. Also, the educational level of couples in this study was at least high school level or above. In addition, the average income is higher than the average African American national household income. Perhaps including couples with lower income and educational levels might have resulted in different findings. Couples with lower income and educational levels might have sought refuge in inner-city churches, and those churches might not have provided the spiritual base for their marriages.

Another limitation of the study is that only three religious denominations were represented in this sample. Other church denominations might teach or emphasize different Biblical principles which could influence marriages differently.
There are also limitations regarding the gathering of the data. First, the interview questions were not asked in exactly the same manner with all the couples, and the prompts were not the same. Therefore, each couple was not given the same opportunity to answer exactly the same questions which may have affected the findings. Secondly, the majority of the questions asked by the interviewer were not about religion. Their responds were often embedded in answers to questions about other aspects of their strong marriages, this did not give the participants the opportunity to stay focused on religion.

Despite the limitations in this study, it provides preliminary information about how religion affects the marriages of these five couples, and this information may be useful for other African American couples. This research also contributes to the limited number of studies about strengths in African American marriages.

**Implications for Future Research**

The goal of this study was to have in-depth understanding of how religion contributes to marriages in the African American community. However, future research should concentrate on a larger sample representing different locations in the United States. In addition, it should include more church denominations, education levels, and income levels so that the influence of these variables can be separated from the influence of religiosity.

Researchers such as Wilcox and Wolfinger (2007) found that ethnic groups that attend church were more inclined to marry. The present study supports the literature in that couples in this study indicated that it was a commandment from God to get married.
Future research might determine if couples are marrying for religious reasons or for other motives, since several African Americans choose not to marry.

African Americans have unique stressors that other ethnic groups may not experience such as the legacy of slavery, discrimination, male unemployment, incarceration patterns, and poverty (Blackman et al., 2005; Patterson, 1998; Wilson, 1996). Additional research might focus on understanding how couples in other ethnic groups use religion to strengthen their marriages. In addition, not all African Americans have roots of slavery such as those who are Caribbean African, those from Hispanic backgrounds (Fincham & Beach, 2010), or those from other parts of Eastern Africa. Future research might investigate whether these African Americans who may have very different religious beliefs from their country of origin, and who did not experience a legacy of slavery, view religion differently or practice it differently in the marriages.

Lastly, researchers should further investigate the paradox of high rates of church attendance and high divorce rates in the African American community. It is speculated that because African Americans do not practice their religion as the couples in this study have done, the paradox exists. Several reasons that African Americans may not practice their religion as these couples have, may be due to circumstances such as inner-city living, the downplay of religion, and the different reasons for church attendance. Using an inner-city sample might help further answer this question.

**Implications for Practice**

Researchers have found that affiliation with religious institutions seems to promote psychological well-being, social support, and pro-social norms among couples
which, in turn, strengthens marriages (Amato & Booth, 1997; Ellison, 1994; Gottman, 1998). Couples in this study also stated that religion was a motivation to become better people, better husbands, wives, and parents. In addition, during difficulties in their marriage, these couples turned to religion as a means of support. Educators, clergy, and practitioners can use the findings of this study to suggest, since these findings are preliminary, to other African American couples that they might try these strategies in their marriages.

An important finding in this study regarded the importance of clergy and other church members in helping couples with their marriages. Therefore, an implication of this study is to encourage clergy in church denominations to be an example to their members since couples in this study looked up to clergy as role models. In addition, these religious leaders might have discussions with their congregational members about how religion might strengthen marriages. Because the clergy plays a greater influence in the congregation marriages than would an outside professional, therefore, to act accordingly.

Finally, therapist and other practitioners should know that religion is an important component of strong marriages and not be afraid to talk about its importance in healthy marriages. This is especially true for many African Americans.

Individuals in the present study all indicated that the key to their successful marriage was their religious belief. Perhaps other African American couples can learn from these couples how to use religion to have stronger and healthier marriages.
Concluding Remarks

This study provides a new understanding about how religion helps African American couples have stronger marriages. These couples saw religious beliefs as the foundation of their marriages. They did not dwell on hardships, financial struggles, the roots of slavery, discrimination, or any other stressors that are often part of African American communities. Instead, they focused on making religious beliefs the foundation of their marriages. We speculate that perhaps the paradox of high church attendance rates and high divorce rates occurs in the African American community because some African Americans couples do not practice their religion daily. Hence, African American couples who practice their religion in their everyday lives may reap the benefit of having strong and healthy marriages.
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Appendix A. Brochure
Strong Marriages in the African American Community

How Can We Help?
You and your spouse participating in a 1-2 hour interview in which you both share your thoughts regarding what it takes to make a successful marriage.

Who Is Eligible?
African-American couples who have been legally married for a period of at least 5 years, have at least one child, and consider themselves happily married.

What Do We Get For Participating?
You and your spouse will be given a $40.00 gift certificate to a local restaurant of your choice.

Who Should We Contact For More Information?

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Appendix B. Interview Protocol
Protocol for African American Interviews

1. Contact potential couples and explain the study, including the requirement for participation:
   a. Both husband and wife need to identify as African American
   b. Both husband and wife need to feel they have a strong marriage
   c. They must have at least one child, and both be involved, or both have been involved, in raising that child (this may be a step parent family)
   d. Must have been legally married for at least 20 years

2. Schedule interview
   a. Indicate that we would like to interview them separately since we would like to get their individual responses to the interview questions. They can choose to be interviewed one right after the other or at separate times
   b. Ask them where they would like to be interviewed, i.e. in their home, at their place of work, at the university, etc.
   c. Explain that they will be provided with a $40 gift certificate at a restaurant of their choice—the gift certificate will be mailed to them after the interview
   d. Each couple will be assigned a number and wives will have an “a” after the number and husbands a “b” after the number; Cassandra will have numbers starting with “1” and Linda will have numbers starting with “50”

3. Conducting the interviews
   a. The consent forms will be summarized before they are asked to sign the forms
   b. Ask if there are questions about the study
   c. Have two consent forms for each person (four per couple), one for the husband and wife to keep and one signed consent form from the husband and wife for our files—put the couple numbers on the consent forms, the demographic forms, and start each interview indicating what the number of the interview is, i.e. 2a or 51b
   d. Complete the demographic form before the interview starts by asking the questions and filling in the answers
   e. Begin the interview; it can work well to have the recorder on the armchair of the person being interviewed, or have that person hold it
   f. Each interview will be a separate file

4. Ending the interviews
   a. Thank them for their time and find out which restaurant they would like their gift certificate from
   b. Make sure we have their correct name and address so we can mail the gift certificate to them
Appendix C. Consent Letter
Informed Consent

“Strong Marriages in the African American Culture”

To Participants in “Strong Marriages in the African American Culture” Study:

You are being asked to participate in a research study to learn about what makes a marriage strong in the African American culture. This information will be used to learn how to help other African American couples have strong marriages. The information you provide will be used to develop marriage education for other couples who might want to have strong marriages.

You and your spouse are being asked to participate in an interview that will last from 30 minutes to one hour. You and your spouse will be interviewed separately. You will be asked approximately 30 questions and the answers to the questions will be tape recorded. The tapes will be kept for three years, after which time they will be destroyed by erasing each of the tapes.

There will be minimal risks from participating in this study. Participating in this study will give you an opportunity to help other African American couples have a good marriage. There will be approximately 25 couples participating in the study. Your family will be provided with a gift certificate worth $40 to a local restaurant after you and your spouse have completed the interviews as a way of saying thank you for participating in the study.

Completing the interview is completely voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Research records will be kept confidential, consistent with federal and state regulations. Your responses will be kept confidential by using a code on the audiotape and any transcriptions of the tapes. The code corresponding with your name will be kept in a locked cabinet, and the code and corresponding name will be destroyed after the study is completed and the tapes are transcribed. All audio tapes and transcribed materials will also be kept in a locked cabinet. Only the principal investigator and co-investigator will have access to the name and corresponding code. Those transcribing and analyzing the data will not have access to the names. There will be no reference to individual identity any time when the information is reported.

The interviews will take place in a location convenient for the participants. It will usually take place in the participants’ home, but may take place in an office on campus, a community building, or a restaurant. The interviews will be conducted by Cassandra Chaney and Linda Skogrand.
If you have questions about the study at any time, you can contact me, Linda Skogrand, at Utah State University at 435-797-8183. You may also contact the Utah State University Institutional Review Board office at 435-797-1821 if you have questions about your rights as a participant in this research study. You have been given two copies of this Informed Consent. Please sign both copies and keep one copy for your records.

I certify that the research has been explained to the individual, by me or my research assistant and that the individual understands the nature and purpose of this research. Any questions that have been raised have been answered.

_________________________________ ________
Principal Investigator
Cassandra Chaney
Louisiana State University

________________________________  ________
Co-Investigator  Date
Linda Skogrand
Utah State University

By signing below I agree to participate.

_________________________________  ________
Signature of Participant  Date
Appendix D. Demographic Data Form
### Demographic Data
*(To Be Collected Verbally Before the Interview)*

1. **Age of husband**
   - 35-39
   - 40-44
   - 45-49
   - 50-54
   - 55-59
   - 60-64
   - 65-69
   - 70-74
   - 75 and older

   **Age of wife**
   - 35-39
   - 40-44
   - 45-49
   - 50-54
   - 55-59
   - 60-64
   - 65-69
   - 70-74
   - 75 and older

2. **Education of husband:**
   - 8th grade
   - High school
   - Technical School
   - Community College
   - Four-Year College
   - Graduate School

   **Education of wife**
   - 8th grade
   - High School
   - Technical School
   - Community College
   - Four Year College
   - Graduate School

3. **Household Income**
   - Less than $10,000
   - $10,000-$19,999
   - $20,000-$29,999
   - $30,000-$39,999
   - $40,000-$49,999
   - $50,000-$59,999
   - $60,000-$69,999
   - $70,000-$79,999
   - $80,000-$89,999
   - $90,000-$99,999
   - Over $100,000

4. **Occupation of husband**

5. **Occupation of wife**

6. **Was marriage in the United States**
   - Another country

7. **Age at marriage of husband**
   - Age at marriage of wife

8. **Length of time being married**

9. **Previous number of marriages of husband**
   - of wife

10. **Age and sex of children**
    - Child number one
        - (age) (sex)
    - Child number two
        - (age) (sex)
    - Child number three
        - (age) (sex)
Child number four (age)_____(sex)_____
Child number five (age)_____(sex)_____
Child number six (age)_____(sex)_____
Child number seven (age)_____(sex)_____
Child number eight (age)_____(sex)_____
Child number nine (age)_____(sex)_____
Child number ten (age)_____(sex)_____

11. Religion________________________________________

12. How long have you lived in Baton Rouge _________Where did you come from______________________________________

13. Did you live together before marriage? If so, how long__________

Notes or clarification of above information:
Appendix E. Interview Schedule
Interview Schedule

Strong Marriages in the African-American Culture

Because we are trying to understand more about Strong Marriages in your culture, we would like to ask you about your thoughts about what makes a strong marriage.

1. Can you tell me about how you and your spouse met? Can you tell me how you ended up getting married? Can you tell me about one of the best times you had when you were dating?

2. In your opinion, what are the reasons for getting married?

3. How would you describe a strong marriage? What is essential for a strong marriage?

4. Do you know other Black couples who have a strong marriage? What do you believe makes their marriages strong?

5. Do you know couples who are having difficulties in their marriage? What do you believe has caused these couples to have difficulties in their marriage?

6. How did you learn about what it takes to have a strong marriage? Did your parents, or other individuals, give you any advice regarding marriage? If so, what advice did they give? What advice really stuck in your mind?

7. How did you prepare for getting married?

8. What specific adjustments did you make in your life to get ready for marriage?

9. How would you define family?

10. What is more important, your immediate family, your extended family, or your marriage? Please explain.

11. What kinds of relationships do you have with extended family members?

12. Do you have family members outside of the marriage with whom you spend considerable time? How do those relationships affect your marriage?

13. Do you spend much time with friends? How have these relationships affected your marriage?

14. Have family members or friends ever lived with you during your marriage? How did this affect your marriage?
15. What were your feelings about having children?
16. How have children affected your marriage?

17. What were high points in your marriage? What were low points? Please tell a story about each.

18. What kinds of things could happen that would cause you to have difficulties in your marriage?

19. Who would you go to if you had problems with your marriage?

20. Would you ever ask professionals to help with your marriage? Please explain.

21. How do you make decisions in your marriage?

22. Has the church or religion played a role in your marriage? Please explain.

23. Did you ever consider separation or divorce? If so, what triggered it?

24. As you know, many Black couples struggle in their marriage. What do you think would be most helpful in helping these couples prepare for marriage?

25. What would be the most helpful in supporting Black couples to continue to have strong marriages?

26. Do you think that what makes a strong marriage in the Black culture different than what it takes to make a strong marriage in the White culture?

27. What were your expectations before marriage? How have your views changed or remained the same over the years?

28. What advice would you give your children about having strong marriages?

29. Are there any things about strong marriages that you would like to add?

30. Are there any things you would like to ask us about?