

Successful Teenage Marriages: A Qualitative Study of How Some Couples Have Made it
Work

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Abstract

Teenage marriage is a topic that has received limited attention from researchers. In 1990 nearly one out every five first time brides in the United States was under the age of 20. Although it is commonly accepted that these marriages are likely to end in divorce, there is little scientific evidence to validate that. The focus of most studies has been on negative outcomes of these marriages however little concrete evidence has been found to condemn all teen marriages as doomed. This study is a qualitative look at how six couples that married as teenagers have created successful and long lasting unions. Six white couples from the Eastern U.S. participated in 60 to 90 minute long interviews. Using a qualitative method and a phenomenological perspective this study describes the processes these couples believe are most important to their success. The couples provided their personal experiences as well as their unique perspectives on the ingredients necessary for marital success. Five major themes emerged from the couples' interviews including commitment, communication, shared values, spirituality, intimacy, and family. These five themes are common within the literature on strong marriages. In addition to these themes, the role of couple individuality and the process of growing together are discussed.

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having faith when I didn't. And to my father, Hubert, whose decades in higher education gave me my first taste of academia, it is your work that fostered my love for learning.

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Dedication

I've always wanted to say that my husband completes me. It sounds romantic and passionate and I loved it when Tom Cruise said it. But the truth is that I know that no one can complete you. Even at 17 I knew that I had to be my own individual before I could really love anyone else. But after nine years of marriage I have learned that while love cannot make you whole it can make you a better person. It is with that in mind that I dedicate this thesis to my husband. Thank you for all the ways you make things possible for me and all the ways that you have challenged me to be my best self. Writing this study has become more than an academic exercise for me, it is the story of successful marriage and the tenacious individuals who believe in it. I am so fortunate to be married to one of those people. It is your love that inspired me to find ways to encourage others to ride out the tough times and find the joy that can exist in marriage. I cannot imagine my life or this project without your presence. Thank you.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Teenage marriages in context

Teenage marriage is a phenomenon that has been of interest to scholars and social policy makers for decades. The reasons and outcomes for these unions have been a topic of debate in a variety of intellectual circles from educators to historians to mental health professionals (Ireland, 1972). Although we know that teen marriages very often end in distress and separation, very little is known about the experiences and factors that make some teenage marriages work. This lack of knowledge about how some teens are able to create successful marriages is the focus of this study. The purpose of this study is to gain a descriptive picture of teenage marriages that have gone on to flourish as successful and long lasting unions.

In 2000, there were 891,000 marriages in the United States involving a partner under the age of 20. This indicates a slight increase in marriage among the 15-19 year old population in the last few years (CBS News, 2002). Overall teenage marriages represent a small proportion of annual marriages; in 1990 17% of first time brides were under the age of 20 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1995a). This is a significant decrease from the 30% in 1980 and nearly 42% in 1970 (CDC, 1995a). This decrease might indicate that teen marriage is a fading phenomenon. However it still represents nearly 20% of first time marriages in the U.S. and there are additional statistics to indicate that these marriages face increased risk of a number of negative outcomes including divorce, poverty, decreased education, and possibly violence (Seiler, 2002).

Given the wide range of potential negative outcomes for teenage marriages, it seems vital for researchers and policy makers to understand the factors that mediate such

outcomes and encourage marital success. The current study will give a first glimpse at what some of these processes might be.

Significance

There are a variety of negative outcomes for teenage marriages; one of the most commonly noted is divorce. In 1990, nearly 28% of divorcing wives were under the age of 20 when they got married (CDC, 1995b). In 1995, studies found that nearly one-half of women who married between the ages of 18 and 19 were separated within 15 years versus only one-third of women who married after age 20 (Seiler, 2002). In addition teens who marry before the age of 18 seem to have an even higher rate of divorce than older teens. Given the high divorce rate, it seems pertinent to also note that divorce tends to lead to lowered economic status and less education particularly for young mothers (Seiler, 2002).

There are a variety of reasons that successful teenage marriage is important to study. Due to the range of negative outcomes noted in the literature (e.g. Seiler, 2002; Burchinal, 1965) it seems critical to examine the exceptions and gain a better understanding of how teenage marriages might avoid these poor outcomes. By developing our knowledge about how teenage couples might build lasting relationships, we can begin to develop appropriate interventions and theories to help this population.

In addition to the high rate of separation, divorce, and poverty among teenage marriages, the US Department of Justice reports that 16-24 year old women experience the highest rate of violence by intimate partners (Seiler, 2002). While this report does not distinguish between married partners and boyfriends, it is worthwhile to note the potential for increased risk of spouse abuse within young marriages. Not only is this

possibility important for the safety of women, it also impacts the children of such marriages. Teenage wives are twice as likely to become teenage mothers when compared to their single counterparts (Seiler, 2002). This increased likelihood of childbearing widens the potential impact of teenage marriage success or failure to include a new generation of children.

The issue of teen pregnancy has apparently motivated some social policy makers to examine teen marriage more closely (Seiler, 2002). Recent proposed changes in legislation regarding welfare reform and youth education programs may be inadvertently or consciously encouraging an increase in teen marriages. One example of this is a proposed policy that would earmark federal funds for programs promoting abstinence until marriage among American teens. While the stated goal of such legislation is to discourage teen pregnancy and premarital childbirth; the subtle message for some youth may be that marriage is a viable option and possibly the only appropriate option for teens that choose to be sexually active. Seiler (2002) suggests that without research to understand the complexities of teen marriage and what makes some of these marriages thrive, it is unwise to encourage, even inadvertently, teenagers to consider marriage in order to meet sexual needs or to legitimize pregnancies. A review of the literature finds that the issue of teenage marriage cannot be easily separated from the issue of teenage pregnancy; the co-occurrence of these two phenomena in teenagers has been the focus of numerous studies (e.g. Billy, Landale, & McLaughlin, 1986; Moore & Waite, 1981; Teti and Lamb, 1989; Waqite, Gus, & Kanouse, 1985). However these studies have focused primarily on the negative outcomes generally associated with teenage pregnancy

and marriage. Seiler (2002) and others (e.g. Burchinal, 1965) have suggested a need for further research into successful teenage marriages, which is the gap this study aims to fill.

Rationale

Several authors acknowledge the existence of successful teenage marriages (e.g. Burchinal, 1965; Seiler, 2002; Reiner & Edwards, 1974). However none offer examples of research examining successful marriages or the factors associated with such relationships. We know there is increased risk of divorce, poverty, and possibly violence among teens that marry (Seiler, 2002; CDC, 1995a). Also, recent public policy changes indicate a potential for governmental influences encouraging more teenage marriage. In light of these factors, it seems that now is a critical time to begin the exploration of successful teenage marriages. In addition, the majority of the studies examining teenage marriages were published decades ago (e.g. Burchinal, 1965; De Lissovoy, 1973). A search of recent marriage and family journals found no studies on teenage marriage in the last five years. The lack of current published research on teenage marriage, despite its continued presence, demonstrates another gap in the research. The current study seeks to provide an understanding about contemporary teenage marriage and the factors related to it.

There are several main themes that the existing literature on teen marriage examines. Many studies focused on demographic variables related to the kinds of teenagers that get married such as, family of origin, socioeconomic status, educational achievement, and pregnancy (e.g. Burchinal, 1965; Kiernan, 1986). In addition, some authors explored possible factors that may have influenced these teenagers to marry (Reiner & Edwards, 1974). Others have focused on a variety of teenage marriage

outcomes such as high divorce rates, low socioeconomic status, large family size, unemployment and other factors that may contribute to the failure of teenage marriages (e.g. CDC, 1995a; CDC, 1995b; Burchinal, 1965; De Lissovoy, 1973; Keirnan, 1986). These factors offer a cursory picture of teenagers that marry and the outcomes of such marriages. However, many of these studies are more than 25 years old and none involve the detailed understanding that qualitative data can provide. This study will provide a descriptive and contemporary picture of teenage marriage as seen through the eyes of six different couples who married as teens and have developed lasting, successful marriages. It is important to note that no studies have been found that focus on successful teenage marriages and thus the current study will provide a view of this population, which has not been fully explored.

Burchinal (1965) conducted an extensive study, which produced a complex list of economic, personal, educational, and family of origin factors that seemed to contribute to either the decision to marry as a teen and/or the outcome of that marriage. He also offered some speculation about what things help and hinder these relationships. While these speculations are useful in guiding future research, the findings of this study only paint part of the picture. Burchinal (1965) acknowledges that there is a gap in our understanding of how successful teenage marriages work. This study begins to address this missing piece while also providing a modern perspective.

De Lissovoy (1973) attempted to fill in some of the gaps mentioned above by gathering data on more process-oriented factors such as relationships with in-laws, religious activity, social networks outside of marriage, and child-rearing practices. While this information brings additional richness to our understanding of teen marriage, it does

not offer the depth that a qualitative study can. In the present study couples were able to share the full range of their experience and include factors that the researcher had not initially identified.

Kiernan (1986) offered a similar look at the differences between teenagers who married and divorced and those who remained married using an English population. While this study included comparisons between teenage couples that remained married and those that separated, it did not provide a specific definition of success and relied on quantitative data collected from the female partner alone. The results of this study provided important information regarding education, poverty, and even homeownership among couples who married as teens as well as some evidence that post-marital factors, such as family size and husbands' employment, may be the most salient in determining whether couples remain intact or not. These findings suggest that it may be the process of marriage that most significantly impacts outcomes and thus lends support for the present study. By developing an understanding of what happens within the marriage, we may be able to provide better support and resources for teenage marriages that are struggling.

Another area that this author will address is why some teenagers get married in the first place. Some researchers suggest that teenagers choose to get married in order to escape dysfunctional families of origin or in an attempt fulfill accelerated adult roles (Reiner & Edwards, 1974; Burchinal, 1965). Economic factors, the glamorizing of marriage in the media, and teen pregnancy are also factors identified by researchers as potentially encouraging teenagers to marry (Burchinal, 1965). Again it is important to highlight the lack of recent research on this issue. While these factors may have been

relevant 30 or 40 years ago, they may not be as significant now. Recent studies report a decrease in the number of pregnant teens that choose to marry as a result of the pregnancy from 69.4% of white girls in 1960 to only 19.3% in 1990 (Seiler, 2002). This decrease in so-called “shotgun” weddings raises the question, what leads some teenagers to choose marriage despite the changing social expectations? And with so few pregnant teens choosing to marry, do those who marry face a different level of social support than one might expect 40 or 50 years ago? This study begins to identify themes that may lead to answers for these questions and others. Using the experience of teenage marriages that are succeeding, the researcher will provide some insight into the reasons for such young marriages and how they are able to build lasting connections in today’s society.

The current literature offers many facts about teenage marriage and its likely outcomes. It also provides a variety of hypotheses as to why some teenagers choose to marry and what factors seem most detrimental to these relationships. However we still are lacking an in-depth understanding of what makes some teenage marriages succeed. This study provides a descriptive analysis of six couples who married as teenagers and the processes they identify as contributing to the success of their relationships. It will also serve to add to the extensive body of literature on marriage interactions in general. The past decade has seen an enormous growth in the area of marital research (Gottman & Notarius, 2000). The proposed study will enhance our understanding about a specific population in the research on marital quality. In keeping with some of the recent trends in marital research, this qualitative study will take the perspective that successful marriages can teach us how to assess and treat un-successful marriages. This approach is based in part on Gottman’s method of understanding how couples go about “the business

of being married” (Gottman, 1999, p.7) and extrapolating a set of guiding principles to help poor functioning couples improve.

By enriching marriage literature in general and providing one of the first qualitative studies of successful teenage marriages, the proposed study hopes to provide an illustrative analysis of the processes involved in adolescent marriages that flourish.

Theoretical Framework

In developing the present study, it has been important to use an overarching theme to keep the many complexities of teenage marriage in focus. The guiding framework that I have chosen to use is phenomenology. Phenomenology is a theoretical framework based on several philosophical assumptions about research and human nature. One of these tenets is an emphasis on understanding the ordinary aspects of everyday life. From a phenomenological perspective the everyday life is essential in really understanding the processes and meanings that families and couples attach to their relationships together (Boss, Dahl, & Kaplan, 1996). As discussed previously, the current literature on teenage marriages focuses heavily on statistics and negative outcomes but there is little research examining the everyday lives of such couples. Using this theoretical perspective to guide the current study has assisted in filling in this gap.

Boss, et. al. (1996) go further and suggest that the phenomenon of what makes relationships work lies in understanding the meaning found in all the things that are taken for granted. It is by exploring those things that simply exist in the family’s world (e.g. the way couples communicate, the way they problem solve, the meaning attached to each members’ role) that researchers and family therapists begin to really understand the processes by which these relationships exist. In this study, the couple’s joint experience

and the meanings they have attached to their experiences has been one of the main focuses.

Another important component of phenomenology is the reductionistic method. Within this model researchers begin with a hunch and then through the research one peels away the layers in an effort to get closer to understanding what really is happening (Boss et. al., 1996). This process of starting with a hunch and following the data towards a real understanding is complimentary with grounded theory qualitative research methods, which was also used in guiding this study's framework. Using this approach, data gathered in the first few interviews was used to inform future interviews and direct interview structure. This process of using data to inform research supports the theoretical idea of discovering the phenomena as you go. Another way that phenomenology was influential is through the collaborative process between researcher and participants. Boss, et. al. (1996) express this idea of the participant expert. Participants are seen as the experts that can answer the research question set forth. In other words, couples that married as teenagers and have developed successful marriages are the ones who can help therapists and researchers understand how it is that they are able to do that. By taking the stance of participants as experts, this study attempted to empower participants and acknowledge their wisdom about their own experiences and what is most important about it. Participants in this study were able to focus on those questions and themes they believed were most relevant and introduce new topics of discussion, which were, used in future interviews.

Phenomenology also guides focus of this study. From a phenomenological standpoint, in order for this study to claim to understand couples they must be

interviewed as a couple and individually. Therefore the methods will focus primarily on the couple as a unit rather than the individual spouses. By interacting with the couple as a whole I was able to gain access to the “family conversational voice”(Boss, et. al., 1996, p.87) which provides vivid picture of the interaction between partners. This insight into the joint definition of couplehood is one of the key ingredients of this study. It is hoped that by analyzing the shared experience, the researcher may have begun to uncover the processes that contribute to the success of these teenage marriages.

Another important assumption in phenomenology is that the researcher always brings her bias, values, and experiences to the research questions asked and the analysis of the answers received. One of the methods to deal with researcher bias is through reflexivity or regularly examining the researcher’s role in the process of research (Boss, et. al., 1996). This approach is very important for me in part because of my own experience with teen marriage. As a partner in a successful (by this study’s definition) teen marriage, I must be constantly aware of my own beliefs and expectations about what makes such relationships work and what are the important factors. Phenomenology offers a pragmatic approach for dealing with the influence of researcher’s internal life on the research. By acknowledging the existence and potential impact of one’s personal biases and experiences on the research conducted and making them a part of evaluating the research, it allows participants and readers to more accurately assess the process and findings reported. Grounded theory methods provides an additional base for addressing this issue via cross-coding, peer debriefings, and iterative analysis of the data.

In general, phenomenology provides a structure for conducting a study that involves a complex examination of interpersonal and systemic processes. Teenage marriage is not simply a compilation of statistics and demographic information; the processes by which couples are able to succeed have been elusive in the past. It is the goal of this research to use a reflexive process of exploration into the phenomena that contribute to creating such relationships. Through this study, some of the key themes and variables will become clearer and provide a new guide for future research addressing this multifaceted issue.

Statement of Purpose

Although there is a body of literature examining the characteristics of teenagers who marry and we know that many of these marriages end in divorce or separation, we still know very little about what makes some teen marriages work (e.g. Seiler, 2002; Burchinal, 1965). The purpose of this study will be to add the first piece to this void in the literature.

Using a qualitative research method, the current study aims to gain a descriptive picture of successful teenage marriages and the processes and factors that influence these relationships. By using a qualitative method guided by a phenomenological perspective, this study will describe the processes that teenage couples believe are most important to their success. A qualitative approach has provided a means for developing rich and descriptive analysis of the experiences of teenage marriages that are succeeding. The key research questions that will be addressed by this study are:

- Why do some teenagers choose to get married?

- How do some teenage couples create successful marriages?
- What are the external and internal factors that help and hinder teenage marriages?
- What are the processes that contribute to the success of teenage marriages?

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Although there is limited research available on the phenomenon of teenage marriage, this issue has captured the attention of some researchers and numerous political and social organizations. I will present a brief review of the literature on the history, outcome, and current social context for teenage marriages. In addition to a focus on teenage couples, I will explore the literature on strong marriages in general. Much has been written about the numerous possible factors that promote long-term, successful marriages and I will attempt to summarize some of the important findings and hypotheses.

Teenage Marriages: History, Outcomes, and Social Context

Teen marriage is an issue that has begun to regain the spotlight in many public policy and political discussions. Over the years research has been sparse on this population of married couples. There is significant research that focuses on the negative outcomes and problems associated with young marriages and fewer studies that provide descriptive statistics about the life course of teen marriages. The focus of the current study is successful teen marriages, but first it is important to get a brief picture of the literature available on this population and some of the recent social changes that may impact such couples.

Perspectives on teenage marriages and related factors.

There are several perspectives on teenage marriage in the literature. The most common assumption is that teen marriages are unstable and often ill advised; however there has been little concrete evidence to validate these conclusions. Ireland (1972) conducted an extensive review of literature and found that in general, there was much

speculation about why teens marry and the reasons these unions have such poor outcomes but insufficient data to corroborate these statements. The overall finding from this literature review was that age alone couldn't adequately account for the potential success or failure of a marriage (Ireland, 1972). The author does point out that many factors related to marital success, such as emotional maturity and educational attainment can be related to age. However it is important to note that no one factor can predict the success of any marriage.

In addition to finding little evidence that points to age as the sole determinant of marital success, Ireland (1972) also found a lack of data to support the many hypotheses for why teens get married. Early dating and sexual relationships, a need for security and attachment, and the desire to escape a dysfunctional home have all been cited as reasons that teenagers might decide to marry (Burchinal, 1965; Ireland, 1972). However, in his review of literature from 1960 to 1972, Ireland (1972) found no studies with clear evidence to indicate that any of these explanations were more common among teen marriages as compared to other age populations. Another study gave a list of ten possible reasons teens marry but also highlighted the fact that there was little or no evidence to conclusively support any of the proposed explanations (Burchinal, 1965). Among the ten factors speculated to contribute to teen marriage rates were things such as the pregnancy, attempts to fix personal problems through the marriage, and even a "bandwagon effect" (Burchinal, 1965, p. 245) in which some propose that the marriage of one teen couple can instigate others. While these are all interesting speculations it seems important to note the age of these reports as well as the lack of data to support them. Some of these proposed factors are related to specific social and cultural climates, which even if true at

the time of publication, are now 30 or 40 years old. In addition, it is important to point out that both Burchinal (1965) and Ireland (1972) conducted extensive literature reviews and neither found any concrete data to support these propositions.

While some studies focused on why teens marry others provided insight into who are the teens that marry and what happens to their unions. In an extensive study of teen marriages, Burchinal (1965) examined individual, relational, and social factors that seemed to help or hinder these relationships. Overall he found that while teen marriages faced greater risks, age was not an adequate criterion for predicting success or failure. Couples who were at least 18 years old were more likely to develop lasting relationships which, the author attributed to the likelihood that they had greater competency for relationships and the practical duties of adult life (Burchinal, 1965). The author went on to postulate that there were fourteen core areas that when combined could more accurately forecast the outcome of teenage marriages. The thirteen areas are as follows

- 1- Age-: poorest outcome were those under 17
- 2- Education: poorest outcome was for those couples where both partners didn't finish high school
- 3- Pregnancy: poorest outcome was those who were pregnant prior to marriage
- 4- Courtship: poorest outcome was those who dated less than six months prior to marriage
- 5- Dating History: poorest outcome for those who had little dating experience
- 6- Personality: poorest outcome for those who were maladjusted and/or immature
- 7- Motivation: poorest outcome for those who just drifted into marriage
- 8- Family of Origin SES: poorest outcome for children of low SES families

- 9- Parental Attitude: poorest outcome for those whose parents strongly opposed the relationship
- 10- Wedding: poorest outcome for those who eloped or had a civil service
- 11- Economic: poorest outcome for those who were completely dependent on family for financial support
- 12- Residence: poorest outcome for those who lived with relatives on a long-term basis
- 13- Post-marital Parental Attitudes: poorest outcome for those whose parents were rejecting or controlling

The author notes that only some of these factors have been based on research findings and others are the result of inferences using knowledge on marriage in general and this list is only offered as a tentative guide of some key factors that future research might explore (Burchinal, 1965). Burchinal (1965) uses this list to point out that young marriages are complex unions, similar to any other marriage, and that age alone cannot account for their future longevity. For example, a couple in which the both partners are 17 and the girl is pregnant might not be expected to have a successful marriage but if the man had a steady job and both families were supportive, the combination of all the factors may indeed lead to success. As one researcher noted (DeLissovoy, 1973), it is also necessary to consider the role of individual beliefs and determination, each couple will be a unique entity and their success is unlikely to be captured even in this extensive list of factors. When using this list to assess couples in his study, DeLissovoy (1973) would have predicted the majority of his couples to divorce, however 77% were still married after three years. Burchinal (1965) acknowledges that there is a gap in the

research and that future studies are needed to examine how successful couples are able to create lasting marriages despite the expected perils of teenage nuptials. Some authors have attempted to fill this gap with studies examining teen couples and the processes in their marriages more closely (e.g. DeLissovoy, 1973; Kiernan, 1986; Teti, Lamb, and Elster, 1987; Teti and Lamb, 1989).

Kiernan (1986) conducted a longitudinal study of British women born in 1946. Using data from the Medical Research Council's National Survey of Health and Development in Great Britain, which is a longitudinal study of 5,362 individuals born in the first week of March 1946, the author examined data on the 1,981 females in the sample. Data was collected from each individual approximately every two years from birth through the publishing of this study (Kiernan, 1986). Using the statistics gathered through this national survey, Kiernan (1986) examined a multitude of factors and compared those women who married prior to age 20, which comprised 25% of the sample, and those women who married later. In general this study found that teenage brides were less likely to be interested in higher education and high status jobs (i.e. professional careers) than other women in the sample. One might speculate that this is in part related to the fact that teen brides in this sample were more likely to come from families where both parents left school at an early age (e.g. 14 years old or younger). In addition to less ambitious career goals, Kiernan (1986) found that teen brides fared poorer in school through their childhood and were less likely to go on and pursue vocational training after high school. In general, teenage brides were found to be more likely to come from financially disadvantaged homes and families that were less interested in their children's academic achievement. This disadvantaged start may

contribute to later findings that those women who married as teenagers were more likely to be in marriages with financial difficulties.

While Kiernan (1986) provided some more detailed information regarding the teenagers who marry, other studies focused on the lives of married teens. One longitudinal study followed 48 couples that married during high school for three years from 1965 to 1968 (DeLissovoy, 1973). This study focused on gathering the couples' assessment of their marriage and many factors mentioned in previous research such as financial status and educational goals. Consistent with findings in other studies (e.g. Kiernan, 1986) these couples reported significant financial strain. It is interesting that most of the conflict reported by couples about money were related to their lack of resources rather than disagreements in spending or saving habits (DeLissovoy, 1973).

In addition to examining the financial aspects of these relationships, DeLissovoy (1973) attempted to gather data on the marital relationship and its social context. Most couples reported a decrease in friendships and social support from their peers once married. In particular wives felt they no longer had things in common with peers and wished they had more married friends with whom to relate (DeLissovoy, 1973). It is interesting to note that husbands were often slow to give up their social lives and continued to go out regularly with their high school friends often leaving their wives at home. This may be one reason wives felt a greater need for more couple friendships. DeLissovoy (1973) points out that it is likely for the couple to feel marginalized and without community or familial support. In particular the author noted the lack of suitable role models or mentors available to set an example of successful teenage marriage. This may in part contribute to the finding that church was an important social outlet for most

couples (DeLissovoy, 1973). Churches may help provide a supportive extended family that could mediate some of the stressors these couples faced, particularly if one or both families of origin are not supportive of the marriage.

While many of the couples reported less than ideal relationships with their in-laws, there was a strong tendency for improved relations over the course of the three years. The most notable improvement in familial relationships was after the birth of the first child (DeLissovoy, 1973). One might speculate that as couples become parents the need for emotional and possibly financial support increases and may encourage more positive interactions with extended family.

In general, DeLissovoy (1973) found that these couples showed a great deal of resiliency and although 23% were separated by year three, many of the couples who the researcher had predicted to do worst were thriving and enjoying their married lives. The author noted that many of the things that seemed to contribute to couples overcoming their challenges were subjective elements that could not be easily quantified such as love, commitment, and ability to adjust to adult responsibilities together. In fact the author goes on to point out that these factors were often noted by interviewers during home visits and conversations not pertaining to the data collected for the study. It may be that such factors are best identified through qualitative means.

Challenges and perils of teenage marriage.

As the studies above have noted, teenage marriages often involve individuals with disadvantaged backgrounds. According to several researchers (e.g. Bahr and Galliga, 1984; DeLissovoy, 1973; Kiernan, 1986) teenagers who marry often lack financial and educational resources as well as familial and community support. Teti, et al. (1987,

1989) found that both men and women who married as teenagers were unlikely to reach the same educational and financial levels as their counterparts who married later. It is interesting to note however, that similar outcomes were found for women who gave birth as teenagers regardless of their marital status; indicating that teenage parenthood may precipitate similar outcomes as teenage marriage. Kiernan (1986) had similar findings on educational and financial attainment. Using data collected when all the women in the sample were 26 years old, Kiernan (1986) found that couples who married as teenagers were more likely to rent rather than own their own home. They were also more likely to work in manual labor positions and make less money than their counterparts who married after age 20. These couples often had more children and younger children in addition to a lower income, which seems likely to increase the stress on their marriages. Bahr and Galliga (1984) conducted a similar study using a national sample from the United States. The ten-year longitudinal study from 1966 to 1976 also found that teenage couples were likely to be less educated and have a lower income (Bahr and Galliga, 1984). The authors speculate that this increased financial strain may be one factor that contributed to the high divorce rate in this sample.

As noted above there are a variety of negative outcomes for teenage marriages, one of the most commonly noted is divorce. Many studies report statistics on the increased divorce rate among teenage marriages (e.g. Burchinal, 1965; Kiernan, 1986; Teti and Lamb, 1989). Based on CDC reports (1995b), nearly 28% of wives who divorced in 1990 were under the age of 20 when they were married. Other studies have found that in 1995 almost one-half of women who married between the ages of 18 and 19

were separated within the first 15 years of marriage in contrast to only one-third of women who married after the age of 20 (Seiler, 2002).

Kiernan (1986) also found a high divorce rate among her sample. By age 32, the last age data was collected for this study, 23% of those women who married as teenagers were separated or divorced (Kiernan, 1986). It is important to note that only 80% of the original sample of teen brides could be contacted at the last data collection and so 20% of these marriages are unaccounted for (Kiernan, 1986). DeLissovoy (1973) reported the same divorce rate within his sample of couples from central Pennsylvania. Similar to previous studies (Burchinal, 1965; Seiler, 2002), older teenagers seemed to fair better in marriage than younger teenagers (Kiernan, 1986). Within this sample of British women, 32% of women who married at age 16 were separated or divorced by age 32 in contrast to only 19% of the women who married at age 19.

While age appears to be a factor in the likelihood of divorce for teenage marriages, several other factors were found to contribute to success or failure. Only two pre-marital factors were significantly related to future separation for teenage brides. Parental divorce in childhood was significantly more common among the teenage brides who later divorced their husbands as compared to teenage brides who remained married. In addition, adolescent measures for neuroticism were highest among those teenage brides whose marriages broke down. While these are the only two significant findings for antecedent factors, there were many post-marital factors, which seem to contribute to the break down of teenage marriages. Financial strain was significantly related to divorce and/or separation among this group (Kiernan, 1986). Low income and not owning a home were much more common among the couples who later separated. These couples

were also more likely to have more children. In addition to the number of children, the timing of childbearing was related to dissolution of these marriages. The earlier in marriage that couples had children the more likely they were to separate by age 32 (Kiernan, 1986). It is interesting to note that Teti et al. (1987, 1989) found that the couples in his sample were more likely to remain intact if they were also parents. The author goes on to speculate that the transition to parenthood may help solidify the importance of the marriage as a stable union and encourage partners to work through differences for the children's sake. While there are contradictory findings in the research on the effects of parenthood, one should note that teenage marriages are more likely to have a larger number of children than older marriages (Kiernan, 1986; Teti et al., 1987, 1989). This increased likelihood of childbearing expands the potential negative outcomes of teenage marriages to include a second generation of children.

Teenage marriages today: a changing social context.

In light of the many negative outcomes associated with teen marriages, it seems important to examine the changing social context for these relationships. While there are many studies that examine teenage marriages most are decades old and often cite factors that are in part related to the social climate (e.g. Burchinal, 1965; Ireland, 1972). Burchinal (1965) noted in his study that there was steady pace of teenage marriages for several decades however recent statistics have shown a steady decline since that publication. There has been a steady decline in teenage marriages since 1970. Teen brides represented 42% of first time marriages in 1970 but only 30% in 1980 and by 1990 they only accounted for 17% of first time marriages (CDC, 1995a). Despite this decline, recent studies have noticed a slight rise in teenage marriages. In 2000 there were 891,000

marriages in the United States among 15 to 19 year olds, nearly 300,000 more than there were in 1990 (CBS News, 2002). In spite of this modest increase, teenage marriages may seem like an issue that is fading away. However with nearly one in five first time brides being teenagers there seems to be a need for greater understanding of this phenomenon in the current social climate.

Many researchers (e.g. Burchinal, 1965; DeLissovoy, 1973) cited factors associated with cultural norms of the time which hinder teenage marriages. The most notable of these factors is teenage pregnancy. Teenage pregnancy is a topic that is often intertwined with teen marriage in the literature (e.g. Moore and Waite, 1981; Teti and Lamb, 1989). Many of these studies have focused on the negative outcome of teen pregnancy and its tendency to precipitate teen marriages. However recent studies have reported a significant decrease in the number of pregnant teens that choose to marry as a result of their pregnancy. While 69.4% of pregnant teens married their partners in 1960, only 19.3% pregnant teens in 1990 chose to marry their partners (Seiler, 2002). While there are few studies that examine the reasons for this trend, one might speculate that changing attitudes about single parenthood and marriage in general may play a role. Whatever the reasons for this trend, it seems important to consider how this decrease in “shotgun” weddings impacts the support available for those teens that choose marriage. Several authors (e.g. DeLissovoy, 1973; Ireland, 1972) note the lack of support for teen marriages and the tendency for such couples to be marginalized. This lack of support from family and community may increase as teenage marriages represent fewer new marriages and cultural norms continue to shift.

This lack of support and concern over teenage pregnancy may have played a role in motivating some social policy makers to focus more closely on the viability of teen marriages (Seiler, 2002). Several proposed changes in legislation and new funding opportunities have been developed to support marriage and discourage teenage childbearing. While the focus of such programs is to discourage teenagers from having sexual relationships and bearing children during adolescence, the silent message may be that marriage is a better option. Some legislation has set aside funds to programs that promote abstinence till marriage and others promote marriage education in low-income communities. The stated goal of such policies is to encourage adults to work at marriage and adolescents to wait for adulthood. However, there is a possibility that some teenagers may get the message that marriage is the only appropriate option if they choose to be sexually active. Seiler (2002) points out that without significant research to understand the complex set of factors which help and hinder the success of teenage marriages, it is unwise to set policies which may unintentionally encourage teens to marry.

It is interesting to note that while teen marriage rates are down significantly, there are also some social changes that encourage such unions. As many of the studies mentioned previously note, there is little concrete evidence to support or discourage teenage marriages (e.g. Ireland, 1972; South, 1995). Chase-Lansdale and Vinovskis (1987) asked this very question and after a review of literature found that the resiliency of individual couples was one of the most salient factors in their success or demise. The authors go on to highlight many researchers who have influenced public policies yet do not have the data to support either the encouragement or discouragement of teen

marriages. South (1995) suggests that individuals need to shop around for a suitable mate and that teenagers simply do not have enough dating experience to do this adequately. However the findings of this study showed no significant difference in divorce rates among those teens that married and later found themselves in an environment with many suitable alternatives to their spouse and those who remained in more isolated communities. In general the success or failure of marriages in this sample were more likely to be related to interpersonal issues rather than the availability of more suitable partners. There continues to be little evidence to develop a clear picture of the viability of teenage marriages or how best to mediate the factors that may hinder their success. Overall many of the challenges noted in early research (e.g. Burchinal, 1965; Ireland, 1972) continue to pose problems for teen couples today; however there is a striking gap in contemporary research that would include the changes in social context and begin to explore their influence on these marriages.

Strong Marriages: Creating Happy, Healthy, Lasting Relationships

One of the toughest questions facing family researchers today is how to create and maintain a successful marriage. Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1995) proposed a need to look at the “internal life of good marriages” (p. 16) as the first step in really beginning any genuine attempt to answer this question. It is a focus on the internal workings of the relationship that is at the heart of this study as well. Researchers have focused on numerous descriptions and analyses of marriage in an effort to identify the key ingredients of strong marriages; however there are a limited number of studies which attempt to move beyond those variables that are easily measured to explore the factors

that couples believe are significant. Several studies have focused on long-term marriages as a way to identify these ingredients (e.g. Fields, 1983; Bachand and Caron, 2001; Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1995). For example, Bachand and Caron (2001) conducted a qualitative study of 15 couples married thirty-eight years or longer. Couples were recruited using a snowball technique in which the researcher asked participants to suggest other couples they knew who might be willing to participate as well. The sample was limited to white couples residing in Maine. Despite the limitations of the sample, the study provided interesting qualitative data on elements necessary for a long and successful marriage. A wide range of factors were identified by each individual in the study; including such things as friendship, love, commitment, respect, and similarity. The authors noted several common themes that appear in other studies, however they also found several factors that were unique to their study and even specific individuals within the sample. There appears to be a paradox within the literature, which suggests equal importance for universal factors as well as the individuality of each couple. This section will focus on the unique elements of couples and several of the ‘universal’ ingredients found to be significant to strong marriages but first let’s examine the big picture.

Perspectives on strong marriages and its components.

While there is no clear consensus on what a strong marriage consists of, there seems to be agreement that there are several key factors that play a role for most couples. In the study mentioned earlier by Bachand and Caron (2001) several key themes were identified which were similar to the three elements identified by Lauer, Lauer, and Kerr (1990). While couples were found to have varying views on what ingredients were necessary to a successful marriage, there were three factors that each individual spouse

agreed was important. These three elements were also identified in the study by Lauer, Lauer, and Kerr (1990). Both studies found that having an intimate relationship with someone they like, commitment to marriage as an institution and their partner as an individual, and humor were critical elements to their study participants.

In order to expand upon these three elements one might look to the broader definitions of healthy families. As part of a 1990 family therapy conference, nine core elements were identified as the cornerstones of a healthy, strong family (Family Therapy News, 1990 as cited in Kaslow and Robinson, 1996). The nine ingredients are listed below and have been used as a springboard for creating similar definitions of strong marriages (Kaslow and Robinson, 1996).

- 1- Adaptive ability; the ability to be flexible to both predictable life transitions and unexpected, stressful events through internal and external resources and coping skills
- 2- Commitment to family; acknowledgement of each individual's value and the value of the family as a unit
- 3- Communication; open, direct, and regular communication
- 4- Encouragement; providing a place of support and belonging while fostering individual personal growth
- 5- Appreciation; consistent expression of positive regard for others in the family without expectation of anything in return
- 6- Religious or spiritual experience; while it is unclear what part of spirituality is important, its existence within the family framework is seen as contributing to the overall strength
- 7- Social connection; connecting to a larger network of family, friends, and community
- 8- Clarity of roles; a clear but flexible structure which defines the expectations and responsibilities of each member
- 9- Shared time; spending time together which is enjoyable for each person, both quality and quantity are important

These nine foundations have been found to be important to strong, long-term marriages as well (Fennell, 1993; Kaslow and Robinson, 1996; Sokolski and Hendrick, 1999). In a study of 147 couples married 20 years or longer, Fennell (1993) found eight characteristics that were common to happily married couples. Using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale to identify couples as satisfied, the author found that the happy couples often agreed upon which factors were most important. The eight factors found by Fennell (1993) are: life-long commitment to marriage, companionship, respect, commitment to sexual fidelity, desire to be good parents, loyalty and reciprocity, strong, shared moral values, and a spiritual commitment. It is interesting to note that of these eight, three are specific types of commitments.

Another study of 160 graduate students and their spouses identified similar factors through both quantitative and qualitative means (Sokolski and Hendrick, 1999). Using regression analysis, Sokolski and Hendrick (1999) found several factors that were significantly related to marital satisfaction such as commitment, sexual satisfaction, self-disclosure, and spousal support. In addition, an open-ended question was used to find out what factors study participants believed were most important to marital success. Some of the most frequently mentioned themes include communication, commitment, spirituality, trust, love, friendship, and hard work. Other factors identified in previous research were also included in these findings such as humor and cooperation.

Many of the studies cited above have worked to provide us with a list of ingredients for a successful strong marriage. This grocery list of interpersonal and intrapersonal factors has served as a springboard for other research, which aims to figure out how couples combine these things in order to create their strong marriage. If previous

researchers have provided the ingredients, then Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1995) have attempted to write the recipe. In an extensive qualitative study of happily married couples, the authors identify nine psychological tasks of marriage. Although these tasks are not characteristics such as listed above, if one compares the study of strong marriages to cooking a fine meal, you can see how these tasks would involve the ingredients mentioned in the previous studies. The authors use a different metaphor in explaining the goal of their research. Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1995) offer these tasks as steps in building a house, similar to Gottman's (1999b) sound marital house. The idea is that marriages must withstand stress of inevitable life changes and unpredicted crises thus it is not only important to figure out what is needed to build the marriage but how to combine the many variables in ways that offer the strength and flexibility necessary to weather any storm. The nine tasks identified by Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1995) are listed below:

- 1- Separate from one's family of origin by redefining the connections between family members and investing fully in the marriage
- 2- Build togetherness and intimacy while maintaining individual autonomy
- 3- Incorporate the roles of parenthood and the chaotic changes it brings while maintaining privacy as a couple
- 4- Confront the crises of life while strengthening the bond between partners
- 5- Develop a safe environment for expressing differences, anger, and settling conflicts
- 6- Create and maintain a fulfilling sexual relationship making an effort to protect it from the invasion of family and work demands
- 7- Laugh and have fun to keep perspective on things and develop shared interests and friends
- 8- Nurture and comfort one another while making an effort to meet each other's needs to depend on and be supported by the other
- 9- Hold onto the early romance and idealization of falling in love as you face the sober reality of change and growth over time

The authors outline each of these tasks through several life stages within the couples studied. Many of the ingredients identified above are crucial to making it through these challenging steps. These steps represent one possible recipe for creating strong and fulfilling marriages. What is important to note about the Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1995) study is that these steps are the fruit of an extensive exploration of the inner workings of strong marriages. Each couple that participated was unique and offered different perspectives and themes which they felt contributed to their success but through the myriad of stories these authors worked to identify what they believed are the common threads. It is inevitable that others will suggest a different list of steps, which is the challenge of understanding strong marriages.

Despite the multitude of perspectives on strong marriages, there are some variables that are consistently mentioned in the research and I will provide a brief discussion of some of these variables. Commitment to stay the course in spite of crisis and the inevitable difficulty of navigating life with another person seems a crucial element of any strong marriage and a complex concept to understand. One component that may influence commitment and perceptions about marriage as an institution is spirituality and/or religion. Although there are conflicting findings on this variable, it seems to be consistently identified by couples as important and therefore a worthwhile topic to explore further.

There is one factor that seems to be universally accepted as the cornerstone of every healthy relationship and necessary for the creation and maintenance of these relationships and that is communication. Communication is a topic that could be the focus of endless discussion and research not to mention countless theses. However, I will

attempt to provide a brief look at some of the common findings about communication and marriage.

In addition to the aforementioned topics, I will offer some thoughts on intimacy and marital friendship. Many of the ingredients found in other studies could easily fit under the umbrella of intimacy and friendship such as companionship, respect, understanding, love, and sex. While there is not enough space to provide a detailed exploration of any of these factors, I hope to provide a succinct synopsis of how these factors plays a role in strong marriages.

Finally I will offer a brief examination of the individuality of couples and its role in creating their recipe for success. Couples are unique and therefore the ingredients for success are going to vary, as will the ways in which they use each characteristic. I will attempt to offer some perspective on how the uniqueness of couples impacts the creation and maintenance of strong marriages.

Commitment.

One of the most consistently reported factors for strong marriages is commitment. While there are some differences in our understanding of what commitment means it is one of the few characteristics that is consistently reported by researchers, clinicians, and couples alike. In general commitment is seen as an intra-personal factor, specifically it is the decision or intention to create and maintain the current relationship for an indefinite period of time (e.g. Jones, Adams, Monroe, and Berry, 1995; Lemieux and Hale, 2000). Several studies have looked at the interaction between commitment, satisfaction, and marital stability (e.g. Impett, Beals, and Peplau, 2001; Lemieux and Hale, 2000). Lemieux and Hale (2000) used the triangular theory of love to examine the interplay between commitment, intimacy, and passion and their effect on marital stability.

Through their theoretical perspective, marriage includes three components of love- an emotional component, a behavioral component, and a cognitive component. Intimacy encompasses the emotional aspect, passion includes the physical and behavioral aspects, and commitment is the cognitive component. The authors believe that conceptually this division of love is useful yet the measurement of such elusive qualities proved difficult. Although the authors had concerns about the validity of their measures, they were able to use factor analysis to find some interesting results. Overall intimacy, passion, and commitment were found to account for 70-80% of the variance in relationship satisfaction for men and women (Lemieux and Hale, 2000). In other words, the majority of changes in marital satisfaction could be linked to changes in the level of intimacy, passion, and/or commitment. One interesting finding to note is that couples who were married longer seemed to have higher levels of commitment over intimacy and passion. This may lead one to consider the possibility that while these three components are all very important to marital satisfaction, the ratio of each may change over time. That is to say that over the course of a marriage commitment may increase in importance adjusting for the possible decrease intimacy or passion over the years. Overall one important finding from Lemieux and Hale (2000) is that commitment, intimacy, passion, and satisfaction are interrelated and not easily separated into distinct quantifiable categories, which is similar to findings in other studies (e.g. Jones et al., 1995).

Impett, Beals, and Peplau (2001) took a different approach in their examination of commitment. In fact they posit that satisfaction is in fact one component that determines an individual's degree of commitment. They utilized an investment model and explored what they believed are the three keys to commitment, satisfaction, quality of alternatives,

and investment. Quality of alternatives is not limited to other potential partners but includes the costs and benefits of living alone or relying on friends and family for emotional connection. Investment refers to the amount of time, money, energy, and emotional resources one has put into the relationship. Satisfaction from the perspective of these authors is a cost/benefit analysis of the relationship and the rewards one gets from continuing to be involved with this partner. Of the three components studied by Impett, et al. (2001) satisfaction was the greatest predictor of commitment. One fascinating finding was that a combined measure of both partners' level of satisfaction was the best predictor of either partner's commitment to the marriage. One possible explanation for this is that if both partners are highly satisfied, it is easier for each partner to commit to continuing the relationship. It is easier for us to say we are sticking with a relationship for better or worse when our experience suggests there will be more good times than bad. Although commitment was found to be a significant predictor of stability it only accounted for a small proportion of differences in long-term stability in this study. This reinforces the idea that strong and stable marriages are made up of more than one or two single components. It is interesting to point out that other studies (e.g. Sokolski and Hendrick, 1999) which have looked at commitment as being a component of satisfaction have found that differences in commitment account for 40% of the variance in marital satisfaction. This may suggest that commitment and satisfaction are intertwined in a way that we have yet to fully understand and other factors may be influencing both. Impett, Beals, and Peplau (2001) also suggest that one reason that commitment may be misunderstood or difficult to measure is that there may be several types of commitment. The three types of commitment suggested are personal, structural, and moral. Personal

commitment is the attraction to one's partner as an individual or the promise to stay true to this person because of who they are or who you are as a couple. Structural commitment is based on the barriers and constraints of the relationship and the idea that marriage is an institution with a contract and certain promises. Moral commitment is based on a sense of obligation and duty often stemming from religious or cultural values. It is easy to see how personal and structural commitment fit with the many lists offered by researchers and couples as mentioned above. Several studies (e.g. Bachand and Caron (2001); Lauer, Lauer, and Kerr (1990); Kaslow and Robinson, 1996) pointed to the importance of commitment to marriage as a separate entity which may be seen as a form of moral or structural commitment; and of commitment to one's partner as an individual, which can easily be seen as a personal commitment. While commitment continues to be an area we do not understand fully, it seems clear that there is a need for partners to make a conscious decision to maintain their relationship. Based on the findings and reports from couples there seems to be a need to not only commit to a partner but also decide that marriage is something worth maintaining. In Fennell's (1993) list of eight key elements for strong marriages, three make specific reference to commitment; including commitment to marriage, to one's spirituality, as well as sexual fidelity. One might consider commitment as an example of the whole being greater than the parts, that couples not only commit to each other but also to the idea that together they create a unit which is valuable and worth preserving over time.

Religion and spirituality.

The prevalence of spirituality or religion in these lists of key ingredients is not universal (e.g. Bachand and Caron, 2001) however it has been a focus in several studies (e.g. Call and Heaton, 1997, Fennell, 1987 as cited in Kaslow and Robinson, 1996). In

their 1997 study, Call and Heaton found that religious affiliation was important to marital stability. Although Kaslow and Robinson (1996) found that 31% of their sample felt religious beliefs were one of the main reasons they stayed married, Call and Heaton (1997) found that attendance patterns were more influential on the stability of the marriages they studied. Specifically, couples that attended church with similar regularity were less likely to divorce as compared to those who rarely attended. In addition, those couples in which one partner attended regularly and the other did not, were found to have the highest risk of divorce. While one may argue that attendance is likely to have a direct impact on the degree of indoctrination, it is important to note that in this study the presence of traditional religious beliefs or belonging to a religion which does not look favorably on divorce were not as highly related to stability as mere frequency of attendance.

In another study no significant relationship was found between religiosity and marital satisfaction or stability (Kieran, 1986). Kieran (1986) conducted a two phase study in which he measured religiosity in 172 newlywed couples and a longitudinal phase in which he used the same method over a four year period with sixty newlyweds. The results of both phases of his study indicated that no significant relationship existed between religiosity and satisfaction. In addition this study found that religiosity did not appear to mediate the risks for marital dissolution as some researchers have suggested it would (Kieran, 1986).

Nonetheless, several studies point to the importance of some form of spirituality in the lives of couples with strong marriages (Kaslow and Robinson, 1996; Kaslow and Hammerschmidt, 1992; Fennell, 1993). Sokolski and Hendrick (1999) found that

although the quantitative results of their study indicated no significant relationship between religion/spirituality and marital satisfaction, the qualitative portion revealed spirituality as the second most frequently mentioned factor for successful marriage. In light of the mixed findings, it seems that the aspects of spirituality that enhance marriage are not easily isolated and therefore not clearly understood.

Communication.

Another ingredient of strong marriages that is often cited is communication. Communication is one of the most frequently cited problems in marriage and therapists of all theoretical persuasions have a plethora of interventions aimed at fixing communication problems (Gottman, 1999b). Poor communication in marriage has been linked to divorce, parenting problems, stress-related health issues, and domestic violence (Kelly, Finchman, and Beach, 2003). The importance of communication to couples is far-reaching and related to many of the ingredients identify earlier. Spousal support needs communication skills in order to thrive and researchers have pointed out that for married individuals spouses are the person whom they most often communicate with (Kelly, Finchman, and Beach, 2003).

Both verbal and non-verbal communication can impact specific problems as well as the overall functioning of a marriage. Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002) point out that non-verbal communication, such as facial expression and tone of voice, has short-term as well as long-term effects on marital functioning. The authors suggest that when partners misinterpret each other's non-verbal communications the current conversation can become negative and it may also negatively influence their global assessment of marital satisfaction.

It is interesting to note that some of the short-term and long-term consequences of poor communication are not obviously congruent. For example Gottman and Krokoff (1989, as cited in Kaslow and Robinson, 1996) found that the expression of conflicting ideas and feelings led to decreased marital satisfaction at the time of conflict but was also predictive of improved marital quality over time. It is likely that the expression of disagreement has the potential for increasing understanding between partners and provides opportunity for couples to refine their conflict resolution skills. This ability to resolve conflict and express ideas may lead to increases in couple's relational efficacy or confidence in their ability to weather conflict together (Notarius and Venzetti, 1983). So it seems that communication is not simply a matter of self-disclosure but that certain patterns and processes can promote relational functioning. Interpreting partner's verbal and non-verbal communications is an important part of positive communication. After reviewing the current literature on communication, Kelly, Finchman, and Beach (2003) found that cognitive filters and biases play a significant role in shaping how partners perceive communication in their marriage. Couples in distress may perpetuate their dissatisfaction because they are more likely to perceive their partner's communications negatively regardless of intended affect, which will influence their response and may increase the likelihood of escalation. Conversely, couples may also have positive biases that filter their perception and perpetuate a cycle of de-escalation rather than conflict.

Other studies have found that spouses' ability to decode messages and identify negative affect that is irrelevant to relationship is important to overall satisfaction (Koerner and Fitzpatrick, 2002). Essentially it is beneficial to the relationship when couples understand each other's non-verbal messages and identify when these messages

are not related to relational quality therefore enabling them to respond appropriately to behaviors which outsiders may perceive as negative. Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002) found that spouses were much more accurate than outsiders in decoding non-verbal messages and that the patterns were idiosyncratic for each individual. The finding of such unique patterns supports the idea that knowing one's partner intimately is an important part of good communication. It may allow partners to avoid misunderstandings and provide support in times of distress without direct requests from their spouse.

The importance of good communication is a facet of strong marriages that few researchers would argue with, however, it is important to note that communication is not magic key to a long and happy marriage. Gottman (1999a) points out that the development of good communication skills has been shown to be insufficient in helping couples create and maintain healthy marriages. Often communication research focuses on how to successfully resolve conflict, while Gottman (1999a) agrees that conflict resolution is important, he argues that there is no perfect prescription for how to do it. In fact, in his research many of the happy and lasting marriages included high levels of conflict and even screaming matches. Gottman (1999a) offers a ratio of positive to negative interactions, which he believes is key to healthy relationships. After decades of research he has identified a specific pattern of positive and negative communication that works for most couples, whether they have one negative interaction a week or one an hour, couples who can maintain a ratio of five positives for every one negative seem to be happier and remain together longer than couples who don't (Gottman, 1999b). Many other researchers agree that the ratio is far more indicative of the marital quality than the

degree of negativity (Kelly, Finchman, and Beach, 2003). So if communication isn't the answer, what is? One possibility in addition to the factors mentioned above is friendship and intimacy.

Intimacy and the marital friendship.

Intimacy is an intangible collection of feelings and interactions. The word is used to refer to everything from mutual respect and companionship to sex and physical affection. For the purpose of this discussion I am going to use a broad definition of intimacy to include emotional, physical, and spiritual connection between two people. In essence what I am talking about is a deep friendship and sexual relationship between spouses.

Many researchers believe that a deep and enduring friendship is the foundation for successful and stable marriages (e.g. Gottman, 1999a; Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1995). In fact, in a compilation of essays from medical and mental health professionals each author mentioned friendship and intimacy as key elements of strong marriages (Fitzgerald, McKellar, Lener, and Copans, 1985). Some see the development of this friendship as a natural progression of marriages such as Lener who described this process as a transition from the "hot passion of love" into a warm and "ever-burning genuine liking" of each other (Fitzgerald, McKellar, Lener, and Copans, 1985). Gottman (1999a) describes the marital friendship as the foundation that requires continual care and nurturance throughout the life of a marriage.

Of course many of us hear the word intimacy and think of sex. While it does not encompass the full range of intimacy, sex is an important part of the marital relationship. Fields (1983) found that sexual satisfaction was a significant dimension of overall marital satisfaction. In addition while there were consistent discrepancies between husbands and

wives on desired frequency of sex, this disagreement appeared to have little or no impact on overall satisfaction with their sexual relationship. One factor that Fields (1983) believes impacts overall sexual and marital satisfaction is trust, although the findings of this study do not indicate whether issues of trust mediate the impact of differences between partner's desire for more frequent sex. One interesting finding in another study is that for both men and women quality of marital friendship determined 70% of the variance in their satisfaction in sex, romance, and passion (Gottman, 1999a). Essentially it seems that the friendship in marriage drives the quality of the sexual intimacy for both partners.

It seems that intimate friendship encompasses many of the variables mentioned thus far. Respect, loyalty, sharing, compassion, and humor are all part of an intimate friendship with another person. Many studies have found that knowing and understanding your spouse is an important element of marital satisfaction and stability (e.g. Fields, 1983; Koerner and Fitzpatrick, 2002; Bachand and Caron, 2001). Fields (1983) suggests that knowing one's spouse well enables partners to be more empathetic in times of crisis and stress and over time respond in ways that provide support and nurturance. In that study, partners who were more satisfied were better able to reflect a positive image of their spouse and, more specifically, they were able to report a picture of their spouse that was congruent with the self-image that the spouse reported. In other words, happily married partners not only saw their spouses in a favorable light but also had a clear understanding of how their spouses viewed themselves. This suggests that it may be important for spouses to be able to act as a mirror for each other and reflect a

positive image that validates each partners view of self. This kind of reflection cannot occur without a deep understanding of all aspects of each other.

While knowledge of each other and self are part of intimacy, there are clearly many other components to consider. One way that researchers have attempted to provide some structure for this multi-faceted concept is by using categories of intimacy. Stauffer (1987) offers three categories of intimacy: intellectual/social, emotional, and physical/sexual. The intellectual/social category includes the acceptance of others and oneself and the development of interdependence between partners. Emotional intimacy in this definition is the giving and receiving of love and affection and the physical/sexual category is defined as sensual closeness and physical togetherness (Stauffer, 1987). This perspective highlights the multidimensional nature of intimacy. In order to achieve this goal of intimacy or friendship a certain level of individual growth and relational development are necessary. One might see a connection between the tasks outlined by Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1995) and the skills and growth necessary to achieve the kind of relationship outlined above. Development of an independent self, healthy disengagement from one's family of origin, and an ability to accurately perceive a partner's behavior and attitudes are all components of achieving this type of intimate friendship and are clearly part of the nine tasks previously mentioned.

The uniqueness of couples and their recipes for success.

In spite of the many common factors found among strong marriages, the individuality of each couple is often cited as an important part of the recipe for success (e.g. Bachand and Caron, 2001; Gottman, 1999a). While there is some general consensus

about the key elements of strong marriages, it also seems that couples combine these things in a variety of unique ways to create a marriage that works best for them.

Several researchers found that many spouses did not identify the same factors as being important to the success of their marriage; however, there was a high degree of congruence between partners (Bachand and Caron, 2001; Fennell, 1993; Lauer, Lauer, and Kerr, 1990). In other words although partners listed some different variables they found that those who were most satisfied agreed on the majority of the important ingredients. While this might suggest that it is important for partners to be in agreement on what makes a marriage work, Bachand and Caron (2001) found that a shared understanding of what marriage means to each other was a common thread among happy couples. There seems to be a unique recipe for each marriage that is collaboration between both partners' ideals about what it takes to create a strong marriage. According to this study, a shared understanding of this recipe is more relevant to the success of these couple than any specific factor alone (Bachand and Caron, 2001). Shared understanding of each other's unique needs and desires for marriage can be connected back to the issue of marital friendship. As partners know each other they may be better able to combine their different perspectives on how to make a successful marriage, which leads to a unique formula for their own success.

This idea that couples are unique and therefore their success is related to a distinctive set of factors is one of the motivations for Weigel and Ballard-Reisch's study of marital types and maintenance behaviors (1999b). In this study the authors used questionnaires to gather data from 141 married couples regarding their relationships in an attempt to explore possible difference in the use of maintenance behaviors across marital

types. For the purpose of their study, Weigel and Ballard- Reisch (1999a) defined maintenance behaviors as interactional patterns used for the purpose of preserving an ongoing relationship. These behaviors may be aimed at preventing decline, repairing conflict, or enhancing positive aspects of the relationship. Canary and Stafford (1992) identified five categories of maintenance behaviors: positivity, openness, assurances, network, and sharing tasks. Overall these behaviors serve to create upbeat, open communication and an atmosphere in which partners reaffirm the importance of the relationship while fostering togetherness and sharing daily responsibility. In general Weigel and Ballard-Reisch (1999a) found that the use of maintenance behaviors was influenced by spouses' perceptions of marital quality including commitment, satisfaction, and love. In general partners used more maintenance behaviors if they felt that the overall marital quality was already good. In an effort to expand their early findings, the authors decided to examine the role of unique marital type on maintenance behavior. Weigel and Ballard-Reisch (1999b) decided to use Fitzpatrick's (1988 as cited in Weigel and Ballard-Reisch, 1999b) three marital types as a guideline to differentiate couples and then examined the maintenance behaviors of each type of couple. The three marital types examined were traditional, independent, and separate. Traditional couples hold very conventional beliefs about marriage and marital roles. They have low autonomy and avoid conflict at times. These couples often use cultural standards as a guide to measure their satisfaction and find little need to renegotiate roles or expectations. In contrast, independent couples are often renegotiating, in part because they are less conventional and develop their own rules and expectations about marriage and marital roles. These couples are emotionally close but maintain separate space. Their expressive

communication style means they rarely avoid conflict and they are very autonomous. The third marital type used in this study is separate. This type of marriage is characterized by conventional beliefs about marriage and marital roles. Additionally, these couples have very little togetherness and often avoid conflict as part of their more restrictive communication style. In general differences were found in the type and frequency of maintenance behaviors used in each marital type (Weigel and Ballard-Reisch, 1999b). Individuals in traditional and independent marriages used more maintenance behaviors, although the use of such behaviors was strongly related to satisfaction in traditional couples. This may be due in part to the traditional couples use of cultural standards as a measuring stick for their marital quality while independents are more involved in defining what is a satisfying relationship for them. Both traditional and independent couples rated higher in levels of commitment and love as compared to separates, this difference may be due to the higher level of interdependence for those couples (Weigel and Ballard-Reisch, 1999b). While the focus of this study is on the use of certain behaviors it is interesting to consider that these findings suggest there is no single list of variables needed to create or maintain a successful marriage.

Many authors offer various marital types or categories (e.g. Blakeslee and Wallerstein, 1995) and as the previous study indicates there are several ways in which each type of couple might maintain their marriage. Much like the lists of ingredients for strong marriages, there is no conclusive guideline but most researchers agree that couples are unique and therefore when we examine the concept of strong marriages it is important to include the role of individuality. As one examines the wide range of research on strong marriage it is easy to see that developing a clear and concise recipe for creating

lasting marital bliss is goal we may never fully achieve. Marriage is not an easy task and establishing a marriage that will last the tests of time is an even greater challenge.

Chapter Three: Methods

Overview of study design

Although we know that teenage marriage often ends in divorce, we know very little about how some couples are able to make it work. This study is a first step in understanding what makes some teenage marriages successful. The use of a qualitative design allows for the development of a descriptive picture of successful teen marriages and the factors that have contributed to their success. Grounded theory seemed the most appropriate framework for exploring this area in which relatively little is known. By allowing the data to inform the process, interviews were adjusted to better capture those factors that seemed most relevant to participants' experiences of being part of a teenage marriage. The iterative process of grounded theory qualitative research encouraged the researcher to utilize themes and patterns uncovered in the first interview to help refine and revise future interviews. This approach is well suited for this topic about which little research has been conducted. A qualitative method provides a rich picture of the processes involved in successful teenage marriage and can begin to fill in the gap in current literature.

After a screening process, couples recruited took part in an open-ended, semi-structured interview with the researcher. The open nature of the interview fostered discussion by participants of a variety of aspects of their experiences and guided the research toward those factors that are most relevant to them. Interviews were coded using open-coding initially and selective coding as themes and patterns emerged.

Participants and recruitment

Fliers, university newspaper ads, and a snowball method were used to recruit participants (see Appendix I). Fliers were posted in a variety of local communities in an attempt to recruit as diverse a sample as possible. Churches, civic organizations (e.g. mother's groups), local universities, and public schools were contacted and asked to post fliers or otherwise spread word of the study. In addition, personal acquaintances of the researcher were asked to recommend couples they knew for participation. The ads and fliers solicited couples, as described above, interested in participating in a study of successful marriages. Respondents contacted the researcher via email, voicemail, or through personal acquaintances. A brief screening was conducted at the time of interview scheduling to ensure that couples met the age, cohabitation, and marriage length requirements (see Appendix II). Successful or happily married couples were self-defined as such, in keeping with the theoretical framework of phenomenology.

Phenomenology places great emphasis on participant experts and so it was important to allow couples to be the final judge of their own marital success however the Dyadic Adjustment Scale was used to provide some additional data on couple happiness. A general definition was provided at the time of scheduling and couples were asked to classify their marriage as either successful or not. Prior to beginning the interview, couples were asked to complete a packet of brief written questionnaires. This packet included the informed consent, a demographics questionnaire and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) (Appendices III, IV). Informed consent included an explanation of qualitative research and the efforts made to maintain anonymity in the reporting of the study results (see Appendix III). The demographic questionnaire developed by the researcher included questions to identify age, race, length of marriage, number of

children, living situation (e.g. cohabitation), and education level of each partner (see Appendix IV).

As mentioned previously, there were specific screening criteria for participant couples. Couples asked to participate in the study were required to have at least one partner age 19 or younger at the time when they were married and neither partner was over age 22. Couples could not have more than a 5-year age difference between them in order to participate in this study. The focus of the current study is to explore how teenage couples create successful marriages and their experience of being young and married. Significant age differences between partners may mediate some of the challenges faced by partners who are both under the age of 21. In our society a variety of activities are restricted to those over the age of 21 such as drinking, renting a car, and other factors that may impact daily life as a married couple. In an effort to minimize these potentially confounding factors, I chose to exclude couples that have a substantial age difference between them. In addition, couples have been currently cohabitating and not have lived separately within the last 12 months.

Couples were married for at least 7 years in order to participate in the study. This limit was set to provide some definition on what is meant by a successful marriage. By excluding couples married less than 7 years, I hoped to increase the probability that participating couples have had some life cycle and/or developmental transitions to deal with in their marriage. Literature on marriage suggests that these transitions can be extremely stressful to the relationship (Gottman & Notarius, 2000). Successful couples, for the purpose of this study, are those who have navigated some transitions and still identified their relationship as doing well.

For the purpose of this study, I have limited the participating couples to those married by 1980 or later. There seems to be a shift in cultural norms in the U.S. over the last several decades. Young adults are getting married later and more women are choosing to have children outside of marriage. This change suggests to me that some societal and cultural factors that may have influenced teen couples 30 years ago may no longer impact the marriages that occurred in the 80's and 90's. I also speculate that support systems (e.g. parents, friends) may respond differently to teenage marriages now than they may have in the 50's, 60's or 70's. The focus of the current study is to understand how teenage couples are able to make successful marriages in our current society given the social norms and expectations. Thus I have chosen to limit my sample to couples where both partners are less than 42 years old. After several months of recruitment and careful consideration, an exception was made for one couple in which the husband had recently turned 44.

Couples were recruited from August 2003 until March 2004. Seven couples were interviewed for this study however; due to mechanical error with recording devices one couple is not included in the final results. Demographic information is reported for each couple interviewed however only six couple's interviews could be transcribed and coded for use in the final analysis. This is a small sample size, however, it is appropriate given the qualitative method employed by this study.

Data collection and analysis

Interviews were conducted with the couple together at a mutually agreed upon location. Two couples were interviewed at the researcher's office, two in their own homes, one at a local coffeehouse, and two interviews were conducted by phone. While

the initial methods called for face-to-face interviews only, the limited budget of this study did not allow the researcher to travel extensively for interviews. After several months, it was deemed appropriate to include couples that could be interviewed via telephone. In an effort to adhere to the theoretical framework of the study, couples were asked to use a conference call format in which they each were on the same call with the researcher allowing them to be interviewed together as the other participants had been.

Interviews followed a semi-structured format with a list of researcher-developed questions guiding the process (see Appendix V). Each interview was audiotaped and later transcribed for analysis. Transcripts were reviewed for accuracy before beginning data analysis. Scheduling constraints did not allow for cross-coding of the first interview prior to the next interviews however; in keeping with ground theory methodology, audiotapes and/or transcripts were reviewed after each interview and provided guidance for subsequent interviews.

Interviews were open-coded to highlight patterns and themes that emerged in each couples' story. In an effort to integrate Glaser's idea of theoretical sensitivity, where the researcher is open to any significant variable that emerge, and Strauss and Corbin's approach to open coding which is more structured in nature, open coding was used to create headlines or running themes which were later broken down into smaller categories (Rafuls & Moon, 1996). In this way open coding gave way to selective coding in which selected themes are synthesized into broad but distinct categories. Additionally an attempt was made to draw some connections between the major categories and highlight the major processes that seem to be involved in successful teen marriages.

In order to address the issue of trustworthiness, two techniques were employed. During analysis of the first interview, I cross-coded with my research advisor. The cross-coding process can help to identify where and how the researcher's experience and bias may have entered the analysis of the data. A focus group was initially planned for the end of the data analysis, in order to allow any interested participants to review a summary of themes found and ask for feedback on the analysis. Allowing participants to evaluate the findings can provide greater confidence that the results reported are pertinent to the couples' interviewed. Unfortunately given the locations of many of the participants and the time constraints of this study that was not possible. Future studies may be able to utilize focus groups in this way and provide such valuable data. Since no focus group was possible, a personal log was used during coding to track personal reactions and ideas. The goal behind this technique is to provide an appropriate space for researcher values to be processed and separated from the participants' responses.

In addition to the extensive analysis of the interview content, demographic information was collected for this sample. Couples' DAS scores were taken as an average (i.e. each partners individual score added together and divided by two). These scores give some interesting data on quantitative means for measuring marital happiness. While all the couples reported themselves as happy and their marriages as successful, not every couple scored at least 114.8, the mean score found in Spanier's original testing of the DAS for happily married couples (1976). The differences between the expected score range and the actual data from each couple is discussed in more detail in chapters four and five. Demographic information and DAS scores are reported in chapter four (see Table one) along with narrative data for each participating couple.

Chapter Four: Results

The focus of this thesis is to understand how some teenage marriages are able to thrive despite the challenges they are expected to face. The review of literature shows that there are many obstacles and hurdles for such young couples to withstand in order to create successful unions. I have identified several themes from the six couples interviewed that they believe have been vital to their success. I will present these themes with quotes and experiences from the participant couples. In keeping with the rationale outlined in the introduction, the themes identified are mostly described in the words of the participants rather than by the researcher.

However before we explore those themes and hear the couples' own words, I would like to share their stories. While I believe that there are many interesting and important factors to be reported, I also believe that there are intangible variables that can only begin to be exposed through knowing these couples. Each couple has their own unique story and experiences but they all seemed to have an unseen connection that escapes formal description. I hope that in telling their stories I can provide the reader with a glimpse of the elements that contribute to the success of these marriages.

The Story of Us: An Introduction to Participant Couples

The sample consisted of six couples from across the country. The average age at marriage was 18.5 for the women and 19.7 for the men. All the couples included in the findings were white couples from the Eastern United States. An effort was made to recruit a more diverse sample by advertising on the campus of a historically black university campus as well as posting signs in neighborhoods with a larger population of minorities. The lack of racial diversity may be one limitation of this study however given the small sample size and geographic location it was not unexpected. One couple was

Mormon, two were active Christians, and one wife was an active Catholic. At the time of the interviews couples had been married between 7 and 24 years with the average length of marriage being 16.25 years. The average number of children for these couples was 3 and all of the couples had at least one child. Three couples were in the military. Two husbands enlisted after getting married and one couple met after both enlisted. Individual occupations ranged from homemaker to military officer. It is interesting to note that five out of six wives were stay at home mothers at the time of the interview. The one wife working fulltime outside the home spent the majority of her marriage as a stay at home mother. Every individual had at least a high school diploma and several were working toward or had already earned a college degree. The average DAS score for all couples was 115.9, higher than the cutoff of 114.8 established for this scale. There were no significant differences between spouses' scores within any of the couples. It is interesting to note that two of the couples in the sample scored below the cutoff score. In spite of not reaching the cutoff point, these couples reported their marriages as happy and successful. More detailed demographic information can be found in Table 1. These narratives are intended to give the reader taste of each couples' individual recipe for success. It is important to note that each couple has experienced their share of ups and downs including typical marital conflicts as well as unexpected tragedies. The focus of the following narratives is to provide a brief history of the couples and to highlight their unique strengths and resiliencies. Names and other identifying information have been changed in order to protect the anonymity of participants.

Table 1

Couple ID		Age at Marriage	Education	Length of Courtship ^a	Years of Marriage	Number of Children	Couple DAS Score ^b
Carrie	Female	19	High School	5 months	22	5	123
Mark	Male	19	High School				
Lisa	Female	18	High School	2 years	24	3	115.5
Sean	Male	20	Some College				
Jessica	Female	18	Some College	3 years	20	4	118.5
Dave	Male	19	Bachelors Degree				
Rachel	Female	19	Bachelors Degree	8 months	7	1	126
Max	Male	19	Some College				
Lucy	Female	19	Some College	4 months	13	4	100.5
Josh	Male	22	Masters Degree				
Tara	Female	18	High School	3 years	11	2	109
Luke	Male	19	Bachelors Degree				

a- length of time from first date to marriage, estimated to the nearest month

b- composite score based on the average of each spouses' score: cutoff score for happily married couples is 114.8

Mark and Carrie: Building bridges and staying connected.

Mark and Carrie knew from their first date that their love would be forever. After their first date it seemed that they were always together. Although she maintained her own place, Carrie hardly ever went home. A hometown girl returning from the big city, Carrie moved into the small midwestern town her parents had grown up in after living in Los Angeles for most of her childhood. Mutual friends introduced Mark and Carrie and although both were seeing other people, the connection was immediate. They shared private jokes and she enjoyed the way he always made her laugh. In turn she was a comforting and loving presence in his life, something he had not always felt in his own family. Other relationships faded quickly and less than two months after their first date they were engaged.

Their blissful engagement was short lived. Although they had gotten married when they were teenagers, Carrie's parents were outraged at the news of her engagement. In fact both families were sure that the impending marriage between Mark and Carrie was a recipe for disaster. Her family questioned his background and integrity, and his accused her of entrapment. Nearly everyone they knew and loved thought that it would only be a matter of time before both Carrie and Mark regretted their decision. But they were wrong. In spite of the swirling doubts, anger, and fears of their families, Mark and Carrie held fast to their love and commitment. They held onto each other, and learned to create their own foundation to grow on.

After the arrival of their first child, less than a year after their wedding, Mark and Carrie found their families were warming up. They helped each other put aside their hurts and build bridges between their families. These bridges became the foundation of a

large extended family, which over the years grew to love each other, and as Mark and Carrie's marriage flourished so did their love for each other's families.

None of the challenges they withstood during their engagement nor the trials of raising five children could have prepared them for their greatest test yet. During a family vacation Mark, Carrie and their children were in a car accident. As a result of the accident they lost two of their children and another would require lifelong special care. The news was devastating and their community of family and friends rallied around Mark and Carrie. Many wondered if their marriage could survive but Mark and Carrie did what they had learned to do many years ago- hold on tight. At a time when many turn inward or lash out, they both turned toward each other and held on. The bridges they had built allowed others to provide comfort but for them the most important connection was to each other. They found the strength to reach out and support each other in ways they did not know they could. Their shared sense of humor and commitment to each other never wavered; in fact it became the coping tools which led them through a difficult time. Through this tragedy they have grown closer and the connection they formed on their first date continues to unite them in a bond that is powerful and long lasting.

Sean and Lisa: A quiet connection.

Lisa was a quiet sixteen-year-old working at her local hot dog stand when she and Sean first met. They exchanged a friendly banter over his change and she didn't think much of him again until a friend told her he wanted to go out with her. After exchanging messages through a mutual friend, Sean asked Lisa out. Neither would have guessed that their quiet evening of pizza and movies would be the beginning of a life long connection.

Sean was a quiet young man, similar to Lisa. Unlike most of his friends he was not boisterous or much of a party-animal. He enjoyed hanging out with his friends and Lisa quickly became one of his regular companions. After a few months of dating they were inseparable. Their fondness for quiet, everyday activities was the first spark of connection but over time they found a special friendship built on more than just similar interests. They enjoyed each other's company and found lots to talk about. After two years of dating they both felt ready for marriage. Sean had started working for a local company after high school and Lisa was preparing to graduate. Their families and friends were be surprised by their plans because Sean and Lisa had established a strong relationship over the years and nearly everyone expected marriage was imminent.

Lisa had thought a great deal about marriage. She had already watched her sister marry because of pregnancy and vowed that she would not follow in those footsteps. She wanted to get married for her own reasons not because there was a baby on the way. She shared the importance of this plan with Sean who gave his full support. Together she and Sean remained true to this commitment and after he proposed they planned a traditional wedding, the first of its kind among their siblings. They planned and discussed each

detail and created a wedding that met both their dreams. This ability to compromise and remain true to their commitments would continue to serve them well.

After two decades of marriage and three children, Sean and Lisa still believe in their ability to reach their goals together. They both stand by their commitment to give 100% to each other everyday. This focus on giving of themselves and having faith that the other person will do their part has been a cornerstone of their marriage. Their quiet connection and strength of character are just two qualities that make their marriage uniquely successful.

Dave and Jessica: A marriage greater than its parts.

Jessica knew she would marry Dave the first time she saw him at the flea market. Dave wasn't quite so sure. When she invited herself to go for a ride with him, he politely declined. But her bubbly personality and outgoing nature intrigued him and then next week at school he struck up a conversation. He was reserved and she was animated yet together they found a perfect balance. They dated for the rest of high school; going out, building things together, finding fun and unique projects for one another to help with. Jessica enjoyed being Dave's assistant and he enjoyed her lively conversation. Together they forged a wonderful partnership.

Although they talked about marriage and Dave seemed ready to pop the question, things cooled off after graduation. Jessica was eager for graduation and a life together but Dave was still trying to find his way. After road trips and adventures alone, Dave returned ready to commit himself to a future with Jessica. He entered the Air Force and proposed to his girl. Jessica was thrilled but she may have been the only one. Both of their families were shocked. They had plans and expectations for Dave and Jessica, which did not include marriage right now. Their siblings thought it was a horrible mistake and their parents feared that their lives might be ruined. Despite the protests Dave and Jessica were married in a small service with only a few family members around.

At a time when Dave and Jessica were looking for role models and support many of the marriages they knew were disintegrating around them. Jessica's parents separated around the time of her engagement. Mutual friends and some of their siblings also called it quits in the first few years of the marriage. They both wondered how these people they

loved couldn't see the impact of their choices. Yet Dave and Jessica remained strong despite their hurt and confusion. They learned to depend on each other for support and encouragement and reach out to other couples' in their community. Dave traveled often but Jessica worked hard to keep herself and her children connected to him. They wrote letters and played counting games as they awaited his arrival from his Air Force assignments. Parenthood became a deep and meaningful bond between them. The lesson that they had begun to learn as they watched other marriages fail became clear to them. Their union was about more than their own individual happiness. As a family they were far greater together than they could be alone. This emphasis on the value of their marriage as a unit rather than on either person individually continues to flourish in their lives. It has fostered a sense of family values that keeps them both grounded and headed for the same goal: a family that supports and cares about each other.

Max and Rachel: Everyday moments are long lasting joys

It was a rainy summer night when Max leaned over in his car and proposed to Rachel outside the bowling alley. Although some might say that knowing each other for five months was not enough time to be sure, he knew. Over the five months of dating they had already endured separations and medical crisis. They met in basic training. And their first date just happened to be on a weekend when families were visiting. Max introduced Rachel to his parents that weekend and on their way home his parents later said that they knew it was serious. The next month, he brought her home for a family reunion. Max's family embraced Rachel and she enjoyed their boisterous and warm nature. But his family members weren't the only ones who saw the spark. Rachel's parents lived overseas but when they came to visit their first question was whether they needed to prepare to return soon for a wedding. After the initial shock of the question, Max and Rachel both agreed that it was a possibility.

Just three months into dating, a medical emergency forced Max and Rachel to think about the possibility of losing one another. Rachel required emergency surgery and as Max sat by her side each day and night he realized that her pain was his pain and her joys were his joys. He knew then that she was the only woman he wanted to marry. Rachel also was taking stock of their connection. As he nursed her back to health, she saw a compassionate and dedicated man, the kind of man she could build a life with. Their brief encounter with the possibility of life apart only encouraged them to take advantage of every moment together. Their love for each other flourished and soon after she recuperated they began discussing marriage.

Although the military had brought them together, it also quickly became the force that kept them apart. Over the course of their first 2 years of marriage they faced countless weeks and months apart. Again they were faced with the reality of life without each other and they longed for each precious moment that they were able to be together. They shared countless adventures as they trekked across foreign countries and crisscrossed the globe in attempts to connect with one another. At a time when some people might have drifted apart and gotten lost in the excitement of their jobs, Max and Rachel grew closer. They kept journals and made tapes for each other. After several years of assignments that kept them apart, Max and Rachel were finally given positions that allowed them to begin a regular life together. Their long absences and fleeting reunifications were finally giving way to routine. They had learned to appreciate the simple routine of life together. The mundane tasks of running a household were exciting times to connect. Max and Rachel basked in the simple joys of Saturday nights on their own couch or Sunday morning laundry. With the arrival of their first child, Max and Rachel found another reason to be thankful for their simple life of routine. They were finally able to settle into a home and create an uncomplicated life without running cross-country to share a moment together. They could sit together and experience the growth of their new baby moment by moment together.

Whether through crisis or career circumstances, Max and Rachel have faced time apart and learned to appreciate each day together as a precious gift. Their ability to love each other in every moment helps them weather the challenges of new parenthood. No matter the conflict or stressor they are able to cherish each moment as a one more thread in the beautiful fabric of their marriage.

Josh and Lucy: Growing into a special union.

Anyone that knew Josh and Lucy would have said that they were too different to ever get together. Josh was the studious type; kind of a handsome nerd. Lucy on the other hand was the most popular girl in town. She was a cheerleader and into sports and guys who played sports. They began as friends, giving each other dating advice but as the time went by and they both faced heartbreak with others their friendship grew into something more. In spite of herself, Lucy was attracted to Josh and they began a casual dating relationship. Although they both tried very hard to keep things light and superficial, their common spirituality and some twists of fate led them to a deep connection.

After a friend suffered a tragic accident, Lucy and Josh found themselves sharing their deepest beliefs and to their surprise they found themselves considering marriage. What started as a casual summer fling evolved into a spiritual connection and within six weeks of dating they were engaged and two months later they wed.

In spite of their common spiritual beliefs, marriage was a growing experience for both. Lucy quickly found herself deeply committed to her husband as well as the institution of marriage. However Josh found that marriage was not as easy or instantaneous as he thought it would be. His commitment to keep his vows never wavered but he needed time to grow into a husband. Together they struggled to negotiate their roles. Neither was sure what it meant to be a wife or a husband. But through the struggle they turned to each other for support. They found that as naturally as their casual dating had grown into a profound connection, their marriage also grew. Their shared spiritual beliefs and honest communication would nourish their budding marriage.

They tended to their new relationship and over the years they developed a deep understanding of each other and marriage itself. Using their faith as a guide, Josh and Lucy nurtured each other and their relationship. They now enjoy the challenges that arise because they know it is only another opportunity to grow closer together.

Luke and Tara: High school sweethearts with traditional values.

Luke and Tara were your typical high school sweethearts. They dated through their entire high school career. They went to sporting events and did the typical teenage things. They passed notes in class and met after school with their friends. They seemed like your average teenagers enjoying young love. But Luke and Tara were a little different. After three months of dating their notes started to consist of plans for their future. Marriage plans. Although they seemed like your typical modern teens, they held some traditional beliefs that we don't hear about too often anymore. Tara looked forward to graduation and becoming a wife and mother. Luke was equally excited. In fact neither could remember a time when they hadn't believed they would be together forever.

After Luke graduated he continued his education at the local university in order to be close to Tara. They continued to date and hang out as Tara finished her senior year of high school. It was Christmas break and Luke went to see Tara's father. Although their families knew they loved each other and might get married some day, Luke felt it was important to ask Tara's father for her hand in marriage. Tara's father was delighted and her mother was eager to plan a wedding soon. However Luke's family was a little surprised. They had expected their son and his girlfriend to follow the new traditions of college and careers before marriage and children. But Luke and Tara were traditionalists, they believed that marriage was right for them and that would be the most important thing right now.

Both families came together and held a beautiful wedding that summer. Looking like teenagers on spring break, Tara and Luke went off on their honeymoon. They returned home and quickly settled into married life. Luke finished college and Tara

worked and together they built a life. While their peers were partying, Luke and Tara were nurturing the foundation of their marriage. For them that was the greatest joy. After graduation they had children and continued to foster a deep sense of family commitment. They worked together and played together, never losing sight of their love and commitment. For Luke and Tara love and marriage were the key ingredients to all their other successes. Their dedication to each other and family has proven one of their greatest strengths. As they continue to raise their children and grow as individuals they both are thankful for the blessing of sharing this life together.

Couples' Perception of Success and Teenage Marriage: Themes and Processes

As evidenced by the narratives above, each couple that participated in this study has unique visions of how best to develop a young marriage. However within these differing perspectives several themes emerged. Although the couples did not always share similar opinions on how these themes play out in their relationships, it is interesting to note that several themes recurred in nearly every interview. The themes I will highlight are commitment, communication, marital friendship, spirituality, and social support. One of the values of qualitative research is that we gain some insight into the thoughts and feelings behind the themes. In an effort to amplify this benefit most of the results will be described in the participants own words. Using their words and examples, I present some of the most commonly mentioned themes for successful teenage marriage.

Commitment: a complex promise.

For every couple interviewed commitment was an important factor. They each had various ideas about how it played out but one common thread was the significance of the promise itself. The excerpts below give an indication of the level of sincerity with which couples said their marital vows.

Luke: We both have very strong beliefs in feelings of our relationship being what it is, and being committed to each other and never having (inaudible) So when we got upset with each other, those kinds of things don't really, its always in the back of our heads, we know it's a long term, we know its forever and we don't let those feelings come into play.

For Josh, religion had a strong influence on his views of his marital commitment.

Josh: It takes love obviously, respect, communication and compromise to make any marriage work...in the Mormon culture, it's even more than that. We believe that marriage continues after death. And so, when you're making decision to get married, it's not a decision of, who am I going to spend my life with. It's a decision of who am I going to spend forever with.

Sean and Lisa placed a similar value on the religious aspects of their vows.

Lisa: We knew that, we said those vows. Those vows were important to us that we said in front of God and everything. We were going to do whatever to make it work ... marriage is a covenant between two people, and you don't take it lightly. So, its not always easy, that's for sure. Not always fun. Sometimes it is. The older we get, the better it gets.

For many couples interviewed the significance of the commitment in marriage was related to a promise to stick it out through thick and thin.

Lisa talked about this dedication in terms of divorce,

One of the things we talked about even this weekend at the marriage retreat was the divorce word is not an option. Not an option for us. Not saying that we never ever popped into one of our heads maybe, but it really wasn't an option for us. We made that commitment when we got married. Because a lot of folks back then, a lot of friends of mine specifically said, it will never last, you guys are too young, you know, you didn't really date anyone else. We'll give it six months.

Tara shared a similar opinion on calling it quits.

...you know that I'm gonna married to you forever, and you go through a lull sometimes, it might even be like a five year period where everything's not really perfect, but then like, it gets better. And you know, you say your vows, in the vows it says, till death do us part. But people tend to forget that, and forget that day where they were committed to each other and they loved each other and go through thick and thin and ups and downs and now it's a little bit of anxiety or disappointment, oh, there's gotta be something better. Just give up, this isn't working out. So I'm just not the kind of mindset that today's world is, where if you're not happy, you walk away. You get a divorce, because you need to be happy... maybe you can just call me stubborn, but I just believe that marriage isn't about a choice, its about you made a commitment and that that's what it is and you don't just walk away because. So I can't look at it and say why marriages succeed. It's people who fail, not marriage.

Lucy echoed the need to stick it out.

And you know, you'll go through tough times and just stay committed and love each other, be there for each other. It can be as simple as that.

(laughs). Just if you keep things in perspective and just don't let anything sway you from that.

For some couples the focus was on action. Not only does commitment mean that they keep working when things get hard but also it seemed that some couples felt that their commitment made the work of marriage easier. Max said it this way.

The desire to make it want to work right? Because I want her to be my wife for the rest of my life. And there's not a whole lot that could change my mind. So anything that comes up can be dealt with.

For Josh commitment helped him get through challenges he hadn't anticipated.

I was just so surprised at how difficult it is. If I were to tell anyone anything, it would be, you know, life is an adventure and anything that has value has got some struggle in it. If you want your marriage to be strong and have value, you gotta be willing to go through the struggle as well.

And that's part of the adventure.

As they continued their life together, Josh and Lucy found that commitment helped them continue to work at their differences.

Josh: ...it's not that things got easier, but she saw that I was more committed, then maybe she might have thought I was before.

Lucy: I was definitely more secure in our relationship, so when things did get difficult, it wasn't as scary for me...

Josh: I think what kept us, what pulled us through it, for Lucy what she needed to see was that I was committed.

Trust is often discussed in the context of commitment and that was true for the majority of couples interviewed. Several couples discussed the importance of trust and fidelity.

Sean and Lisa, who have experienced long separations due to his military career, expressed it like this:

Sean: You don't have that commitment thing, who knows what can happen while you're not together. Anything can happen. But if you're committed, it never even-

Lisa: Not never. You can't, it's not realistic to say it never enters your mind-

Sean: No I'm not saying that, yeah, it does enter your mind. There's always opportunity out there, constant opportunity but you gotta be willing to resist that, and say its not worth it.

Lisa: Think of the consequences.

Sean: Going to Korea for a year, when you're separated for a year, that's a long time, but you just try to realize your marriage is more important than, you know ... fun.

Lisa: ...That's one of the biggest things I remember. Never doubted.

Never gave me any reason to doubt that he'd be there.

Jessica, another military wife, also expressed the importance of trust during separations,

You have to trust too. He's not doing anything hurting the family. You have to trust that that's what he's doing. And same with him, when he's deployed. I have to trust him. I know he loves me. I know he loves the kids. He's not going to do anything to jeopardize that. What is he doing? I have no clue. But that's not the issue, the issue is I trust him and he can trust me.

Another wife, Tara, looked at fidelity from the other side and what her commitment would mean in the face of an affair,

Like if my husband ever had an affair, I don't think I'd leave him. I shouldn't be saying that in front of him, because now he thinks he can have an affair (laughs). But I've heard stories of women who, I'm like, what, just because, just because, you know, they just. The way I was brought up to think was that, you didn't get divorced unless there were certain things that happened in your marriage, and if those things happen, then you were free to get a divorce and, but I always said I don't know if I would because this is my husband. I love him and why would I just walk away? ...It's a lifetime commitment.

Early in her marriage, Carrie was forced to examine the strength of her commitment when she was faced with Mark's infidelity. A onetime indiscretion in the first year of their marriage gave them both the opportunity to make some decisions about their commitment.

Carrie: We've had some awful things happen to us but I never considered leaving. We've even dealt with infidelity...And that time was the only ever time that I questioned cause it's always something you say. Y'know growing up, if my husband ever cheats on me, I'm outta there. That's not happening. I had to ask myself did I feel out of love at any point.... There were a number of things and I knew that he felt awful. And I think he felt better for having told me. I think things were back on course again. So there were a couple years where trust was an issue. It was like okay you will not be offended if I call and check on where you're at, you will not be offended if and he was really good about that, about my insecurities. And

I know that , I have faith that he would tell me. That was always the preface, if you ever feel like cheating, call me... sometimes you have to rebuild the trust but you gotta have it.

Even couples that did not face such concrete tests of their commitment found that it was not always an easy ingredient to hold onto. While all the couples talked about commitment as an essential, some found it was a growing process, which did not always happen easily. Josh and Lucy talked very openly about their differences in commitment and the process they went through.

Josh: I would say, it was several years into our marriage before I was, I knew for sure that I really wanted to be there. I wasn't like Lucy; I didn't have some type of spiritual confirmation or anything else. It was something I was growing into.

Lucy: We were both very committed to the idea of marriage. And I was very committed to the idea of marriage with him, and he was very committed to the idea of marriage, I think, in the beginning, in the very beginning.

Josh: she's probably one of most loyal people I know. And she's loyal to me personally and she's loyal to the idea of marriage, far more than I was.

Lucy: Y'know once we were married, honestly, I never worried about him not being committed. I mean, I did, I did worry about it in some ways.

But I knew that, because of his spirituality, because I knew. And when we get married, we believe we make a covenant with each other, and we make a covenant with God, because we believe it's eternal. So the idea that he

had a commitment to me, at times, I didn't feel that his commitment was as strong as mine. But I knew that his commitment with God was very strong...

Josh: the first couple years, it really was Lucy's commitment to me and marriage and it was my commitment to my responsibilities as a husband and father. But, that was the first twelve months, maybe. I think moving from there, what's really helped our marriage move forward, and bolster it, is we have a very enjoyable marriage. I mean, it's not bliss and its not perfection, but we enjoy it.... I think that commitment has gotten us very far... I think it's important to be committed to marriage.

Later, Josh went on to talk about how change and commitment have worked for them.

We go through so many changes and the big joke of course is that nobody is the person that their spouse got married to. Lucy changed overnight and so did I and we continue to change. So its not that we're married to any specific issue or expectation and that we've stayed faithful to that expectation, its just that there's commitment to going through this adventure together.

Communication: talking, fighting, and making up.

Communication was another theme that emerged in every interview. Most couples agreed that communicating with each other was important for many aspects of their relationship. Max put it this way,

Is it a huge mystery that communication between two people is always gonna let any kind of relationship between two people work out. Be it people at work. If you have people that you have a problem with, tell them about the things that you have a problem with, greatly helps out. So that's just tenfold with your significant other. And being understanding about what they're telling you. Gotta be that middle ground. You gotta cooperate. You gotta compromise.

Dave agreed that talking and listening were important components of his marriage as well.

Be a good communicator and a good listener. Gotta hear what your mate is telling you. Sometimes you just, you hear it over and over again and its going in one ear and out the other, you gotta listen to what, what they're trying to tell you. Or they wont be saying it over and over again if it wasn't something important. Communication and active listening too.

Three couples emphasized the importance of being open and honest in their communication. They each expressed the idea that their spouse should be their primary confidant and that communication should be open even if it's difficult.

Dave: I would say, always be honest. Don't tell anybody anything and say, don't tell my wife, don't tell my husband. There you go, you're gonna get in trouble.

talk it out between each other. Don't try to work out all your relationships with your best friend about your wife.

Tara expanded on the necessity of honesty and how she felt it tied to their personal beliefs.

But always just expressing what you're feeling and what you're going through, to the point that you're not hiding anything. Like I say I think a lot of times people's marriages fail because people hide things, because they don't think they should talk about it or if they see a cute guy or whatever, or if they have some feeling, they don't think they should talk about it. It's like this secret hidden thing. And I'm more of like, well you be open about it and discuss it and then you don't have that hidden secret inside, you don't have that hidden desire for sin. Its more like I'm gonna deal with this and get it out, get it gone.

Although the majority of couples agreed that honesty and openness were key, most also found that communication was not easy all the time. Sean and Lisa found that with three children they were often just too tired or busy to talk. Lisa remembers how Sean worked to make communication a priority during that time.

Lisa...I look back now and I used to get mad at him, not mad, not fighting mad, but just kinda upset, because he always wanted to go out. I didn't want to leave my kids with the sitter...Well we did. Once a month and once every couple of weeks, but that was hard for me, that was really hard for me to leave the kids, it really was and it always was, even when they got to be teenagers... But he was always really good, of making a point. Now we need to go out, we need to talk. I look back and that was probably

the best thing that he could've done. Communication, yeah, that's a big thing.

For other couples the issue wasn't about time but figuring out how best to communicate with each other. Several couples mentioned differences between the husbands and wives' tendency to talk. Dave and Jessica talked about their differences and the importance of learning to be more open.

Jessica: Talk about it. Force him to talk about it.

Dave: She talks about it, I listen.

Jessica: But I just think its important to talk about it. Get it out. Talk about it. People love you. They care about you. They want to hear about it. They want to help you. They might say one little thing that you weren't even expecting, and you go, I never thought about that. And so it helps. I think over the years, he talks more. Even if you don't see eye to eye on something, understand why the other person feels the way they do and either work it out or. I mean, don't just say well, he likes black and I like white. Well, hello, there's gray. Right? ...you gotta be able to compromise otherwise. You can't always get it your way.

Mark and Carrie had a similar experience.

Carrie: At first he didn't like talking, he liked leaving. His best way of handling it was going and cooling off. He'd come back and I'd still be a blithering idiot so it wasn't settled yet because we hadn't talked it through in my eyes. So he learned how to communicate with me and we started getting through things. And I understood that blowing up was okay and

then letting it calm down... you get angry, you talk it out, and then you put it to rest.

Not everyone had such an easy time of negotiating the level of communication. For some couples the differences between their communication styles was not as easy to adjust to. Both Josh and Lucy experienced each other as overwhelming at first and it took them time to adjust their expectations.

Lucy: you're really intense emotionally and I was very surprised how angry he could get at me. I understood annoyed or something like. But I didn't quite understand anger. So there was a lot of understanding things about each other that we didn't really know.

Josh: And Lucy expressed everything she felt as soon as she felt it. It all came out, happy, sad, angry, elated, whatever. And so, it was emotionally overwhelming for me. And so I found that we dropped into that whole pursuit-distance routine really quickly. And of course Lucy would get very insecure when I would distance myself. And so as I was going through that adjustment period, I think what I had to learn to do was go through the grieving process of what I expected marriage to be like, and learn to accept the reality of it.

Along with the challenges of learning to communicate with each other successfully came conflict resolution. Most couples expected conflict to arise but all agreed that there was a need to negotiate how these conflicts should be resolved. For Rachel and Max, the negotiation happened before they were married.

Max: Our very first fight we ever had defined all the fights. Exactly how all the fights should go... It's okay to fight, but I better not leave without resolving the fight...

Rachel: You can't just walk away, there's no respect. You gotta patch things up. I don't like to leave anybody with bad feelings, stuff like that. So [after he went to cool off] we walked to picnic table outside and sat and talked for an hour and a half or so. Worked things out and made up. We still might not agree about Edward Norton's character but (laughter) its just a movie.

Two wives found that compromise and perspective were very important to resolving arguments in their marriages. Lisa makes an effort to let the little things slide and focus on how her perspective may be influencing the disagreement. Tara shared a similar approach.

Instead of getting upset, I'd just be supportive and basically just realize what you need to do to get through something and have a better attitude will make you get through it. And so, within a year after he started [traveling for work], it just started being easier and I just be like, okay, bye! It's just a matter of when I decide to change my perspective instead of being upset and frustrated by something, when I decide to say, okay, instead of just waiting for something to happen or change, I'm going to actually try to do something about it and make me change... But I also come from a very healthy mom and dad being married for a long time,

watching them grow up and fight and knowing that that doesn't mean anything, that doesn't change that you love each other, that kind of stuff. Although most couples expected conflict, that was not true for all. Lucy did not anticipate arguments with Josh and that became something they would need to work through. In fact they both were surprised by the realities of their early life together.

Lucy: But in the beginning, I thought that couples didn't fight... I remember our first fight. I don't even remember what it was about, probably something very silly. And I remember Josh getting very angry and saying he needed a time out and took a walk. And I remember thinking like, is he ever going to come back? I was very, I was probably very insecure in that, because I didn't. I knew that marriage would be hard and I knew it would be, I knew there would be hard things about it, but I didn't anticipate arguments with him. And that's very naïve of me, I think.

Josh: [We had] to figure out how to work through things like that. And to do so, you have to talk to each other, to see what works best for you.

Lucy: ...so even when there were fights, I saw that we could work through things

Every couple mentioned the need to work through their disagreements. For most a sense of humor was an important part of that equation.

Luke said, "Being able to laugh at the situation, or laugh at oneself has helped a lot."

And two other husbands agreed that having a sense of humor was helpful in getting

through stressful conversations. But humor was not the only coping strategy used. Dave and Jessica talked about their own special ritual.

Dave: I think is your doing. Almost every night, we kiss goodnight. Even if we fought all day, we still good night... I think its one of those things too that helped break the ice or whatever to [remind ourselves that] we'll get over it. We know we're gonna get over it. And just own up to the fact that if there is a fight, we're gonna get over it. Sooner or later.

Jessica: Nine times out of ten, if we do go to bed, and it isn't resolved, 9 times out of 10, the first thing in the morning, he brings it up and I thought, well if we would've just done that last night, I would've just slept better. And you always just make it better.

Mark and Carrie also maintained a similar ritual to keep their communication open through the years.

Carrie: And never go to bed mad at each other. We've had a lot of late nights (laughter). But don't go to bed angry. And my grandmother used to tell us, fight naked, then you can't fight. Take all your clothes off and it's really hard, especially early on. (laughter) She said you just won't fight as much as you think.

Although not every couple had a special ritual they all expressed the importance of resolution and keeping the communication lines open whether that was through compromise or learning to accept each other's differences.

Intimacy: an intricate web of connections.

Whether in the form of friendship, romance, partnership, or teamwork, individuals interviewed agreed that intimacy or connection to one's partner was critical to their success. Some couples knew from the beginning that they had met their life partner. Tara and Luke was one such couple.

Tara: ...within two months of starting dating, you know being in 10th and 11th grade when we started, I don't know if we talked about it out loud as much as we wrote notes about it, y'know 'cause you do that in high school. (laughs) And if we still had those as proof, you could see, we definitely knew that we'd be getting married.

For other couples it was an event that helped clarify their feelings for each other. In the case of Max and Rachel it was an unexpected surgery that pushed them both to see how deep their bond was.

Rachel: that year I had a surgery and he was there by my side every single second he had off. And he shaved my legs (laughter). Because I couldn't, so I mean I did do the right thing [marrying him]. Smart, very handsome, caring, and always [there for me]. I definitely knew.

Max: She was in a lot of pain and I had to take her to the emergency room and the depth that her pain hurt me just kinda let me know that, y'know, she was gonna be the one.

One couple was surprised by their relationship. Lucy said, "I didn't foresee myself with Josh, but he ended up being one of my best friends." In fact several other couples said

that they were best friends also. Sean and Lisa found their friendship together was an important source of support.

Sean: She's been nothing but the best supporter and encourager that you could ask for. Everything, every decision that we'd always come together and make a decision, a big decision together. We'd never do it individually. But whatever I wanted to do, if I wanted (inaudible) she encouraged me while I was doing it.

Lisa: But he's right too, just to encourage each other. you get beat up enough on the outside, you don't need to get beat up on the inside.

Support and encouragement were important to other couples as well. But some couples found that the everyday moments were sometimes the most important. For Max and Rachel, their time apart helped them appreciate the little joys of being together.

Max: To sit down and like, for somebody else to ask her, what are some of the things you like about him. To hear them tell you what they love about you and you get a chance to tell what you love about them. Because everybody likes to feel loved by their partner. That's the cornerstone of marriage. Love...

Rachel: they say absence makes the heart grow fonder, so we had, we were very happy to see each other, you get that euphoric high and you don't pick on the little things. Screw the little things, at least you're here and stuff, so.

Max: Everyday is a best time for me.

Jessica also felt that sometimes just the presence of Dave was important enough.

Jessica: It's good having a person that you can tell anything. Its good having a person that you know, at the end of the day, you at least have somebody, even if you don't feel like talking, you have somebody there.

It is a good feeling.

Two couples found regular routines that helped them nurture their intimate connection.

For Sean and Lisa time together was important.

Interviewer: Why did you insist on the dating?

Sean: I don't know I just like to go out and spend time with her alone because if we're at home, usually she's doing stuff with the girls and I'm probably on the couch sleeping or watching the football game or something. It's time for us to get out alone.

Lisa: When the kids got older, we started to take walks so we had a chance to talk Sometimes we'd walk at 8:30, 9:00 at night, just for an hour, just to talk. Spend time together.

While Sean and Lisa have found one activity that is significant to both of them, other couples had differing views. Dave and Jessica agreed that it was important to stay emotionally connected but mentioned different ways in which that happens for them.

Dave credits Jessica with starting a nightly ritual that he enjoys.

Dave: I think it is your doing. Almost every night we kiss goodnight.

Even if we fought all day, we still kiss goodnight.

While Jessica finds the little daily moments crucial.

Jessica: Just the little things that they, y'know like if you're gonna come in and have a tomato sandwich, and I'm gonna go in and have a tomato sandwich, well why don't we just make them together.

Mark and Carrie found that they needed to rekindle some rituals in order to get through some difficult times.

Carrie: held on, we held on for dear life. It got to the point, soon after the accident, that neither one of us were turning to each other for support. We were kinda turning inward and we realized that communication was really backing up. And I think at that point, we had kind of a little breakdown and we kinda went okay what are we going to do. We have to do something. And that's when we started spending more time together again.

We said okay date nights gotta come back.

Rituals and daily activities were mentioned by four of the couples but only one couple mentioned sex as a key part of their intimate relationship. Although all the couples have active sex lives, Josh and Lucy were the only ones to discuss the role of sex in their marriage.

Lucy: ...those times we were having trouble connecting, I think that if we, if we were intimate with each other, each of you have to give for that relation. And so it was a point when we could just be ourselves with each other and then get past the defensiveness or frustration with each other, and speak more honestly. Of course we didn't have sex every time we had a disagreement. But I think that, for me and I think for Josh too, helped us to remain connected.

Josh: our intimacy, our sex life has never been a proxy for other issues. We've never been manipulative. We've never used it to express anger or anything else. I think we both made a strong effort to keep our sex life from getting toxic with all the other arguments. ... it is our intimate time together when we drop the guard and we both make sure that we can keep it that way.

Each couple talked about unique and personal ways in which they fostered their closeness between them. Although they each had individual needs and expectations about their relationship, each couple mentioned growing together. Three couples felt that moving away from family early on helped them rely on each other.

Jessica: we went to the other side of the country and I didn't know a single soul and of course, you can tell, we had [our two oldest children] right away. So I had two kids. He was gone all the time and I felt a lot of stress in that period. But

Dave: I think it brought us together, the two of us.

Jessica: Because there wasn't anybody else. No.

Dave: That helped out. We relied on each other. We talked to each other.

Later Jessica went on to talk about how watching her sisters divorce helped her see the importance of togetherness.

Jessica: Right before they got divorced. It was all about me. That was the way they both were. They were walking side by side but he was looking at him and she was looking at her. And I thought, it made me miserable.

Many couples felt that their age at marriage was a special component of their growth together. Lucy wondered how things would be if they had been older.

Lucy: I still can't believe I got married at 19. But I really think it made me who I am today, and Josh is such a part of me. I think if I got married at a later stage in my personal development, I think it would have been harder for me to compromise, maybe. I think that there are benefits to getting married older as far as maturity goes. But I also see that my development with my husband, our growing together to where I think we're in a good place may have been more difficult.

Mike and Carrie also felt that their age had allowed them to grow together.

Carrie: It's so intertwined, especially at this point.

Mark: We've been married more than half of our lives.

Carrie: and don't feel that way. There are still days that it feels like we just got married not too long ago. The romance is still alive.

But age alone has not impacted their growth together. The majority of couples talked about the birth of children and the experiences they've had as things that have changed their love for the better. However, for Tara and Luke it was different.

Tara: we were just so happy to finally be together, be living together, be in the same bed, all that stuff. We waited for everything.

Luke: we never really stopped and you know, a lot people, everything changes and we have a baby and that's it. That's our life now. We never really did that. Things changed but we continued to do what we'd always done.

Tara: We look at ourselves like we're really not that much different than we were when we got married.

Mark and Carrie's experience was more typical of the other couples although the circumstances in their life were more dramatic.

Carrie: Mark and I are not together because of the family or for the family. Uh, I don't know. Unfortunately we felt selfish because one of the thoughts [we had after the accident] was neither one of us died. First it was why didn't you take one of us and then it was thank God you are not gone away from me because I could not get through this without you. So that felt at the time like a very selfish thought but it still is there. If he hadn't been there with me through this.. no way. No way. ...It changed everything. The whole dimension of our being but not our love for each other. Stronger? We keep thinking that can't be but... I know I love him more. And it's like it can't get anymore than this... it's just good.

Whether they slowly grew into their friendship or were experienced love at first site, whether it was a constant rock or an ever-changing link; each couple interviewed agreed that the intimate bond between them was one of the most essential ingredients to their marriage.

Spirituality and shared beliefs: cultivating a philosophical context.

Shared values and spirituality were common themes among the couples. For some, specific religious affiliation was key. Sean and Lisa emphasized the role of God and prayer in their lives together.

Lisa: I think one of the strongest things that holds us together though is our faith. I really honestly believe that wholeheartedly. When there's been decisions that I don't think he's making the right decisions, we can pray about it... I think that's a big commonality that we've had that we always and we do fall back on a lot, when we're making a decision or deciding what to do, or when we're upset with each other (laughs)... [If] my faith is wavering or if I'm not doing what I'm supposed to do, usually the marriage is not working. You know what I mean? That's usually when we're having difficulties. If I keep my connection with God clear, then usually that connection between [Sean] and I stays pretty good.

Josh and Lucy place a similar importance on their religion as well. Lucy recalled a time early in their marriage when she received some religious advice that they continue to hold onto.

Lucy: I was waiting for him once, he was playing racquetball, and I was watching him. And there was an older gentleman who came up to me and we started talking. And he told me, I thought it was very good advice. And he said, I've been married for fifty something years. And he opened up his hand, and he drew on his palm with his finger, and he said, the only way to make a marriage work. And he drew this triangle. And he said here's God, and here's you and here's your spouse. And if each of you has a strong relationship with each other, and each of you has a strong relationship with God, then it will be very hard to break up that marriage.

And that was kind of his advice to me. And I feel that is very true in our case.

Not every couple believed that having the same religious beliefs was important. Max and Rachel have different religious affiliations yet they have found ways to work together.

Max: We sit and have discussion, theological discussion because some of our beliefs are a little bit different. More along the lines of, I have smaller beliefs, littler beliefs, because I wasn't raised in quite a strict as religious environment... Sometimes we talk about creation and Darwinian theory of evolution, stuff like that. I'll take a purely scientific approach. I can play the devil's advocate quite a bit, however, it works for us.

Although they enjoy differing views on religion, Max and Rachel went on to point out the importance of having shared priorities and a sense of how they wanted their lives to develop. Another couple that did not emphasize religion was Dave and Jessica. They also focused on the importance of shared values separately from religion.

Dave: ... if you got the same priorities, share the priorities, then the relationship works out. Its when you have different agendas and whether you hide the fact you have different agendas or just let it be known to your spouse.

Jessica: [If that happens relationships] fall apart, sooner or later they fall apart, there's too much friction there. You gotta find somebody that's on the same, has the same priorities as you.

Although Josh and Lucy valued their similar religious background they also differentiated between the religious and spiritual context.

Josh: I know that religion divides a lot of people and I can understand that. But we have a shared spiritual understanding. And I stress the use of the word spiritual vs religious. I think you can be from very different religious backgrounds and still share the same spirituality... we have a shared spiritual context. And in that spiritual context was a shared valuing of each other. And I think that was probably the critical ingredient. One of the things that helped me.

Whether it was a spiritual value or religious belief, all couples agreed that having a shared perspective on their lives together was helpful. For some, religious practice was helpful in getting through their differences. Sean and Lisa found that using their church as a resource was a good way to learn about each other and their religious beliefs about marriage.

Lisa: We have taken, through church and stuff, umpteenth thousand classes on marriage, how they work, how the relationship with God affects the relationship in our marriage, how we're the ones responsible for our marriage, as far as our part. We're doing our part, all that God asks us to do our part, he'll take care of doing his part. (laughs) And vice versa. He's doing his part and I'm not doing my part, then I'm the one who has to answer to that, take responsibility.

Sean: And worship together and make sure you're going to church together and you're talking to God together and raising your family in a Christian home. That's what worked for us.

Lucy talked about it as a tool for resolving conflict and making decisions both before and during their marriage.

Lucy: We both believed very strongly in marriage... [After we talked about marriage] I immediately started to pray very honestly and ask if this is something that was good or that I should pursue, that I should continue with, because it was kind of scary. I got on my knees and prayed about this and I felt that I received an answer, a very strong answer that I should in fact stay with Josh, that he was a good man, and this was a good thing... [After we were married] we both sought spiritual guidance for resolving the issues that we faced. And sometimes we had different interpretations on that, but because it was, there was a spiritual guidance. And I don't mean a religious guidance. I don't mean that (inaudible). But I mean a spiritual desire to (inaudible), not only for ourselves but for the other person and learning to be a little more selfless.

For other couples religious practice was not as important. For example, Max and Rachel focused on compromise and shared priorities.

Max: Make sure your priorities are straight or similar and know how you want to grow. And it can change over time... And there are some things where we're going to have different philosophies and stuff. So we'll have to find a middle ground there.

Rachel: Because if we get through, y'know, a year of only seeing each other 47 days, we can do anything. That's our motto... Its very important.

Although there are some clear differences among the couples in their views on religion and its role in marriage, one idea that seemed to resonate with everyone was that there needs to be a shared marital value system. Lucy phrased it this way.

Lucy: I think it is important for young couples to decide together, with each other, what it is they, I guess their family values, if you want to say it that way. Or things that are important to them. I think its important for them to make those decisions by themselves without people trying to help.

Whether it's a shared religious background or common priorities, each couple found some value in sharing common beliefs with their spouse.

Family: the role of parents, children, and everyone else.

One area that I asked each couple to specifically talk about was family. There was a range of experiences in terms of the response from family, their influence and interaction with each couple. Two couples had very positive reactions from their families. For Tara and Luke the announcement of their engagement was warmly received by her family and although somewhat surprised by the timing even Luke's family was supportive.

Tara: My parents were cool about it. He had asked my dad... And my mom and dad also knew from the very beginning, my mom knew that I was going to marry Luke.

So it wasn't a shock to my family and I don't really think it was shock to our friends either. They all knew. And it was funny to be a senior in high school wearing a diamond ring around. Again you see the differences in our families. My mom took me out for a dress the day I told her. And his

mom and dad were kinda freaked out. But my mom was ready to throw another wedding.

Josh and Lucy also found a mostly enthusiastic family.

Lucy: his grandmother was the most wonderful woman and she just said, you're just part of the family. She made me feel like, even though I hadn't quite gotten that feeling from his parents, his extended family was incredibly supportive.

Not every couple found their families so eager to throw a wedding. For Max and Rachel it was a matter of getting through the mothers.

Max: [the first time I met] her mom, just very forward, she asked, what are your guys' intentions? Because if you're gonna get married soon, we have to plan out time to be able to come back over here and whether or not its in our yearly trip back to the States and whatnot. And I was in the middle of a hot wing and I just said (choking noises). [After announcing our engagement] when my mom asked me about her, about me wanting to marry her, I think she was very satisfied with my answer and the stuff I said. I told her I've been involved with a lot of girls, short-term, not very long-term, girls you don't even know about that I had no desire to spend any extra effort to make any of those relationships work because I knew that they weren't right for me. But I love Rachel. I will always love Rachel. And getting married right now is what we need to do. My mom was quite satisfied.

For two couples it much longer for their parents to warm up. The lack of family support was hard for both of these couples in the beginning. Dave and Jessica found themselves on their own.

Dave: We had to wait [until she turned 18 to get married]. Her dad was very

Jessica: Mad.

Dave: Yeah, didn't like the idea of his daughter getting married that soon and all that. Although we had been dating for a long time. I wasn't the picture perfect person for her daughter.

Jessica: Well we had to say everybody was mad because they were. We didn't give them any notice, just 24 hours. His mother took me and she bought some flowers so I would have some flowers. And she put some ferns on the porch, so she did at least cave at the last minute. Okay, so if you're going to do it, let me at least help...Nobody liked it. There's five of us, brothers sisters. Well the younger brothers, younger than me, I don't think they really comprehended as far as what you're doing and whether it could be a lifelong mistake or a good thing. But the older ones just were mad because we were doing something stupid. So for a while there, I felt isolated.

It wasn't only parents and extended family members who had reactions. For some couples the reactions of friends was just as important. Lucy talked about how difficult it was initially.

Lucy: Well, the thing that I found hard, hardest, probably, is my friends didn't know how to interact with me. And I didn't have very many friends at school. I did have some, but once I got married, I remember feeling like they thought I just fell off the edge of the earth into la-la land or something. They weren't on the same plane with me... I still needed peers. That was probably very hard for me. There was a lot of adjustment there, trying to figure out what our roles were. And, for me, trying to figure out what my role was without someone I could talk to that was a peer. I talked to my mother a lot. And I ended up, after a couple of months, I ended up making friends in the apartments near me with some people who were also married. And that helped tremendously.

Jessica also found that finding peers to relate to was helpful in those first few years of marriage. But for other couples, family remained important regardless of their initial reactions. Some couples found that although they appreciated the support of family it was not always ideal. Sean and Lisa had the full support of their families but found it both a blessing and a challenge.

Sean: we lived in my parents' backyard, so they were out all the time. We brought our little girl home from the hospital when she was born and they were at our house all the time, to see their granddaughter, which was nice. That was nice that could happen, but it kinda got old after a couple weeks. ...It was a big challenge, because we lived in sight distance.

Lisa: It was adjustment getting used to moving away. Because I had always lived six miles from my mom and my parents. But it was probably

the best thing, because we had to depend on each other and make our own decisions.

Josh and Lucy found a different challenge with in-laws.

Josh: one thing that used to really bug me, was anytime Lucy was having a hard time, she'd talk to her dad, her dad was a good friend. Fortunately, I respect her dad, and her dad I think gave her good advice at times. But other times, some of the advice, maybe not the advice that he gave, but the way that she understood it, I think proved to be a wedge.

Although relationships with parents were challenging at times, most couples felt that their families offered valuable examples for their own marriage. In spite of the challenges of living close, Sean and Lisa found their families to be positive examples of marriage.

Sean: My parents had been together for 45 years, going on 50 years now. And they still, whenever they're walking with us, or whatever, they're holding hands together and stuff. That's just kinda neat. They didn't, I remember knock down, drag out fights when I was younger, (laughs), but I really don't think it was an option for them either. Divorce is not option.

Tara and Luke also found their parents to important models of what was to come.

Tara: I definitely saw that things okay with my mom and dad, so just having that and having seen them interact over the years, seeing them show love to each other, seeing them be angry with each other, seeing my mom say she hated him and throw chicken at him, you know, all that stuff, to me showed me a healthy relationship, not like dysfunctional, but that, those things happen to everybody, instead of like trying to act like

everything was perfect. Because I really don't think that marriage is like that.

Even Mark and Carrie, who experienced a negative response similar to Dave and Jessica's experience, felt that they had a good model in Carrie's parents who were teenagers when they married as well. But that was not the case for everyone. Jessica and Rachel both found their families full of examples of what they didn't want to do.

Jessica: My sister is on her third marriage. His sister is on her third marriage. And I look at that and I think what was so bad that you traded and then you went through it again and then you traded up and now we're all kinda waiting going well, I already see it...My parents divorced the year we got married, go figure. They were married twenty-six years.

Rachel: I have several models that I could choose from because I lived with my parents until I was 14. They were [overseas] so I couldn't go to school there. Tenth grade I lived with my aunt and uncle and then my junior and senior year, I went to boarding school, so really I just kinda had to do what I felt was right and make up my, make up what worked for me. So I definitely not modeled arguments after my parents. Never throw things, never...never say divorce, never throw things, never hit. There are certain nevers. So I guess I do anti-model.

While there was no overwhelming consensus among couples as the importance or role of parents and extended family members, children were unanimously voted as one of the primary influences in their lives. Many couples found that the relationship with each

other and their families changed with the birth of their first child. For some couples it was a bridge between them and those family members who weren't very supportive.

Carrie: that was a constant in Mark's life, his grandmother. And still is, still is. and she did not like me when I came on the picture (laughter) cause I was taking her boy away. But Mark fixed that.

Mark: I laid the baby in her arms and that took care of that.

Carrie: It was like okay, if she can produce this then she's not so bad after all. And now we're very close.

Other couples felt that children were essential to the strength of their marital connection.

Dave and Jessica found children as the center of their union.

Jessica: When we were dating, he said let's get married and have four kids. I think that the burden of kids and all, helps strengthen the relationship.

Dave: I think having the kids and all has made the relationship better, gives us something more to live for. Because I'd do anything for my kids. And she come's fifth.

Jessica: They're so important. How could it make your relationship worse, I don't see that.

Dave: Our kids bonded us together and gave us something we were both responsible for that was more important than us, ourselves. ... But I'd say, with those kids, and the fact that I was responsible for them, the older the two, the first two, the older they got, the more responsible I felt. So that's

what made me mature. Finally I said, I gotta quit being stupid and doing all kinds of stupid things.

Josh expressed a similar experience to Dave when he said, "...I truly wasn't committed to making the marriage work, I think, until we had our first child, after we had been married about a year and a half... we share an intense love for our children."

Couples shared an appreciation for the role of children in their lives yet there were differing views on timing. Rachel and Max felt that it was important to wait on parenthood.

Rachel: I think for a marriage to work, when you're starting out really young, is to have one or two years to get to know each other as a best friend before you start to have kids.

Mark: We got to do what we wanted to do and figure out how we best mesh without having to throw in the next variable.

But Lisa disagreed.

Lisa: We're almost done. I don't think you're ever done, but I'm glad we're at the point where I am now. I love this. I love having kids young. I don't think that I could do as old as I am. The first couple years for me was a little difficult because he didn't quit his job. His job would call and say, I need you Saturday and we had planned to go out for the day. Oh okay. That was a little bit of a challenge.

Lisa was not the only one who found new parenthood challenging. Tara and Luke have found that along with the joys of parenting there are costs.

Tara: I also think that's where the part of parenting and all that, at that point in your marriage, makes it, you just don't have the strength sometimes, the endurance to do the parenting thing and then try to work on the growth in your marriage at the same time. And I think that that's where sometimes you have a stagnant period because you're just doing so many other things right now. But it's not a miserable, that kind of thing. I think that, as the kids grow older and we have more time where it's us, that we will naturally just fall into that, of trying to do things to make our marriage better, because that is what we'll have then. The raising the kids thing will be done and we'll be able to focus more on that.

In spite of the challenges most couples said that their children and their family were the most important thing to them. Mark and Carrie were able to express it like this.

Carrie: Family is the center of us. Our kids are the best thing that either one of us have ever done...Our kids are and still remain the center

Mark: We have had friends split up in the last few years and the wives take off with the kids. I mean it's just the weirdest, I mean to us it's just unconceivable to us. Why walk away? I mean even if you split up why would you walk away from your kids. I don't know family just means so much to us.

Carrie: Build those bridges between your families. Get to know your in-laws, the brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts. It's just so important.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Summary of findings

This purpose of this study was to gain a descriptive picture of couples that married as teenagers and the ways in which they are building successful marriages. There is a significant lack of research in this area and this study attempted to provide some understanding of how some of these couples work. It is important to note how this sample differs from some of the previous research on teenage marriages. Burchinal (1965) identified thirteen key elements which he believed contributed to the challenge of teenage marriages. Of these factors, the current sample did not experience some of the obstacles set out in Burchinal's study (1965). For instance, none of the individuals in this study were under the age of 17 at the time of their marriage although, one couple planned to marry but were forced to wait until she turned 18. In addition to being older teens, these couples all finished their education. Each person had at least a high school diploma or GED and several had some college experience. Unlike the expected outcome identified in previous research (e.g. Burchinal, 1965; Kiernan, 1973), these couples finished high school and went on to have adequate employment that allowed them to be self-sufficient and live well above the poverty line. Although this sample was older and did not have the poor educational and financial achievement outlined in other research, they did experience other factors assumed to lead to negative outcomes. For instance, half of the couples had courtships lasting less than one year and several individuals reported having very limited dating experience prior to marriage. In addition, one couple was pregnant at the time of their wedding and four others had their first child within the first year of marriage. Both of these factors have been considered predictive of poor marital outcome for teen marriages (e.g. Burchinal, 1965) however they did not prove

detrimental to the couples in this sample. Along with these differences in demographic information, several key themes emerged from the data in this study. These themes were the ingredients that the couples in this study found essential to their recipes for success. The five themes that were the focus of chapter four are commitment, communication, intimacy, shared beliefs, and family. Each of these themes was also found in the literature review.

Commitment.

It is interesting to note that the many facets of commitment that emerged in the interviews were very similar to those in the literature. Trust and fidelity were two components that the literature outlined (e.g. Impett, Beals, and Peplau, 2001) which almost every couple mentioned as well. For some couples the focus was on sexual fidelity and for others it was about keeping a promise either with their spouse or with God. There were several context for commitment among the couples and for many it was not just about their vow to one another. Commitment seemed to encompass several factors similar to the proposed types found in the literature. Examples of personal, moral, and structural commitment, as defined by Impett, Beals, and Peplau (2001), were given throughout the interviews. It seems that for the married couples commitment is as complex an issue as it is for the researchers. Future research should be done to examine more closely how couples define their commitment and its role in their overall happiness together.

Communication.

Communication was another theme that came out in the data and the literature. Although there is a good amount of literature on non-verbal communication, the couples

talked very little about that. It is interesting to note that during the interviews I noticed a great deal of non-verbal communication in the form of touching and facial expressions. These non-verbal interactions could not be recorded easily given the methods of this study but future research might include videos that can reveal more information on the non-verbal interaction between these spouses. One facet of communication that was not emphasized in the literature review is differences. Several couples talked about the challenge of negotiating a communication style that worked for both of them. This seemed particularly true during conflicts. However, in spite of the apparent challenges involved and potential displeasure, all the couples agreed that finding a way to talk about disagreements was important. Their value for communicating seems to be congruent with the research findings. Gottman and Krokoff (1989, as cited in Kaslow and Robinson, 1996) point out that it is important to share conflicting ideas even though it may lower the marital satisfaction in the moment because it is likely to result in long-term fulfillment. Couples had unique ways of negotiating communication styles however they were in agreement that one of the cornerstones of successful marriages, at any age, is open communication.

Intimacy.

The discussion of communication easily led into the issue of intimacy. For many talking was part of their closeness. Intimacy was a theme that took many forms. In fact the range of thoughts, activities, and feelings about their relationship draw attention to the multifaceted nature of intimacy. The complexity of the connections is something that researchers struggle with in their attempts to define and measure its existence. For the couples in this study there was no clear definition yet each couple seemed to understand

the unique way in which they connected. Friendship and partnership were elements that every couple discussed along with love. It was interesting that once all the interviews were compiled I found that these six couples touched on every aspect of intimacy that was outlined in the literature review. Mutual respect and understanding, love, companionship, sexual fulfillment, and togetherness are all ingredients of the intimacy that these couples described. One unexpected component of their intimate bond was an emphasis on growing together. Every couple talked about finding a way to develop and mature together. There was an underlying theme of moving toward oneness and creating a relationship in which their lives are eternally linked. Although several researchers highlight the importance of knowing ones partner (e.g. Fields, 1983; Koerner and Fitzpatrick, 2002; Bachand and Caron, 2001), this process of growing into each other seems to be unique to this sample. Growing together and creating intertwining lives may be a theme that needs further research to understand its role among teenagers who marry. It is possible that marrying just as one is entering adulthood can encourage partners to finish their individual development in ways that compliment each other, such that couples not only grow into their adulthood but do so in a way that includes their spouse. Adolescence is a time when individuals figure out who they are as adults in the world and it may be that those couples who have successful marriages not only learned how to be successful adults but also successful spouses in the process. The success of this process may be related to separating from one's family of origin as mentioned by Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1995). In fact several couples talked about moving away from their families as an important part of growing together. While the other themes highlighted are often

universally accepted parts of any healthy marriage, it may be that growing together is a unique component of teenage marriages in particular.

Shared beliefs and spirituality.

The importance of spirituality was not universal among the couple participants nor within the literature. For four of the couples religion and/or spirituality was a key element to their marital success. For three of these couples their specific religious beliefs influenced nearly every other aspect of their lives. The way they viewed commitment, family, and sometimes even the way they resolved conflict included a part of their religious beliefs. For the other couple spirituality was more central. Contrary to Call and Heaton's (1997) findings, this couple did not find their differences in church attendance nor religious affiliation to be an obstacle. In fact they were both clear that their spiritual beliefs were similar and found benefits to the differences between their practices. As other obstacles arose that challenged one partner's ability to practice her religious faith, her husband's very different approach became an avenue for her to continue to feel spiritually fulfilled. In general the role of spirituality in these six marriages was as varied as the findings in previous research. In an attempt to broaden the context of spirituality, I included shared family values and philosophies as part of this theme. For two couples their value system was the center of their spiritual connection and equally as important in influencing their interactions as religion was for the other couples. While some may argue that shared values is not the same as spirituality, it is important to note that for these couples it seemed to be a crucial issue.

The role of family.

The role of family and parenthood is something that has dominated the literature on teenage marriages in the past so it is interesting to look at the similarities and differences between the literature and the experiences of the couples in this study. Some couples found their parents to be very supportive and based on the previous literature it is not surprising that they are in well-adjusted marriages. However, several couples received much less positive reactions. Burchinal (1965) hypothesized that lack of parental support would be detrimental to couples, yet for three couples in this study it did not appear to have any long-lasting ill effects. Some couples found that their families warmed up quickly after the marriage but for others it took years for them to become accepting. One wife recalls that it took her grandfather ten years to finally say that her husband was a good choice for her. In general couples seemed to have mixed experiences no matter the parental reaction. In fact only one couple felt that they received only positive feedback and modeling from their family and friends. Other couples found that although their parents were angry they also served as good role models and some had the opposite experience. There was no consensus on the role of extended family and parents among couples. Overall they were seen as both helpful and difficult to deal with at times. One area that was only superficially mentioned in the research is friendships. For two wives the lack of peers was a difficult challenge. Future research might explore the role of peers and mentors in the lives of teenage marriages.

The transition to parenthood provided another mixed bag of reactions. For some couples this was the glue that permanently bound them together while others found the challenges of parenthood a bit overwhelming. One couple believed firmly that waiting a

few years was an important decision for them. Much of the research on teen marriage (e.g. Burchinal, 1965; Kiernan, 1986) suggests that is the best approach but four out of the six couples had babies within the first year of marriage. In fact the couple who reported being most overwhelmed by parenting was one of the couples who decided to wait. It seems there is no magic formula for timing parenthood. One other interesting trend is that all of the wives were stay at home mothers during their children's early years. In fact every wife with a child under the age of 15 was still a stay at home mother. There is no literature on this tendency toward a more traditional family structure. The statistics do indicate less employment and education among teenage brides but it is interesting to consider that this may be due to a desire to stay home with their children rather than a lack of motivation or ambition. One might speculate that the teenagers who have chosen to marry in the last two decades may have more traditional views, which influence their tendency to stay home and possibly their decision to marry in the first place. It is possible that this is merely a trend among this sample of couples, however, it seems important that future research might look more closely at the role of family and career among teenage brides.

The uniqueness of couples.

As one examines the results of this study it is interesting to note how different the couples interpretations of each theme were. The difference between couples' perspectives highlights their individuality. The uniqueness of couples was not something that the participants discussed but it is a concept that permeates the literature on strong marriages, as noted in chapter two. Within each interview is a compilation of many individual approaches to marriage. Couples may have discussed very similar beliefs

about what makes marriage work yet they all had their own special recipe for putting it all together. It may be that valuing the distinctiveness of each couple will encourage couples to embrace their own uniqueness. It seems that the eclectic style of each couple is itself part of the recipe for success. There may be no magic ingredient but rather individual means of combining a number of factors, which truly influences marital success. These variations among the couples and the role of variety in overall marital success may be of greatest interest to clinicians. Thus clinicians may find that one important part of supporting teenage marriages is helping them have the confidence and patience to discover their unique style of marital happiness.

Clinical implications

Mental health professionals deal with a wide variety of clients and although many work hard to eliminate their biases from the room, that is rarely possible. Clinicians cannot help but bring their own judgments into their work and there is a pervasive assumption in our society that teenagers are not ready to build successful marriages. As noted earlier, there are many studies and policies that suggest that teenage marriages are doomed. This study focused on those couples that have been successful. The findings presented in chapter four indicate that these six couples are very similar to any six couples. The key ingredients to their success are the same factors that research says helps all couples succeed. This suggests that clinicians would do best to treat teenage marriages or teenage couples getting ready for marriage as they would any couple of any age. Each couple is unique and has their own individual needs and expectations. Mental health professionals should take the findings of this study as an indication that it may be

more useful to focus on the particular circumstances of each couple rather than any general assumption about teenage couples.

Another important implication for clinicians is simply to remember that there are couples that marry as teenagers who grow to have wonderful and strong marriages. Each couple talked about the process of growing together and learning about married life. They each indicated that there was a learning curve and that some things took more time than others. Clinicians would do well to talk to couples about the process and encourage patience in learning how to be happily married. Some couples in this study found the everyday annoyances of life together took years to adjust to and others found that they quickly learned how to overcome tremendous tragedy. Each couple had a unique timeframe and process for building their life together but they all agreed that it was a process over time. This emphasis on patience and allowing room to grow may be a useful theme for clients or their families during the first few years of marriage.

In addition it may be useful for clinicians and others to consider the role of social support. While couples mentioned the value of relying on each other, there was also a need for a community. Whether that be peers, parents, or other mentors, it seems that early in marriage young couples may find themselves in need of positive encouragement. Several couples talked about sharing their experiences with other couples as a helpful aspect of their lives. One way that clinicians and community leaders might support teenage marriages is by providing social resources.

Overall it seems likely that clinicians will find teenage couples or couples who married as teenagers face many of the same challenges and need many of the same tools as any couple seeking treatment. If clinicians can remember that youth is not necessarily

a damaging factor for marriage then they can focus on the unique needs of each person, which may be the most important process of all.

Limitations and topics for future research

This study provided an intimate look at some of the factors that six couples who married as teenagers believe contribute to the success of their marriage. While several interesting themes emerged from the data, it is important to note the limitations of this study and potential for future research in this area. Although not a limitation, it is important to remember that we cannot make generalizations from qualitative research. This study does not attempt to make assumptions about teenage marriages in general but focuses on the experience of these six couples. While one cannot make definitive conclusions about any population from qualitative data, it seems important to conduct a more extensive study in order to develop a more detailed list of factors that may influence the success of teen marriages. This study provided several themes, which can be followed up with further qualitative and quantitative research, but larger studies of this nature are necessary.

The couples that participated this study represented a wide range of ages, education, and socioeconomic statuses. However they were all white couples from similar geographic locations. It would be useful for future research to conduct a similar study with different races and ethnicities. There may be cultural and racial differences in teenage marriages that could not be explored in the present study.

Further research can be done to explore more closely the ways each of the themes presented influence couples that married as teenagers. In particular the role of religion, intimacy, and family may be important areas to examine. The lack of current research on

teenage marriage in general warrants several more studies of this kind. In 1965 Burchinal called for more research on successful teenage marriages. This study is just one small step toward that goal. Hopefully the experiences of the participating couples has raised further interest in understanding the success of teenage marriage and further research will be done.

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Are you in a stable, loving marriage?



Did you and your partner
marry as teens or young
adults?

Would you like to
share your personal
expertise with others?

You may be eligible to participate in a graduate research project studying individuals who married as teenagers and have built lasting and successful marriages.

Eligible couples will receive \$25 for their participation.

Interested?

Call- 800-555-1212, mailbox #123
- marriageresearch@yahoo.com

Appendix II

Thank you for your interest in my research project. I am eager to get started and add your valuable input to my current data collection. I have a few questions to determine your eligibility to participate.

- **How old were you and your spouse when you got married?**
- **How long have you been married?**
- **Do you and your spouse currently live together? Have you been living together for at least the last 12 months?**
- **Every marriage has its ups and downs, but in general would you describe your marriage as happy or successful?**

Now I would like to schedule an interview with you and your spouse. Interviews will be conducted with both of you together. Interviews will take approximately one hour and can be conducted at a mutually convenient location (e.g. Virginia Tech, your home). You will be asked to fill out 2 brief questionnaires prior to beginning the interview; they should take no more than 15 minutes to complete. I look forward to meeting you both and hearing your experience. If at any time you have questions or concerns please don't hesitate to contact me.

Appendix III

Informed Consent for Research Project

Project Title: Successful Teenage Marriages: A Qualitative Study of How Some Couples Make it Work

Researchers: Esther L. Boykin, M. S. Candidate, Department of Human Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Sandra M. Stith, Professor, Department of Human Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

What is the purpose of this study? The purpose of this study is to find out how couples that married as teenagers are able to build happy and lasting marriages. There is a significant amount of literature on the challenges, this study will aim to provide therapists with some of the keys to helping similar couples develop successful marriages.

What will I be asked to do? Initially, you will be asked to fill out a short questionnaire with demographic information and another brief questionnaire about your marital relationship. It is expected that it will not take more than 15 minutes to complete both questionnaires. After completing the questionnaires the interview process will begin. The interview will be conducted with you and your partner present. We will ask you about your experiences as a young couple and the elements you believe were most significant in helping you develop a successful marriage. The interview will be scheduled at your convenience in a mutually agreed upon location. The face-to-face interviews will be audio-taped to make sure we understand exactly what was said. You may be contacted after completing your interview for a brief follow-up interview (either by phone or in person) or to participate in a focus group with other research participants. Any follow-up requests are purely voluntary and you may decline further participation at your discretion.

Are there any risks to me? The researchers anticipate that this study will be low risk due to the precautions that will be taken to ensure that your information will be kept confidential. In an effort to really understand all the components of your relationship, the interview will include some questions about potentially emotional subjects, however you may decline to answer any question at any time. If any portion of the interview process raises concerns for either partner, a list of local counseling services will be provided upon request.

Are there any benefits to me? As a result of participating in this study you may feel empowered and feel a sense of satisfaction because you have contributed to an important study that will benefit society. In addition, you may find it enjoyable to share the positive aspects of your relationship with your partner.

Are my responses confidential? Every effort will be made to keep all information you provide in the strictest confidence. Your responses will be kept locked for the duration of the project and access will only be allowed to the researchers listed above or to

authorized research assistants. After the study has been completed your name and any other identifying information will not be reported in any publications or presentations.

However, if you are dangerous to yourself or others, or if there is a suspicion of child or elder abuse, mental health professionals have a legal and ethical responsibility to report that information to the appropriate authorities with or without your consent.

Will I be compensated for my participation? In appreciation for your time, we will pay \$25 to each couple that participates in the face-to-face interview. No other compensation will be given.

Do I have the freedom to withdraw? You have the right to refuse to participate at any time in this study. You also have the right to refuse to answer any questions.

Approval of Research: This project has been approved, as required, by the Institutional Review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact:

Esther L. Boykin, B.A., Principal Researcher
703-538-8393, eboykin@vt.edu

Sandra M. Stith, Ph.D., Principal Researcher
703-538-8462, sstith@vt.edu

Dr. David Moore, IRB Chair
540-231-4991, moored@vt.edu

Participant's Permission:

I voluntarily agree to participate in this research project. I have read and understand the Informed Consent and the conditions of this project. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent for participation in this project by signing my name on the line below. I realize that, although I choose to participate right now, I have the right to withdraw from this study at any time without any penalty.

Printed Name: _____

Signature: _____

Printed Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix IV

Demographic Questionnaire

Name _____ Age _____ Gender _____

Address _____ Phone _____

_____ Race/Ethnicity _____

Highest Education Completed _____ Occupation _____

How long have you been married?__ How old were you when you got married?__

Have you and your spouse ever been separated or divorce?__ If yes, when?__

Have you and your spouse lived together for all of the last 12 months?__

Do you or your spouse have children?_____ If yes, Please list their ages and genders below

(please indicate if from a previous relationship)

Appendix V

Interview Questions

- Tell me about how you two met? What kinds of things attracted you to each other?
- How did you each decide to get married? Whose idea was it to get married?/Who proposed? What was that like? How did you each decide it was the right time and right person? What were the characteristics that led you to believe this was the person you wanted to marry?
- How did you parents/friends/extended family/community react to your decision to get married? How has your relationship changed with your parents/friends/extended family since getting married? What were some of the major turning points?
- Many couples find the first couple years to be a time of transitions, was that true for you? What were some of the most surprising things you learned about each other?
- What would you say are some of the best times of your marriage? What are some of the things that make these times stand out as really good?
- What about the most challenging times? How did you weather these difficult times? During these periods of conflict, how did you know that you were still connected to one another?
- Tell me about the ways your marriage has changed through the years?
- How has becoming parents changed your relationship? What was that transition like for each of you? How has it enhanced your relationship with one another? What were some of the challenges you faced as a couple?
- I am very interested in understanding your opinions on why some marriages succeed and some don't. What do you think are the key ingredients to building a happy marriage? Are these things that you bring individually to the relationship or are there things you develop together?

- Over the course of your lives, have there been couples that influenced your ideas of marriage (maybe parents or friends)? Tell me about those relationships.
- What have you found most surprising about being a husband/wife? How have you managed these new roles?
- What advice would you give to teenage couples that were thinking of getting married now? What would you tell their parents/families?
- What advice would you give to a therapist working with a young couple or their family?

Curriculum Vita

Esther L. Boykin

Email: eboykin@vt.edu

EDUCATION

- M.S. Human Development- Marriage and Family Therapy (GPA: 4.0)
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
September 2004, Master's Thesis: *Successful Teenage Marriages:
A Qualitative Study of How Some Couples Make It Work*
- B.A. Psychology with a minor in Communications (GPA: 3.7)
University of Maryland
May 2001

CLINICAL EXPERIENCE:

2003 to 2004

Family Life Counselor, Chaplain Family Life Center, U.S. Army; Fort Belvoir, VA

Provided therapy, mental health services and case management to individuals, couples and families in a spiritually-based agency. Primarily working with couples and families, utilizing process work and emotion-focused perspectives with a military population. Conducted assessments, identifying specific stressors and risk issues as well as assessing overall function in a variety of areas including family, social, employment, legal, psychiatric and substance abuse. Developed and implemented treatment plans, which addressed treatment goals set by therapist and client and reassessed same when appropriate. Conducted risk assessments and provided short-term crisis intervention for those clients who were experiencing a mental health emergency including suicidal thoughts and risk of severe domestic violence. Discussed safety planning and/or hospitalization with clients when suicidal and/or homicidal risk was apparent. Conducted initial intake interviews, which included determining appropriate modality of treatment and making referrals when necessary. Collaborated with other therapists, psychiatrists and other mental health professionals within the military community in order to coordinate services for clients and provided comprehensive care for each client. Fulfilled administrative duties and maintained client files, according to AAMFT and agency guidelines.

2002 to 2004

Family Therapist Intern, Center for Family Services; Falls Church, VA

Provided therapy, mental health services and case management to individuals, couples and families, primarily focusing on utilizing process and emotion-focused perspectives. Conducted assessments, which included providing a multi-axial DSM diagnosis, identifying problem areas and stressors, family strengths/assets and risk issues. Developed and implemented treatment plans, which addressed treatment goals and objectives, and reassessed same when appropriate. Participated in case planning sessions with supervisor and other therapists, in which cases were discussed and collaborated. Collaborated with other therapists, psychiatrists and other mental health professionals in order to coordinate services for clients when appropriate. Fulfilled administrative duties and maintained client files, according to HIPPA and AAMFT guidelines.

2003

Couples Group Therapist Intern, Couples Conflict Group, Center for Family Service; Falls Church, VA

Co-facilitated a multi-couple group therapy program. The Couples Conflict Group is a unique program through which couples experiencing mild to moderate intimate violence can receive six weeks of gender specific treatment as well as twelve weeks of couples focused treatment. Worked with other therapists to coordinate services between social service departments and provided both phases of treatment for couples involved in the program. Completed all administrative duties including maintaining client files according to HIPPA, AAMFT, and various county guidelines.

2000 to 2001

Volunteer Facilitator, Men's Anger Management Group, Church Street Center; Vienna, VA 22180

Co-facilitated group for court-ordered and self-referred men dealing with anger management and domestic violence issues. Primarily used a cognitive behavioral approach while incorporating some solution-focused techniques and perspectives. In addition to focusing on managing anger in constructive ways, the group also worked with couple and family issues. Organized materials and provided ongoing paperwork management for the supervising therapist.

EMPLOYMENT:

2002-2004

Research Assistant, Virginia Tech, Department of Human Development.

Conducting a literature review and meta-analysis of empirical research on child abuse risk. Development of a child abuse risk assessment instrument for use by military Family Advocacy clinicians.

2001-2002

Graduate Assistant, Virginia Tech, Department of Human Development.

Assisting professor with preparation of class materials, obtaining articles for reading assignments. Planned book signing event for faculty member's newly published text (*McCollum, E. and Trepper, T. (2001). Family Solutions for Substance Abuse: Clinical and Counseling Approaches*) including coordination of caterers, invitation of special guests and press release.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE:

2003-2004

Boykin, E. (2004). *Successful teenage marriages: A qualitative study of how some couples make it work*. Master's Thesis

Master's thesis research including collection and analysis of qualitative data. Conducted seven in-depth, semi-structured interviews and utilized grounded theory in analysis of findings.

2002-2004

Stith, S., Boykin, E., Davies, L., Alder, M., McPherson, M., Dees, J., Harris, J., Som, A. (2004). *Child maltreatment risk factor literature review*.

Assisted in the development and completion of one component of the joint services U.S. military funded Risk Assessment Tool Project, aimed at developing a new tool for assessing the likelihood of family violence recurring within military families. This project, part of a larger Department of Defense/ U.S.D.A. grant at Virginia Tech, examined a variety of family violence issues including child maltreatment and spouse abuse within a contemporary military context. Responsibilities included searching for and reviewing literature on child maltreatment; coding articles and entering data for meta-analysis on factors related to child physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS:

Stith, S., Boykin, E., Davies, L., Alder, M., McPherson, M., & Penn, C. (April 17, 2003). *Family violence risk assessment in the military*. Poster presented at the Virginia Tech Research Exposition, Northern Virginia Center, Falls Church, VA.

Stith, S. & Milner, J. (August 14, 2002). *Development of maltreatment risk assessment tools: A joint services project*. Report presented at the Counseling, Advocacy, & Prevention Biennial Conference, Harrison Room, Doubletree Hotel, Crystal City, VA.

PUBLICATIONS:

Boykin, E. (2003). *My daughter is a girlie-girl: When your Xena turns out to be more like Cinderella*. *Fierce*, 52-53.

Stith, S., Boykin, E., Davies, L. C., Alder, M., McPherson, M., Dees, J., Harris, J., Som, A. (2004). *Child maltreatment risk factor literature review*. Retrieved May 10, 2004 from, http://www.nvc.vt.edu/mft/fap_downloads.html

MEMBERSHIPS:

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, Student Member
Sigma Mu Honor Society in Psychology, University of Maryland

AWARDS:

Virginia Tech Graduate Dean's Assistantship, 2001
Virginia Tech Graduate Student Association, Graduate Research Development Project
Grant for Master's thesis research, 2004

AREAS OF INTEREST:

Marriage enrichment and education
Couples therapy
Process work for trauma survivors
Multi-family / multi-couple group therapy