Louisiana State University

LSU Scholarly Repository

3-1-2016

"Whatever God Has Yoked Together, Let No Man Put Apart:" The Effect of Religion on Black Marriages

Cassandra Chaney PhD
Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge, cchaney@lsu.edu

Lucy Shirisia
Utah Valley University

Linda Skogrand
Utah State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.lsu.edu/socialwork_pubs

Part of the African American Studies Commons, Family, Life Course, and Society Commons, and the Sociology of Religion Commons

"Whatever God Has Yoked Together, Let No Man Put Apart:" The Effect of Religion on Black Marriages

CASSANDRA CHANEY-LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY

LUCY SHIRISIA-UTAH VALLEY UNIVERSITY

LINDA SKOGRAND-UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY, LOGAN

Abstract

This qualitative study examined how religion strengthened the marriages of three (n = 6) African American couples. An ancillary purpose of this study is to examine the extent that spirituality influences the marriages of these couples. Through the use of a family-strengths framework, this study examined how a religious orientation (Hill, 1968) stabilized Black marriages. Qualitative analysis revealed the following four themes: (1) Religion is The Foundation of the Marriage; (2) Couples Consistently Practiced their Religion; (3) Couples Turned to Religion during Difficult Times; and (4) Religion Transcended Race. The findings indicate these couples practiced their religion in all aspects of their lives. As it relates to spirituality, these couples discussed this construct as the relationship that they established between themselves and God, and God and their spouse. The study provides an explanation of why a paradox may exist within the African American community in terms of religion and divorce. The implications for research, practice, and policy are discussed.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how religion strengthened the marriages of African American (or Black) couples. This topic is important for three reasons. First, both historically and contemporaneously, religion has enhanced the financial, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being of African Americans (Chaney, 2008a; 2008b; Billingsley, 1992; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). Second, when compared to other races, Blacks have the lowest rate of marriage, the highest rate of divorce, and are most likely to rear their children in single parent homes (African-American Healthy Marriage Initiative, n.d., Chaney, 2011; 2009). To put this in perspective, married couples head 76% of American families, while African American married couples head only 47.9% of American families. In addition, while the overall rate for single parent households in America has increased for all children, it is especially alarming among African

Dr. Cassandra Chaney is a Black Family Scholar broadly interested in the dynamics of African-American family life. She also explores how religiosity and spirituality support African-Americans.

Lucy Shirisia earned her M.S. in Family, Consumer, and Human Development from Utah State University. She is an Adjunct Professor at Utah Valley University and Weber State University.

Linda Skogrand is a Professor and Extension Specialist at Utah State University. Her research interests include parent education, understanding families from diverse cultures, and identifying components of strong marriages in diverse cultures.

Americans as 69% of African American births are currently to single mothers as compared to 33% nationally (African American Healthy Marriage Initiative, n.d). The current family structure of African Americans has been linked to several factors. In particular, the legacy of slavery, racial discrimination, male unemployment, underemployment, seasonal employment, high rates of incarceration, and poverty (Chaney, 2011; Blackman, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colon, & Roberts, 2005; Patterson, 1998; Wilson, 1996) have been found to weaken Black marriages and increase the likelihood that these marriages will end.

Last, given the increasing amount of attention that has been given to supporting Black marriages, most notably through the African American Healthy Marriage Initiative (AAHMI), whose primary goal is "to promote and strengthen the institution of healthy marriage in the African American community," (http://www.aahmi.net/mission.html) this study can help further the goals of policy by increasing and strengthening the number of Black marriages in America through the vantage point of religion. The aforementioned policy goal is important as the majority of African Americans desire marriage (Chaney, 2014; Chaney, Stamps Mitchell, & Barker, 2014; Dixon, 2009; Johnson, 2012; Taylor, Jackson, & Chatters, 1997; Vaterlaus, Skogrand, & Chaney, 2015), yet are unable to establish and maintain stable marriages.

In the section that follows, we highlight key studies related to the relationship between religion and marital stability. Next, we will discuss the methodology that was used in the current study. After this, we will feature the marital perspectives of three couples from this study. Then, we will present the qualitative findings of our study. Lastly, we will discuss the implications of this study for research, practice, and policy.

Review of Literature

Historically, religious institutions have played a central role in marriage and families (Baucom, 2001; Booth, Johnson, Branaman, & Sica, 1995; Marks et al., 2010; Christiano, 2000; Hill, 1968; Marks, 2005; Marks & Chaney, 2006; Pargament & Maton, 2000; Uecker, 2014; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007; Wilson & Musick, 1995; Witte, 2012). Over four decades ago, renowned Black scholar, Robert Hill (1968), identified five strengths of Black families in America, namely (1) a strong religious orientation; (2) a high aspiration rate: aspirations to achieve more than they "ought" to aspire considering situation; (3) role exchange: women are not afraid to support the family if men are not able; (4) kinship circle: extended family in the black community; and (5) willingness to work. Notably, during a time when African American's access to several institutions (e.g., schools, churches, and businesses) was restricted, the Black Church provided for the material, emotional, and spiritual needs of congregants and members of the community (Taylor & Chatters, 1998). Moreover, religion has been instrumental in the establishment of romantic relationships. In particular, religion has been found to be especially important in the dating and mate selection of African American men (Hurt, 2013), Black college students (Chaney & Francis, 2013), as well as a strong predictor of marriage among emerging adults (Braithwaite, et al., 2015; Fuller, Frost, & Burr, 2015). Furthermore, affiliation with religious institutions promotes psychological well-being, social support, and pro-social norms among couples, which in turn, strengthens marriages (Amato & Booth, 1997; Ellison, 1994; Gottman, 1998; Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016).

Religion is especially advantageous for marriage. For example, religious involvement has been associated with increased levels of marital quality (Call & Heaton, 1997; Christiano, 2000; Skipper, 2016; Stafford, David, & McPherson, 2014; Wilcox & Nock, 2006), and couples who regularly attend church together tend to remain together over time (Marks et al., 2008; Mullins, 2016; Wilson & Musick, 1996). Furthermore, Anderson (1999) believed religious institutions support relationships and encourage healthier marriages in communities. As it relates to community involvement, 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. Specifically, mothers who were in a relationship with fathers who attended church, were particularly likely to marry. Essentially, all inner-city ethnic groups, which included African Americans, were more inclined to marry than those who did not attend church.

Given the high value of religion among Blacks, there is an interesting paradox in the African American community. As a group, Blacks have a stronger desire to marry than Whites (Dixon, 2009) and attend church far more often than Whites or any other ethnic group (Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004; Van Camp, Sloan, & ElBassiouny, 2014), yet have the highest divorce rate (Blackman, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colon, & Roberts, 2005; Patterson, 1998). Given the importance of marriage within religion (Call & Heaton, 1997; Lehrer,

2000; Wilcox, 2004), and the high regard for religion (via church attendance) demonstrated by African Americans (which also highly regard marriage), it is important to consider possible reasons for the current high religion-low marriage paradox that exists within the African American community. Thus, scholars have offered several reasons.

The first consideration is that religious organizations, and the Black church in particular, has been criticized for 'downplaying' traditional religious values involving morality (Anderson, Browning, & Boyer, 2002), which has in turn, made marriage less important to members of this group. To support this, one study found many African American churches manifested a "conspiracy of silence" concerning issues such as sexual activity, cohabitation, and childbearing before marriage (Franklin, 2004, p. 16). Some believe 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). In other words, given the increasing number of individuals that engage in non-marital sexuality and fertility (Lichter, Sassler, & Turner, 2014), religious organizations may opt to not condone these activities for fear that if they preach against them they will offend and/or alienate a substantial number of congregants and/or potential church members. Additionally, tensions within the church may be especially heightened if the messages delivered by clergy are perceived by congregants as contradictory to what is known about the pastor and/or his family (particularly if clergy has been a part of a public scandal) (Chaney, 2012).

Another consideration is that religious institutions may have a different purpose for African Americans than members of other racial groups (Brown, Orbuch, & Bauermeister, 2008). For example, the Black church may be a place for solidarity against racism and economic injustice among African Americans (Ellison & Sherkat, 1995; Graham & Roemer, 2012; McRoberts, 2003; Pattillo-McCoy, 1998), and not necessarily as a place to improve one's marriage. Therefore, churches that primarily focus on political and social realities in the Black community may give less attention to why strong Black marriages are important for individuals, couples, families, and communities. Although most religions highly regard marriage, politics and social issues may be more salient for some church members than marriage (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007). This may be why many African Americans do not associate religion with fostering stable marriages.

The final consideration is that although religion is generally important to African Americans, some members of this group may have a higher regard for spirituality (Reed & Neville, 2014; Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999). Although the terms religion and spirituality are frequently used interchangeably, they are not the same. While religion has been associated with "organized religion," "organized ritualistic practices, or the outward manifestation of spiritual beliefs" (Burr, 1996; Pargament & Maton, 2000), spirituality has been associated with the "internalization of positive values" (Black, 1999; Canda, 1988; Dollahite, 1988; Joseph, 1988; Mattis, 2002; 2000) (Chaney, 2008b, p. 204), or the relationship that an individual establishes with God and other humans (Chaney, 2008b). Since religious organizations generally promote marriage and marital stability (Marks & Chaney, 2006), African Americans that have a high regard for religion (i.e., belief in God, church attendance, prayer, reading the Bible), may also be informed by spirituality as they discuss marriage. Therefore, "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). So, although religion is generally important to many African Americans, spirituality may also inform "the African psyche" that members of this group generate as they experience and discuss marriage.

Clearly, religion is a "survival system" (p. 462) that plays a tremendous role in the daily lives of African Americans. 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). More recent studies have found that when compared with other racial and ethnic groups, African-Americans are among the most likely to report a formal religious affiliation, with 87% of African-Americans describing themselves as belonging to one religious group or another (Pew Research Center, 2009). In regard to Black marriage, religion is especially important. For example, religion has been especially instrumental in unifying Black married couples that regularly attend church together (Marks et al., 2008). Another study revealed African American couples who were married for more than seven years were more likely than European Americans to report that religion was important to their marriage (Holmberg, Orbuch, & Veroff, 2004). While this finding in no way suggests that White married couples do not value religion, it does suggest that certain

racial experiences (i.e., racism, discrimination, poverty, unemployment, and underemployment) (Hayward & Krause, 2015) may make religion especially important to African Americans.

Although Blacks are less likely than other racial groups to marry and remain married (African American Healthy Marriage Initiative, n.d.; Blackman et al, 2005; Chaney, 2010; 2009; Chaney & Monroe, 2009; Dixon, 2009; Patterson, 1998), strong marriages do exist in the African American community. Scholars have revealed marital commitment to be strong among Black married couples with a formerly incarcerated member (Chaney, 2011), as well as the ability of African American spouses to forge a tighter bond during difficult times (Marks, Hopkins, Chaney, Nesteruk, & Sasser, 2010; Marks et al., 2008). For instance, shared grief surrounding the death of a loved one can deepen the bond between Black married couples (Marks et al, 2008; Veroff, Douvan, & Hatchett, 1995). Indeed, African American couples frequently resolve intra-marital conflict and enjoy happy and stable marriages (Allen & Connor, 1997; Chaney, 2010; Marks et al., 2008; Philips, Wilmoth, & Marks, 2014). Therefore, it is important to validate the perspectives of this unique subset of the Black community, specifically African Americans in stable marriages.

This study utilized the family strengths framework (DeFrain & Asay, 2007), which investigates what makes families strong. In addition, focusing on the strengths in a family results in a greater understanding of how families and couples function when problems or difficulties arise within or outside the family (Asay, 2007; Asay & DeFrain, 2012; DeFrain & Asay, 2007; Friedman, 2013; Roehlkepartain & Syvertsen, 2014; Skipper, 2016). The utility of using a strengths-based perspective was beautifully articulated by Philips et al., (2014) who wrote:

> With respect to African American marriage, there is a need not only for more research but also for a positive, strengths-based orientation on the part of researchers. An awareness of factors that strengthen and maintain marriages would be informative, fill a gap in understanding, and likely have more utility or practical applicability than the dominant deficit orientation. Although it is useful, even necessary, to know why many marriages fail, there is also considerable merit in ascertaining why and how some marriages survive and even thrive. (p. 941)

While a deficit-focused framework emphases the problems and weaknesses in a family, and does not offer a positive model of a healthy, well-functioning family, one of the key assumptions of the family-strengths framework is that a strong family is built on a strong marriage (DeFrain & Asay, 2007; Marks et al., 2008). Using the strengths based framework, the primary objective of the current study was to examine how religion facilitated strong African American marriages.

Methodology

This study examined the extent to which religion strengthened the marriages of three Black couples (n = 6), which were selected from a larger sample of 39 couples (n = 78). An ancillary purpose of this study is to examine the extent that spirituality influences the marriages of these couples. These couples were chosen because, as Creswell (2007) indicated, it was important to gather data that was "most promising and useful" (p. 62). Since obtaining "promising and useful" data can help "maximize what we can learn" (Stake, 1995), particularly about religion and marital stability, we made the purposeful decision to feature three Black couples that spoke extensively regarding the salience of religion in solidifying their marriages. While the sample size is small, a qualitative approach allows us to focus on the salience of religion in the lives of African Americans, who as a group, are more likely than other races to be religious yet less likely to have a stable marriage. As we conducted a line-by-line analysis of all transcripts, we realized the transferability of our findings to other married couples would be greatly enhanced by focusing on how religion influences how individuals enter into and maintain their marriages (Yin, 2015). In essence, by highlighting the symbiotic relationship between religion and marriage among three 'marital experts,' we validated their experiences, and thus, increased our ability to offer empirically-sound recommendations for practice and policy.

The larger study was conducted in a large metropolitan city in the southern region of the country, which has an African American population of approximately 50%. The larger study focused on strong African American marriages and what made marriages strong for these couples. Couples were recruited for the study through flyers posted around the city and emails sent to acquaintances by the first author, who resided in the city. The flyers and emails encouraged African American couples who were happily married to share their perspective through face-to-face interviews regarding what makes

their marriages strong. Word of mouth was also used to recruit additional participants for the study. So, after one couple participated in the study, they were encouraged to recommend other couples with strong marriages who might be interested in participating in the study.

Because the definition of strong marriages may differ by the person's cultural background (Skogrand, Hatch, & Singh, 2009; Skogrand et al., 2008), and the individuals in an intimate relationship are in the best position to discuss their experience (Bernard, 1982; Chaney, 2014a; 2014b; Chaney & Marsh, 2009; Kaslow & Robison, 1996; Skogrand et al., 2009), we allowed each couple to determine if they had a strong marriage. Since marital quality and parenthood are strongly correlated with marital stability (Carr, Freedman, Cornman, & Schwarz, 2014; Crohan, 1996), we required that couples self-identify as African American be legally married for at least 10 years and have at least one child.

The first and third authors conducted all interviews within a two-week period. The majority of the couples chose to be interviewed in their homes while others chose to be interviewed elsewhere, such as their place of employment, a restaurant, or a coffee shop. Before the interviews began, demographic data was collected. The interviewers asked 29 open-ended questions. Examples of these questions included but were not limited to: How would you describe a strong marriage? What is essential for a strong marriage? What were your feelings about having children? Has the church or religion played a role in your marriage? Please explain. What would be the most helpful in supporting Black couples to continue to have strong marriages? The interviews lasted approximately one hour with each person and each husband and wife was interviewed separately. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. As an incentive, couples who participated in the study were given a $40 gift certificate to a local restaurant of their choice. This study is part of a larger study concerning strong African American marriages and reports on different topics have been published based on responses from this sample (Vaterlaus, Skogrand, & Chaney, 2015).

Themes across the three cases selected for this study were identified to determine if there were similarities or differences among the couples in terms of how religion contributed to their marriages. Coding was done by the second and third authors to determine if there were similarities or differences among the individuals represented in the case studies. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), researchers must search through the data collected for patterns and regularities in the data. In order to assure that the participants' statements were interpreted consistently, the authors reached a consensus regarding the themes that were identified (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 114). Thus, the second author coded and categorized the interview data, while the first and third authors conducted a reliability check. This approach greatly minimized the likelihood that any personal biases of the researchers would influence the findings presented in this study.

The age of the participants ranged from 40 years of age to 60 years of age. The average length of marriage was 25 years. Since two couples had annual incomes of $35,000 and one couple had an annual income of over $100,000, this resulted in a larger average couple household income of $56,000. Four participants were high school graduates, one participant graduated from a four-year college, and one participant completed graduate school. Two couples were Jehovah's Witnesses, and one couple was Baptist. The identity of all participants were protected via pseudonyms.

The Couples

In this section, we highlight the three Black couples that were featured in this study, namely Steve and Lonnie, Lawrence and Abigail, and William and Sonia. Since the sample size of this study prevents generalizability, by understanding the type of family environments in which these couples were reared, how they define family, the salience of race in marriage, as well as what makes marriage important to them, the reader gains a deeper appreciation for the various perspectives that make the participant who he or she is today. Specifically, these couples discussed the importance of making God/Christ central in a marriage, the value of applying biblical principles, as well as their general views on marriage.

Case 1: Steve and Lonnie

Steve and Lonnie resided in the city for over 26 years and were in their late 40's. They have been married for 26 years with no previous marriages. Together they have two sons, 22 and 17 years of age. Steve's highest level of education was a four-year college degree and Lonnie's highest level of education was a master's degree. Their household income was over $100,000 and their religious affiliation was Baptist. Steve and Lonnie were reared in Christian homes and as children

developed a high regard for God, Christ, and the Bible, which persists to this day.

Case 2: Lawrence and Abigail

Lawrence and Abigail have resided in the city for over 13 years and were in their mid-40s. This couple has been married for 19 years with no previous marriages. Together they have three children: one daughter who was 3 years old, and two sons who were ages 14 and 7. Lawrence and Abigail's highest education level was a high school degree. Their household income was about $35,000 and their religious affiliation was Jehovah's Witness. Prior to getting married, Abigail sought advice about marriage from two sources, her mother and the Bible. Her mother taught Biblical principles so Abigail continued to search for those principles and apply them to her life. To prepare for marriage, she used the Bible principles once again which included being a good person, being kind-hearted, being giving, and being a supporter. Before getting married, Lawrence indicated that he did not enjoy being home alone and 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, and enjoyed having someone in the home.

Case 3: William and Sonia

William and Sonia resided in the city for over 13 years and were in their mid-60s. This couple have been married for 31 years and this was William's second marriage. Together, they have one daughter who was 33 years old and a son that was 25 years old. William and Sonia's highest education was a high school degree. Their household income was approximately $35,000 and their religious affiliation was Jehovah's Witness. While growing up, Sonia learned that two people knowing the Bible makes a strong marriage. William reiterated the point made by Sonia by stressing that applying the bible's principles solidifies a marriage.

Presentation of the Findings

Four themes were evident across all three case studies: Theme 1: Religion is The Foundation of The Marriage; Theme 2: Couples Consistently Practiced Their Religion; Theme 3: Couples Turned to Religion during Difficult Times; and Theme 4: Religion Transcended Race.

Theme 1: Religion is The Foundation of The Marriage was related to words and/or phrases regarding the importance of making God and/or Christ first in the marriage. Theme 2: Consistently Practiced Their Religion was related to words and/or phrases regarding having the couple having strong faith, praying often, frequently reading the Bible, and regularly attending church. Theme 3: Couples Turned to Religion during Difficult Times was related to words and/or phrases regarding the individual or individuals within the church or to God to which the couple would turn during difficult times in their marriage. Theme 4: Religion Transcended Race was related to words and/or phrases regarding the importance of shared religious values over racial homogamy. It is important to note that in order for the theme to be considered a stabilizing force for the couple, both the husband and wife had to indicate that the theme was a component in their marriage.

Theme 1: Religion is the Foundation of the Marriage

As expected, all of the couples indicated religion was the foundation of their marriage. Abigail believed that a good marriage is one that "keeps God first." "Church should be the forefront of it all," exclaimed Steve. Additionally, Lonnie indicated that a marriage that thrives is one that is centered on religion or God. Steve indicated that if a couple wants to be happy they should "Put God and Christ in their marriage . . . they are the foundation of marriage."

When the time came to select a marriage mate, Steve and Lonnie both knew it was important to choose an individual that also valued marriage. Being reared in a small town gave Lonnie the opportunity to observe several marriage and family relationships. As she observed the marriage of her pastor and his wife, she noted that they have a "good marriage" which gave her motivation to pray often for a "good marriage." As she waited for a mate, she "kept believing that whoever it was [she would marry], was going to be sent from God."

Growing up, Steve did not have good role models of a 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 and this knowledge gave his life meaning. Today, his belief in God and clarity in life has made it possible for him

to be a good father and husband. In fact, he credits the protective love that he currently has to God. In support of this, he said, "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 that the emotion of love 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 believed that God was the mastermind behind this wonderful match, and a marriage that thrives is one that is centered on religion and God.

Before Lonnie married, she received extensive advice from her minister and members of her church regarding marriage. Although Lonnie was adopted and felt like a "motherless child," because of her church affiliation, she felt that she has countless mothers. When problems occurred, particularly as it related to marriage or raising her children, she called on her "church family" for assistance. She continued to do so to this day. She felt that the "church family" treated her two sons like their own, and the two sons felt that they have a "hundred" grandmothers. Today, Lonnie has assumed "the mother role with the younger ladies in the church" and was grateful to do so. Like his wife, Steve also directed individuals in the church. In fact, when Steve gave counsel to members of his church, he taught 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.

Steve shared that he believed this because the Bible taught him that marriage is the first institution, and should come before anything else. The Bible taught "A man needs to leave his mother and father and cling to his wife." It also taught that Eve, the first woman on earth, was from the flesh of Adam, the first man on earth. To Steve, this illustrated that a man and woman were one, were the first of God's creation, and should remain forever on earth together. He believed that God prepared him and Lonnie to acknowledge circumstances that would occur in their life, such as the right time to have children. This is because God was always leading them. Steve said, "People may call me crazy" but he still believed he was being led. The fruits of his labor

and the happiness in his marriage were due to having God as the foundation in their marriage. It was evident to him that God should be the foundation of all those who seek a happy marriage.

Steve believed that for a strong marriage to flourish, Christ must be a part of the marriage. For him, marriage started at the altar which allowed God to make decisions in the marriage. He also added, "I try to make sure that I remain spiritually the head of the household." Steve acknowledged himself as "the head of the household," and supported traditional gender roles. He expressed himself in this way:

> 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 also believed that commitment to God encompasses a belief in God as well as living in a way that was consistent with one's belief. Steve believed 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." In essence, *words must be backed by actions*.

Lonnie and Steve believed it was important to teach values to children so that they know right from wrong. They felt 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." Since Steve did not grow up with a father figure in his home, 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 is committed to be the "great father" that he sworn years ago that he would be.

Lonnie and Steve's marriage was especially notable in their families. According to Lonnie, "they have the strongest and longest-going marriage probably on both sides of our families," which included couples who are older than them. Lonnie always thanked God for having such a strong marriage. She asked God, "Why me? Why was I blessed in a good marriage?" She believed it is because their marriage was based on a strong belief

in God, respect for God's word the Bible, and their frequent worship together. She continued by saying, "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 played an important part in this couple's life. Lonnie said 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 said that even though she and Steve loved each other very much, she could not "imagine how they could still be together" if they did not have God, the Bible, and a shared appreciation for religious worship in their lives.

When making decisions in life or in his marriage Lawrence always prayed. He did, however, desire to pray more often with his wife, because he believed that it was very important to pray with one's spouse. He continued 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.

Religion was also key to stabilizing the marriage of Lawrence and Abigail. 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." During times when his children asked why they could not view violence on television, he would tell his children: "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." When Lawrence gave advice to younger couples, such as his younger sister, he said, "Put God and Christ in your marriage and your courtship because they instruct you. They are the foundation of marriage."

Lawrence said, "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." Lawrence continued by saying:

> 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 compared the importance of having God in a marriage to icing on a cake. He provided this perspective:

> 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.

Lawrence firmly believed that, "Without God I would get lost and be alone and feel no hope." He felt that anyone would feel lost without God. Although he acknowledged that he was not perfect, he used the Bible to help him become a better man. Lawrence also said that God 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. Some men think you win when you act otherwise. . . . And so I always credit Him. He protected me from a lot of heartaches.

When Lawrence and Abigail drove to another state for their honeymoon, there was a rainstorm with a blinding fog on the highway which made their travel extremely dangerous. Steve prayed throughout the drive because he was not able to see through the windshield for miles. That was 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 believed that a good marriage was one that "keeps God first." She stated, "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 Abigail was asked how church, 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 were excellent examples of couples in happy marriages. They taught and demonstrated strong, happy, and lasting marriages. When she was asked to give advice about marriage, she stated, "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."

Like Steve and Lonnie, Sonia also believed that if she did not have a spiritual base in her marriage, she would not have stayed married to William for 30 years. In addition, this couple indicated that the Bible declared marriage as the first institution, and presents the standard by which men and women should establish families. William indicated that since Adam and Eve were the first humans to marry, they provided the standard that men and women should also marry. Furthermore, William stated that he felt "complete as the Bible speaks of" after marrying Sonia. In general, these couples regarded religion and their belief in and reliance on God as foundational to a strong marriage.

Theme 2: Consistently Practiced their Religion

All of these couples unfailingly practiced their religion, which essentially means that they deeply believed in and trusted their faith, prayed often, frequently read the Bible, and attended church on a regular basis. In particular, prayer influenced many aspects of these marriages. For example, Lonnie and Steve found prayer to be beneficial when finding their first apartment without a job, they prayed together and were confident things would work out in the end. Steve stated, "I pray and ask God for guidance to be a great father." Lawrence stated that he always prays when making decisions in his marriage, or life, in general.

Not only was prayer beneficial for marriage, but so was studying the Bible together. Lonnie stated, "We study the word of God, we read the word of God together. We were both Sunday school teachers." When read-

ing the scriptures, Lawrence stated that the Bible helped him become a better man, which can influence the way he treated Abigail. While Abigail stated that their marriage has been enduring because of God's words, the Bible, and then the congregation. Furthermore, Sonia stated that two people knowing the Bible made a strong marriage. For example, to prepare for a marriage William studied Bible principles. Abigail also prepared for marriage by using the Bible principles, which included being a good person, being kind-hearted, being giving, and being supportive.

Lastly, church attendance was influential in these marriages. Lonnie believed the "church family" treated her two sons like their own, and the two sons feel that they have a "hundred" grandmothers. Abigail stated that various friends in her church congregation have been married for over 30 to 50 years, and these friends were excellent examples of couples in happy marriages. They taught and demonstrated strong, happy, and lasting marriages. These couples all agreed that marriage was essentially a link between themselves, their spouse, and God. Their faith was the highest priority and, in addition, they lived and practiced their faith in their daily lives and in their marriages.

Theme 3: Couples Turned to Religion during Difficult Times

While all marriages experience difficulties, the right source of support was important to a lasting marriage. All of these couples indicated they would turn to God, or an elder within the church during hardships in their marriage. Lawrence exclaimed there are a lot of stressors in marriage and having God in his life helped him to cope with and regulate these stressors. If problems occurred in the marriage and Abigail needed advice, she would first turn to her mother and then turn to an elder in her congregation. If Lawrence needed advice about marriage he would also go to the elders in his congregation. Although William was an elder in his church, he advised that if he has a problem in his marriage he would seek out the counsel of one of the other elders in his church. 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 in his marriage. In addition, Sonia also indicated turning to God first and then to one of the elders in the congregation during difficult times. Several couples indicated that while other resources might direct them away from the Bible, the elders in the church would direct the

couple to the Bible and give scripturally-based advice. All of these couples relied on their faith, especially during difficult times, as they turned to God, clergy, or an elder for assistance.

Lonnie believed that when couples have difficulties in their marriages, it was 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 doing this helped them both to realize that things would work out in the end. Thus, religion was their foundation during hard times.

In support of his wife, William believed that knowing the Bible, but more importantly, applying its principles led to marital success. He expressed himself in this way:

> 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. 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 were, "First and foremost, so you can serve God better. Second, was companionship and feeling complete." To prepare for marriage, Sonia went to the elders in her church and to her parents to help her make this decision. William prepared for marriage by using the Biblical principles. He also found a scripture in 1 Peter helpful which admonishes husbands to "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 knew several couples who have strong marriages, and they "base their marriage on Bible principles." He continued to say: "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." When there was a misunderstanding in the marriage, William said:

> 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 shared that a strong marriage was:

> ... 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.

In addition, Sonia shared that a strong marriage included 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 believed that if she did not have a spiritual base in her marriage, she would not have stayed married for 30 years.

If Sonia has difficulties in her marriage, she first goes to God and then to one of the elders in the congregation with whom she felt most comfortable. William was an elder in his church, but if he has a problem in the marriage he goes to one of the other elders in his church. They would seek the answer to the problem in the scriptures.

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 said 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."

When discussing the permanence of marriage, William quoted the scripture which said, "Whatever God has yoked together, let no man put apart." He believed that in spite of being a Christian country, for the most part, couples in this nation do not take marriage seriously. William and Sonia devoted a great deal of time monthly to teaching the Bible to Chinese-speaking students. When their students declared that the United States is a Christian country, Williams corrected them by saying:

> 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.

Theme 4: Religion Transcended Race

In general, these couples believed a shared belief in God and religion were more important than race. 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 "to keep the [marriage] going no matter the ethnicity" were feelings shared by all of the individuals interviewed. When asked if race mattered 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.

Lawrence stated 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 stated, "You need to keep it going no matter what ethnicity you are."

When asked if he believed race mattered in a marriage, William said "no" but contextualized his comment by reiterating that 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 are 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.

All in all, these couples believed that when Biblical principles guide a marriage, this contributes to a strong marriage, and would transcend differences in culture, ethnicity, or race.

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how religion strengthened the marriages of African American couples. An interesting paradox exists in the Black community, however. As a group, African Americans attend church more often than other ethnic groups (Chaney, 2008a; Chaney, Skipper, & Harvey, 2015; Taylor et al., 2004; Van Camp et al., 2014), yet have the highest divorce rate in the United States (African American Healthy Marriage Initiative, n.d.; Blackman et al., 2005; Patterson, 1998). This paradox is not what one would expect, since religion generally stabilizes marriage and decreases divorce (Call & Heaton, 1997; Lehrer, 2000; Wilcox, 2004). One can speculate that this paradox may occur because some African Americans are not religious or do not practice religion in the same way as the couples in this study. Due to their value of religion, demographics, and their reasons for church attendance, these couples may have an advantage in marriages compared to other African American couples.

Consistent with the family-strengths framework (Asay, 2013; DeFrain & Asay, 2007; Friedman, 2013; Roehlkepartain & Syvertsen, 2014), couples in this study used their religious beliefs and practices to strengthen their marriages. In addition, their marriages were stabilized by religious leaders who provided a sterling example of what a strong marriage should be. When there were challenges in their lives they looked to God and their shared religion as a way to strengthen their marriages. Instead of focusing on what was wrong in their marriages, they consciously built on the purpose of marriage, via their shared faith. Before an in-depth discussion of these aspects of religion are discussed, at this point, it is important to discuss the importance of spirituality in the lives of these couples.

The Couples and Spirituality

In support of the findings of previous research (Black, 1999; Canda, 1988; Chaney, 2008b; Hawley & Flint, 2016; Joseph, 1988; Mattis, 2002; 2000), these couples discussed spirituality as the relationship that they established between themselves and God, and God and their spouse. An example of reliance on God was provided by Lonnie who explained that as she waited for a mate, she "kept believing that whoever it was [she would marry], he was going to be sent from God." So instead of relying on her own desires, for Lonnie, having a strong marriage meant that she had to wait to select someone that would be "sent from God." Thus, her relationship with God determined the kind of relation-

ship that she would establish with her husband Steve. In addition, since Steve lacked physical examples of what being a good husband or father looked like, he built a strong relationship with God by "reading and studying the Bible." Essentially, by building a spiritual relationship with God, he eventually became the 'fierce father, fierce husband, protector of his family, and protector of his wife' that he never witnessed during the early part of his life.

The importance of spirituality was also voiced by Lawrence and Abigail. For Lawrence, his relationship with God decreased the likelihood that he would be "lost and be alone and feel no hope." In addition, the spiritual connection with God, which he nurtured via prayer, allowed him and his new bride to arrive at their honeymoon safely in the face of inclement weather. In support of her husband, Abigail shared that 'keeping God first' is key to a good marriage and was the reason why she and Lawrence have enjoyed a long marriage. It was especially noteworthy that Lawrence spoke of his relationship with his wife as a "threefold cord" which involved him, his wife, and God. For this couple, having God in their marriage decreased the chances of their marriage being "easily broken" and increased their chances of remaining together.

Spirituality was also important to William and Sonia. For this couple, the primary reasons to get married was to support God-ordained marriage and to "serve God better." Furthermore, this couple recognized that having a relationship with God involved 'loving God more than you love each other.' When problems occurred in the marriage, a strong relationship with God made it possible for this couple to put their anger aside and do "the right thing" or what was best for their spouse. Perhaps most important, especially as it relates to spirituality, was Sonia's view that couples "need someone stronger" than just the two of them. In essence, this shared acknowledgement suggests that problems in the marriage are successfully handled because of the deep, intimate, and personal relationship that William and Sonia have built with God.

The Value of Religion

In this study, we found that several couples indicated that they received assistance from their pastor or elder 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 unitedly confirmed that they were helpful. In addition, the clergy used Biblical principles to instruct and direct their marriages, and disapproved of infidelity within marriage. Perhaps denominations, congregations, or clergy that downplay religious principles may not encourage African Americans to practice their religion daily as the couples in this study have done. 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 has been a part of a public scandal.

Since most religious organizations oppose infidelity, partners who are actively religious may be less likely to commit adultery (Call & Heaton, 1997; Cohen, Kim, & Hudson, 2014), and thus strengthen their marriage. When religious organizations promote how marriage can stabilize families and communities, they may encourage couples to get the help that they need as well as motivate couples that are considering divorce to remain together (Call & Heaton, 1997; Cohen et al, 2014). Since religious organizations generally condemn extramarital sex, which may lead to divorce (Amato & Rogers, 1997; Marks & Chaney, 2006), couples who have successfully weathered and/or avoided this stressor may be in the best position to counsel married couples in this position. Thus, in the religious context, a stronger marital community is forged.

Demographics

The individuals who participated in this study did not mention typical inner-city challenges as they enjoyed above poverty level incomes and had an average household income of $56,000. 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 gleaned different responses. It is estimated that one-half of African Americans live in inner-city neighborhoods (Lassiter, 1998), which are usually "typified by poverty, poor schools, unemployment, periodic street violence, and generally high levels of stress" (Lassiter, 1998, p. 37).

However, African American couples who live in inner-cities may have challenges that couples living in other geographic locations do not have. For example, those who live in inner-cities may experience an imbalanced gender ratio, a shortage in male availability, and may have more children from past relationships (Chapman, 2007; Tucker, 2000; Veroff et al., 1995; Wilson, 2003).

Contrastingly, in this study these couples indicated congregation members taught and demonstrated strong and lasting marriages. We found that these couples witnessed strengths in pastors, parents, and friends, who lived as exemplars in their lives. Perhaps the couples in this study had religious beliefs or religious contexts that are unique because of demographics. Existing research indicates that religious institutions can provide couples with social support and encourage marriage-related norms, which strengthens marital relationships (Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy & Waite, 1995; Wilcox, 2004). In particular, these networks may encourage positive marital behaviors and may discourage infidelity and domestic violence (Youm & Paik, 2004). Drawing on the family-strengths framework, these networks can also offer social support for couples experiencing marital difficulties (Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008).

Reasons for Church Attendance

The couples in this study did not attend church to deal with racism, but rather, to worship and develop an individual and collective appreciation for the principles found in the Bible. In fact, these couples stated that religion was more important than race in creating a strong marriage, and that God made their marriage strong. This finding is especially noteworthy as it has not been evident in past research on strong Black marriages. In addition, we found that these couples were highly involved in their church community, serving as teachers, leaders, and examples for other couples to follow and be encouraged by. In support of the findings in previous research (Marks et al, 2008; Wilson & Musick, 1996), they consistently practiced their religion daily through prayer, scripture study, and/or church involvement. Essentially, religion was the core, base, center, and the foundation in these Black marriages.

Other African Americans may not practice their religion daily due to their motivation for attending church but, rather, churches may be a place of refuge from the world instead of a place to improve one's marriage (Brown et al., 2008). This is because African American churches can also serve as a place for solidarity against racism and economic injustice among African Americans (McRoberts, 2003; Pattillo-McCoy, 1998). The churches in the above-referenced studies may not have the same influence on church members concerning marriage and family values as churches attended by the couples in this study (McRoberts, 2003; Pattillo-McCoy, 1998). Church members in other studies may focus on the political and social matters of the church and fail to see the morals and values that churches promote (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007), as was true of couples in this study. This may be a reason that many African Americans do not associate religious practices with fostering stable marriage relationships. However religion was the foundation in these marriages and made it possible for these Black men and women to be better spouses, better parents, better people, and make the best decisions for themselves, their spouse, and family.

Summary

Religious practices among married Black couples may differ, and may depend on the religious values, the demographics, and reasons for church attendance. 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 result. 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.

Directions for Future Research

There are three ways that future work that build upon the findings presented herein. For one, future studies should utilize a larger sample of married Black couples from various regions in the United States. As the couples in this study resided in a segment of the United States that tends to be more religious than other parts (Connor, 2014), an examination of the salience of marriage and religion among other African American couples may yield different results. Furthermore, to determine the extent of religion on marital stability, it would be advantageous for future studies to secure Black couples that have been married for various amounts of time and represent a wide range of socio-

economic statuses. Second, as the couples in this study represented two religions (Baptist and Jehovah's Witness), future work should include a greater number of religious denominations (Christian and Non-Christian) or compare the perspectives of several Black couples within a particular religious denomination. Future work in this area would uncover the similar and divergent ways in which religion is exemplified in these marriages.

Finally, given the salience of spirituality among African Americans, future work should examine the ways that religion and/or spirituality contribute to stable marriages. Essentially, for these couples, having a strong relationship with God prior to and during marriage increased the likelihood that they could successfully work through problems. In addition, spirituality reminded couples that marriage was ordained by God and that a close relationship with God directly influenced how spouses relate to one another. The couples in this study relied on prayer, Bible reading, and church attendance to stabilize their marriages, which may not necessarily be used among Black married couples that more strongly identify with spirituality than religion. Wilcox and Wolfinger (2007) found ethnic groups that attend church were more inclined to marry. The present study supports the literature in that these couples indicated that it was God's command that they marry. Future research might determine the factors that motivate couples to marry, besides religion, as well as how these factors might move toward or away from religious attendance and church membership.

Implications for Practice and Policy

This study has three implications for practice and policy. First, since religious involvement promotes psychological well-being, social support, and pro-social norms among couples which, in turn, strengthens marriages (Amato & Booth, 1997; Ellison, 1994; Gottman, 1998; Hook, Worthington, Davis, & Atkins, 2014), practitioners should explore the ways that religions support individuals, couples, and families. Since the couples in this study believed religion motivated them to be better husbands, better wives, better parents, and ultimately, better people, it would be advantageous for practitioners to acknowledge how the couple views their marriage in relation to God as well as how religion motivates individuals to contemplate, enter, and maintain

marital relationships.

Second, since Black married couples frequently turn to religion as a means of support during marital difficulties, this should impel clergy members to be a positive marital role example for these members. In addition, religious leaders could have discussions with their congregational members regarding how religion might strengthen, or in some cases better strengthen Black marriages. Because church clergy have a greater influence on Black married couples than marriage professionals (Franklin, 2004), these individuals can partner with policy initiatives geared toward increasing the number of Black marriages. Stated more directly, by working with federal-marriage initiatives such as the African American Healthy Marriage Initiative (AAHMI), church clergy can provide electronic resources (e.g., videos, articles, and brochures) on the AAHMI website related to the short-and long-term benefits of developing and maintaining a strong Black marriage.

Finally, policy should give more attention to the external supports that are needed to stabilize Black marriages. Several couples in this study discussed how the relationships that they established with members within the church provided them strong and happy marital models when none existed within their families. Although policy largely encourages marriage as a decision between two individuals, the findings in this study provide solid evidence that "it takes a village" of happily married people to encourage others to enter into and remain in this institution. This statement is not meant to ignore the external historical realities that affect Black couples (i.e., racism, unemployment, incarceration), but to rather highlight the strengths that exist within church communities that can solidify Black couples in the face of external challenges (Chaney, 2011; Chaney, Marks, Sasser, & Hopkins, 2010). In this vein, the African American Healthy Marriage Initiative (AAHMI) could feature the specific forms of support (e.g., biological family, church members, the Bible, prayer) that stabilize Black marriages.

Conclusion

Even though the majority of African Americans desire marriage (Chaney, 2014a; Dixon, 2009; Taylor, Jackson, & Chatters, 1997; Vaterus et al., 2015) yet are unable to establish and maintain stable marriages, the three couples in this case study provide a constructive example of what a strong looks like as well as how a strong marriage is created. These Black married couples

revealed religion to be the foundation of their marriage, frequently and unitedly practiced their religion, turned to religion during difficult times, and believed that religion transcends racial, cultural, and ethnic differences. It is our hope that the family-strengths framework that was used in this study will encourage future scholars to explore, in greater depth, how religion contributes to strong and healthy Black marriages. At this point in the manuscript, we would like to commend these Black marriages, who by and large have defied the odds of remaining happy and stable over time. In closing, as these and other Black married couples continue to rely on various aspects of religion to deepen their marital bond, it is our hope that as they experience challenges that they wholeheartedly share William's view of marriage, "Whatever God has yoked together, let no man put apart."

References

African American Healthy Marriage Initiative (n.d.). Retrieved from: http://www.aahmi.net/focus.html

Allen, W. D., & Connor, E. (1997). An African American perspective on generative fathering. In A. J. Hawkins & D. C. Dollahite (Eds.), Generative fathering: Beyond deficit perspectives (pp. 217-227). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Amato, P. R., & Booth, A. (1997). A generation at risk: Growing up in an era of family upheaval. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press.

Amato, P. R., & Rogers, S. J. (1997). A longitudinal study of marital problems and subsequent divorce. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 59, 612-224. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/353949

Anderson, E. (1999). Code of the street. New York, NY: Norton.

Anderson, K., Browning, D., & Boyer, B. (2002). Marriage: Just a piece of paper. GrandRapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Asay, S. M. (2007). Strong Families around the World: An Introduction to the Family Strengths Perspective. Strong Families around the World: Strengths-Based Research and Perspectives, 1.

Asay, M. S., & DeFrain, J. (2012). The international family strengths model. In World Congress of Families.

Braithwaite, S. R., Coulson, G. L., Spjut, K., Dickerson, W., Beck, A. R., Dougal, K.,& Jones, D. (2015). The Influence of Religion on the Partner Selection Strategies of Emerging Adults. Journal of Family Issues, 36(2), 212-231.

Baucom, D. H. (2001). Religion and the science of relationships: Is a happy marriage possible? Journal of Family Psychology, 15(4), 652-656.

Bernard, J. (1982). The future of marriage. Yale University Press.

Billingsley, A. (1992). Climbing Jacob's ladder: The enduring legacies of African American families. New York, NY: Touchstone.

Blackman, L., Clayton, O., Glenn, N., Malone-Colon, L., & Roberts, A. (2005). The consequences of marriage for African Americans: A comprehensive literature review. New York, NY: Institute for American Value.

Booth, A., Johnson, D. R., Branaman, A., & Sica, A. (1995). Belief and behavior: Does religion matter in today's marriage?. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 661-671.

Brown, E., Orbuch, T. L., & Bauermeister, J. A. (2008). Religiosity and marital stability among Black American and White American couples. Family Relations, 57, 186-197. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2008.00493.x

Burr, W. R. (1996). Family Interaction: A Multigenerational Developmental Perspective. Family Relations, 45(1), 115.

Call, V. R. A., & Heaton, T. B. (1997). Religious influence on marital stability. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 36, 382-392. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1387856

Canda, (1988). Spirituality, religious diversity, and social work practice. Social Casework, 69(4), 238-247.

Carr, D., Freedman, V. A., Cornman, J. C., & Schwarz, N. (2014). Happy Marriage, Happy Life? Marital Quality and Subjective Well-being in Later Life. Journal of Marriage and Family, 76(5), 930-948.

Chaney, C. (2014b). "No matter good or bad, love is still there:" Commitment and cohabitation among low-income Black couples. Marriage and Family Review, 50, 1-30.

Chaney, C. (2014a). Perceptions of emotional closeness, commitment, and relationship stability among African American couples. Marriage and Family Review. 50(2), 129-153.

Chaney, C. (2012). Who Is David and Who Is Goliath? The Eddie Long Scandal and the Black Mega-Church. Religion, Mental Health & Society, 1-21. DOI: 10.1080/13674676.2011.645224

Chaney, C. (2011). "So my family can survive:" Prison reentry and the risk and resilience of Black families. Journal of African American Studies, 15, 95-114. DOI: 10.1007/s12111-009-9111-8

Chaney, C. (2010). "Like Siamese Twins:" Relationship meaning among married African-American couples. Marriage & Family Review, 46(8), 510-537.

Chaney, C. (Spring 2009). Beyond the Healthy Marriage Initiative: How extension agents can promote healthy relationships among low-income, cohabiting African American couples. Forum for Family and Consumer Issues, 14(1), ISSN 15405273, http://www.ncsu.edu/ffci/publications/2009/v14-n1-2009-spring/chaney.php [Refereed E-Journal].

Chaney, C. (2008a). The benefits of church involvement for African Americans – The perspectives of congregants, church staff and the church pastor. Religion and Society, 10, 1-23.

Chaney, C. (2008b). Religiosity and spirituality among members of an African-American church community: A qualitative analysis. Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought, 27, 201-234.

Chaney, C., & Francis, A. (2013b). The role of religion and commitment in dating and mate selection among Black college students. In R. Robertson (Ed.), The Plight of Students of Color at Predominantly White Institutions: A Critical Reader (pp. 185-208). Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company.

Chaney, C., & Fairfax, C. N. (2013a). A change has come: The Obamas and the culture of Black marriage in America. Ethnicities 13(1), 20-48. doi: 10.1177/1468796812463546

Chaney, C., Marks, L. D., Sasser, D. D., & Hopkins, K. (2010). "Train up a child in the way…": A qualitative study of how the Black church influences parents. International Journal of Religion and Society, 1, (2-3). [Published simultaneously In J. K. Quinn & I. G. Zambini (Eds.), Family Relations: 21st century issues and challenges (pp. 151-167). Hauppage, NY: Nova Science.]

Chaney, C., & Marsh, K. (2009). The factors that facilitate relationship entry among low-income married and cohabiting African Americans. Marriage & Family Review, 45, 26-51.

Chaney, C., & Monroe, P. (May 2011). Transitions to engagement among low-income, cohabiting African American couples. Journal of Family Issues, 32(5), 653-678. DOI 10.1177/0192513X10390860

Chaney, C., Skipper, A., & Harvey, A. (2015). Black mega churches: Attitudes toward corporal punishment and perceived guilt or innocence. Mental Health, Religion & Culture, 1-14.

Chapman, A. B. (2007). In search of love and commitment. In H. P. McAdoo (Ed.), Black families (4th ed.; pp. 285-296). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452226026.n20

Christiano, K. (2000). Religion and the family in modern American culture. In S. K. Houseknecht & J. G. Pankhurst (Eds.), Family, religion, and social change in diverse societies (pp. 43-78). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Cohen, D., Kim, E., & Hudson, N. W. (2014). Religion, the forbidden, and sublimation. Current Directions in Psychological Science, 23(3), 208-214.

Connor, P. (2014). Immigrant faith: patterns of immigrant religion in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. NYU Press.

Crohan, S. E. (1996). Marital quality and conflict across the transition to parenthood in African American and White couples. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 933-944.

DeFrain, J., & Asay, S. M. (2007). Strong families around the world: Strength-based research and perspectives. New York, NY: Haworth Press.

Dixon, P. (2009). Marriage Among African-Americans: What Does the Research Reveal? Journal of African-American Studies, 13(1), 29-46. doi:10.1007/s12111-008-9062-5

Dollahite, D. C. (1998). Fathering, faith, and spirituality. Journal of Men's Studies 7(1), 3-15.

Ellison, C. G. (1994). Religion, the life stress paradigm, and the study of depression. In J.S. Levin (Ed.), Religion in aging and health: Theoretical foundations and methodological frontiers (pp. 78-121). London, England: Sage.

Franklin, R. M. (2004). Healthy marriages in low-income African-American communities. Baltimore, MD: Casey Foundation.

Friedman, R. S. (2013). Commentary on" Family-Directed Structural Therapy: Ten Years of Building on Family Strengths". Journal of Family Strengths, 13(1), 11.

Fuller, J. N., Frost, A. M., & Burr, B. K. (2015). Exploring the Impact of Religiosity and Socioeconomic Factors on Perceived Ideal Timing of Marriage in Young Adults. Journal of Student Research, 4(1), 120-129.

Gottman, J. M. (1998). Toward a process model of men in marriages & families. In A. Booth & A. C. Crouter (Eds.), Men in families (pp.149-192). New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Graham, J., & Roemer, L. (2012). The relationship between the experience of racism an anxiety in a Black sample: moderating effects of church-based social support. Journal of Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 18, 268-276.

Hawley, J. D., & Flint, S. L. (2016). "It looks like a demon:" Black masculinity and spirituality in the age of Ferguson. The

Journal of Men's Studies, 24(2), 208-212.

Hayward, R. D., & Krause, N. (2015). Religion and strategies for coping with racial discrimination among African Americans and Caribbean Blacks. International Journal of Stress Management, 22(1), 70-91.

Hill, R. (1968). Research on the African-American Family: A Holistic Perspective.

Praege. Holmberg, D., Orbuch, T. L., & Veroff, J. (2004). Thrice told tales: Married couples tell their stories. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Hook, J. N., Worthington Jr, E. L., Davis, D. E., & Atkins, D. C. (2014). Religion and couple therapy: Description and preliminary outcome data. Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, 6(2), 94-101.

Hurt, T. R. (2013). Toward a deeper understanding of the meaning of marriage among Black men. Journal of Family Issues, 34(7), 859-884.

Johnson, M. D. (2012). Healthy marriage initiatives: On the need for empiricism in policy implementation. American Psychologist, 67(4), 296-308.

Joseph, M. (1988). Religion and social work practice. Social Casework, 69, 443-452.

Kaslow, F., & Robison, J. A. (1996). Long-term satisfying marriages: Perceptions of contributing factors. American Journal of Family Therapy, 24(2), 153-170.

Lassiter, S. M. (1998). Cultures of color in America. Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Lehrer, E. L. (2000). Religion as a determinant of entry into cohabitation and marriage. In L.Waite (Ed.), The ties that bind: Perspectives on marriage and cohabitation (pp. 228-252). Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

Lehrer, E. L., & Chiswick, C. U. (1993). Religion as a determinant of marital stability. Demography, 30(3), 385-404.

Lichter, D. T., Sassler, S., & Turner, R. N. (2014). Cohabitation, post-conception unions, and the rise in nonmarital fertility. Social Science Research, 47, 134-147.

Littlejohn-Blake, S. M., & Darling, A. D. (1993). Understanding the strengths of African American families. Journal of Black Studies, 23, 460-471. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/002193479302300402

Marks, L. (2005). How does religion influence marriage? Christian, Jewish, Mormon, and Muslim perspectives. Marriage & Family Review, 38(1), 85-111.

Marks, L. D., & Chaney, C. (2006). Faith communities and African American families: A qualitative look at why the Black church matters. In S. D. Ambrose (Ed.), Religion and psychology: New research (pp. 277-294). Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers.

Marks, L. D., Hopkins, K., Chaney, C., Monroe, P. A., Nesteruk, O., & Sasser, D. D. (2008). "Together, We Are Strong": A Qualitative Study of Happy, Enduring African American Marriages. Family Relations, 57(2), 172-185. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3729.2008.00492.x

Marks, L., Nesteruk, O., Hopkins-Williams, K., & Swanson, M. (2006). Stressors in African American marriages and families: A qualitative exploration. Stress, Trauma, and Crisis, 9, 203-225.

Mattis, J. S. (2002). Religion and spirituality in the meaning-making and coping experiences of African American women: A qualitative analysis. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 26, 309-321.

Mattis, J. S. (2000). African American women's definitions of spirituality and religiosity. Journal of Black Psychology, 26(1), 101-122.

McRoberts, O. (2003). Streets of glory. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Mullins, D. F. (2016). The effects of religion on enduring marriages. Social Sciences, 5(2), 24.

Pargament, K. I., & Maton, K. I. (2000). Religion in American life: A community psychology perspective. In J. Rappaport & E. Seidman (Eds.), Handbook of community psychology. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.

Patterson, O. (1998). Rituals of blood: Consequences of slavery in two American centuries. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Pattillo-McCoy, M. (1998). Church culture as a strategy of action in the black community. American Sociological Review, 63, 767-784. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2657500

Pew Research Center (January 3, 2009). A Religious Portrait of African-Americans. Retrieved from: http://www.pewforum.org/2009/01/30/a-religious-portrait-of-african-americans/

Philips, T. D., Wilmoth, J. D., & Marks, L. M. (2012). Challenges and conflicts Strengths and supports: A study of enduring African American marriages. Journal of Black Studies, 43(8), 936-952.

Reed, T. D., & Neville, H. A. (2014). The Influence of Religiosity and Spirituality on Psychological Well-Being among Black Women. Journal of Black Psychology, 40(4), 384-401.

Roehlkepartain, E. C., & Syvertsen, A. K. (2014). Family Strengths and Resilience: Insights from a National Study. Reclaiming Children and Youth, 23(2), 13-18.

Skipper, A. D. (2016). The role of religious coping in the marital stability of strong, African American couples: A strengths-focused approach (Doctoral dissertation): Louisiana State University.

Skogrand, L., Hatch, D., & Singh, A. (2009). Strong marriages in Latino culture. In R. Dalla, J. DeFrain, J. Johnson, & D. Abbott (Eds.), Strengths and challenges of new immigrant families: Implications for research, policy, education, and

service (pp. 117–134). Lexington, MA: Lexington Press.

Skogrand, L., Mueller, M. L., Arrington, R., LeBlanc, H., Spotted Elk, D., Dayzie, I., & Rosenband, R. (2008). Strong Navajo marriages. American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research: The Journal of the National Center, 15, 25–41.

Stafford, L., David, P., & McPherson, S. (2014). Sanctity of marriage and marital quality. Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 31(1), 54-70.

Stolzenberg, R. M., Blair-Loy, M., & Waite, L. J. (1995). Religious participation in early adulthood: Age and family life cycle effects on church membership. American Sociological Review, 60, 84-103. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2096347

Taylor, R., & Chatters, L. (1988). Church members as a source of informal support. Review of Religious Research, 30(2), 193-203.

Taylor, R., Jackson, J., & Chatters, L. (1997). Family life in Black America. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Taylor, R. J., Chatters, L. M., & Levin, J. S. (2004). Religion in the lives of African Americans. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Tucker, M. B. (2000). Marital values and expectations in context: Results from a 21-city survey. In L. Waite (Ed.), The ties that bind: Perspectives on marriage and cohabitation. New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

Uecker, J. E. (2014). Religion and Early Marriage in the United States: Evidence from the Add Health Study. Journal for the scientific study of religion, 53(2), 392-415.

Van Camp, D., Sloan, L. R., & ElBassiouny, A. (2014). Religious Bias among Religiously Conscious Black Christians in the United States. The Journal of social psychology, 154(1), 4-7.

Vaterlaus, J. M., Skogrand, L., & Chaney, C. (2015). Seeking help for marital problems: Perceptions of individuals in strong African American marriages. Contemporary Family Therapy, 37(1), 22-32. DOI: 10.1007/s10591-014-9324-4

Veroff, J., Douvan, E., & Hatchett, S. J. (1995). Marital instability: A social and behavioral study of the early years. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Wilcox, W. B. (2004). Soft patriarchs, new men: How Christianity shapes fathers and husbands. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Wilcox, W. B., & Nock, S. L. (2006). What's love got to do with it? Equality, equity, commitment, and women's marital quality. Social Forces, 84, 1321-1345. http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sof.2006.0076

Wilcox, W. B., & Wolfinger, N. (2016). Soul Mates: Religion, Sex, Love, and Marriage among African Americans and Latinos. Oxford University Press.

Wilcox, W. B., & Wolfinger, N. H. (2007). Then comes marriage? Religion, race, and marriage in urban America. Social Science Research, 36, 569-589. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2006.02.005

Wilson, J., & Musick, M. (1995). Personal autonomy in religion and marriage: Is there a link?. Review of Religious Research, 3-18.

Witte, J. (2012). From sacrament to contract: Marriage, religion, and law in the Western tradition. Presbyterian Publishing Corp.

Wolfinger, N. H., & Wilcox, W. (2008). Happily ever after? Religion, marital status, gender and relationship quality in urban families. Social Forces, 86, 1311-1337. http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sof.0.0023

Wilson, W. J. (1996). When work disappears: The world of the new urban poor. New York, NY: Knopf.

Wilson, W. J. (2003). The woes of the inner-city African-American father. In O. Clayton,

R. B. Mincy, & D. Blankenhorn (Eds.), Black fathers in contemporary American society: Strengths, weaknesses, and strategies for change (pp. 9-29). New York, NY: Russell Sage.

Yin, R. K. (2015). Qualitative research from start to finish. Guilford Publications.

Youm, Y., & Paik, A. (2004). The sex market and its implication for family formation. In E. Q. Laumann, S. Ellingson, J. Mahay, A. Paik, & Y. Youm (Eds.), The sexual organization of the city (pp. 165-193). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Zinnbauer, B. J., Pargament, L, & Scott, A. B. (1999). The emergings of religiousness and spirituality: Problems and prospects. Journal of Personality, 67, 889-919.