

Exploring the Experience of Race-related Stress and Marital Satisfaction among African
American Married Couples

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how race-related stress influenced marital satisfaction among ten African American married couples. Each couple participated in a 60 to 90 minute interview and completed a measure of marital satisfaction. Using phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and family systems theory as a theoretical lens, this study described how African American married couples came to understand if and how the phenomenon of race-related stress influenced their marital satisfaction, and what meanings they created from this experience. Using modified analytic induction, couples discussed how their individual factors influenced their perceptions of race-related stress. Race-related stress couples also discussed how the phenomenon strengthened and challenged their marital satisfaction. It was also discovered that couples with race-related stress developed ways of coping with race-related stress in an effort to protect their marital satisfaction. One of the ten couples reported not experiencing race-related stress. A conceptual model, future research, and clinical implications from these findings are discussed.

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Exploring the Experience of Race-related Stress and Marital Satisfaction among African American Married Couples

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Problem and Setting

Racism and discrimination have been predominant throughout the history of the United States for many ethnic minority groups. The legacy of slavery, racism, and oppression has become a central aspect in the culture of African Americans. Despite the advancement of policies, equality, and legal practices in the United States, African Americans continue to struggle with racist encounters (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999). Due to racially motivated encounters, African Americans experience poorer quality of life (Karlsen & Nazroo, 2002; Krieger & Sidney, 1996; Utsey, 1997), increased psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety (Klonoff & Landrine, 1999; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996), and increased health problems such as cardiovascular disease (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). Utsey (1997) argues that “racial discrimination in American society is insidious, pervasive, ubiquitous, and for many African Americans the consequences of experiencing it on a daily bases can be deadly” (pp. 69-70).

Racism is defined as the “beliefs, attitudes, institutional arrangements, and acts that tend to denigrate individuals or groups because of phenotypic characteristics or ethnic group affiliation” (Clark et al., 1999, p. 805). Racism is a phenomenon that can create distress, diminished self-esteem and quality of life, rage, and anger in a victimized person or group (Fernando, 1988; Griffin, 1991; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996; Pierce, 1995; Sanders-Thompson, 1995). Because racism creates adverse stress reactions among African Americans, scholars have postulated the term race-related stress. Race-related stress, as defined by Harrell (2000), is “[t]he race-related transactions between individuals or groups and their environment that emerge from

the dynamics of racism, and that tax or exceed existing individual and collective resources or threaten well-being” (p.44). Race-related stress has been well documented in the lives of African Americans (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996; Plummer & Slane, 1996; Sanders-Thompson, 1996, 2002).

The United States Department of Justice (2005) reported that 55% of the motivation behind hate crimes between 2000 and 2003 was race-related. Similarly, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (U.S. Department of Justice [DOJ], 2005) found that 50.9% of African American victims reported they perceived the motivation behind the hate crimes attributed to them was race. Findings further demonstrated that 85.2% of African American victims reported that hate crimes were by European Americans; 14.8% African American victims reported hate crimes were by other African Americans; and no African American victims reported hate crimes were by Asian American or Indian Americans (DOJ, 2005). It appears that African Americans are not only experiencing racial discriminating from European Americans, but African Americans are also racially discriminating each other. Poussaint (1993) argues “Although both Black men and women are victims [of racial discrimination] in America, they are still victimizing each other” (pg. 88; as cited in Boyd-Franklin, 2003).

Literature illustrates that racial discrimination plays an integral role among the lives of African Americans (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Murry, 2000). Boyd-Franklin (2003) submits “often African American individuals, couples, and families feel powerless in the face of racism” (p. 106). Research illustrated that African Americans typically experience racial discrimination at some point in their lives (Klonoff & Landrine, 1999; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996). For instance, in a sample of 153 African Americans, 98.1% of African Americans reported experiences of racial discrimination in the past year (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996). Landrine and Klonoff (1996)

also found that African American participants experienced some form of racial discrimination over his/her lifetime. Research also demonstrated that most African Americans experienced race-related stress (Klonoff & Landrine, 1999; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996; Plummer & Slane, 1996).

Because of the compelling phenomenon of race-related stress in the lives of African Americans, it is important to understand the influence race-related stress has on African American intimate relationships. Boyd-Franklin (2003) postulates that the impact of racism and discrimination can have adverse impacts on African American intimate relationships. She explained:

It is difficult to convey fully to someone who has not experienced it the insidious, pervasive, and constant impact that racism and discrimination have on lives of African Americans. Both affect an African American from birth until death and have an impact on every aspect of family life, from childrearing practices, courtship, and *marriage* [italics added], to male-female roles, self esteem, and cultural and racial identity. They also influence the way in which many African Americans related to each other and to the outside world (as cited in Boyd-Franklin, 2003, p. 9; Jones, 1997).

Despite empirical support that African Americans experience some encounter with racial discrimination over the course of their lifetime, and that most experience race-related stress, there are many gaps in the literature examining racial discrimination and its impact on intimate relationships among African Americans (Murry, Brown, Brody, Cutrona, & Simons, 2001; Sigelman & Welch, 1991). There is also little empirical research which examines the influence race-related stress has on African American marital dynamics; such as marital satisfaction.

The union of marriage and building a strong family has played an integral role in African American history. Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan (1998) posit “The centrality of marriage in African American culture is perhaps most evident by its persistence in the face of extraordinarily hostile conditions, including efforts during slavery to prevent and to sever marital bonds. Despite these inhospitable circumstances, the 1990 Census showed that 88 percent of Black men and 92 percent of Black women age 35 to 44 were currently married or widowed” (p. 57). According to the United States Census Bureau (United States Census Bureau [USCB], 2004), of the 75 million family households in the United States in 2003, 57 million were married couple households. Of those households, 4.1 million were African American married couple households. “Although married-couple households have increased since 1970, when they numbered 45 million, they grew at a far slower rate than other family households—by an average of 0.8 percent per year, compared with 3 percent per year for other types of family households” (USCB, 2004, p.4). These statistics indicate that when compared to other racial and ethnic family types, African American families are getting married less often or waiting longer to get married.

The Bureau of Census (USCB, 2004) statistics indicated that high divorce rates, a decline in marriage rates, improvements in the life expectancy and health of the elderly, and the increase in children living with a single-parent has impacted the decline in African American marriages. For instance, in 2003 the percentage of African American men and women who married stood at 35% compared to 59.1% of European American non-Hispanic men and women (USCB, 2004). For African Americans the shortage of African American men and the higher educational attainment of African American women are two factors that have contributed to the decline in marriage rates in the African American community (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Boyd-Franklin &

Franklin, 1998). Hatchett, Veroff, and Douvan (1995) propose “[g]etting married and staying married may become relatively rare events among Black Americans if current trends in family organization, and in the economic marginalization of young Black men, continue” (p. 112, as cited in Boyd-Franklin, 2003). In the present study, it seemed necessary to explore marital relationships of African Americans and examine how race-related stress influenced their marital satisfaction.

The few research studies that have been conducted suggest that the consequences of racial discrimination and/or race-related stress negatively influence marital quality and marital satisfaction among African American marriages (Conner, 1998; Murry et al., 2001). Boyd-Franklin and Franklin (1998) argue “African American struggles with inequalities of racism even in very high occupational, educational, and socioeconomic levels. Unfortunately, the rage about this is often misdirected toward family and couple relationships” (p. 274; as cited in Boyd-Franklin, 2003, p.106). Hatchett and Colleagues (1995) suggested that because African American men typically experience more race-related stress, African American wives’ understanding of their husbands’ reactions to race-related stress positively influenced marital satisfaction, and African American wives’ sensitivity to their husbands’ needs and feelings, particularly to feelings of subjection caused by discrimination, are essential for stability and happiness among African American marriages. Despite the impact of race-related stress on married relationships, the relationship itself might serve as a coping mechanism, or buffer, to combat the strain of racism and race-related stress as long as both partners are understanding and supportive of each others’ experience (Murry et al., 2001).

Although research suggested that race-related stress negatively impacts marital relationships (Conner, 1998; Murry et al., 2001), very little is known about the experiences

African American couples have with this phenomenon. Little is also known about whether some African American couples who experience race-related stress do not perceive this phenomenon as negatively influencing their marital satisfaction. The focus of this study was to uncover the meanings African American couples gave to their experiences of race-related stress and its influence upon satisfaction in their marriage.

In observing marriages of my family members, I ponder what meanings are being created and shared in these relationships as it relates to race-related stress and marital satisfaction. When I came across the lack of research examining the influence of race-related stress upon marital satisfaction of African American married couples, I became intrigued with understanding how African American married couples make sense of race-related stress and marital satisfaction. As a marriage and family therapist, I further contemplated how I would approach and treat these two phenomenon in a therapeutic setting. It would be helpful for mental health professionals to become aware of race-related stress experienced by African Americans and its potential influence on their marital satisfaction.

Significance

There is a wealth of empirical research that suggests race-related stress is linked to several stress-related diseases such as hypertension, coronary heart disease, cirrhosis of the liver, cancer, and lung ailments (McCord & Freeman, 1990; Outlaw, 1993; Steffen, McNeily, Anderson, & Sherwood, 2003). There is also a prevalent body of research that demonstrates race-related stress is associated with amplified levels of depression (Simpson & Yinger, 1985); diminished life satisfaction and self-esteem (Broman, 1997; Sanders-Thompson, 1996; Thompson, Anderson, & Bakeman, 2000; Williams, 2000; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000; Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997); low-birth

weight in pregnant African American women (Giscombe & Lobel, 2005; Mustillo, Krieger, Sidney, McCreath, & Kiefe, 2004); and feelings of helplessness and lowered mastery in dealing with racist problems (Broman, Mavaddat, & Hsu, 2000; Ryff, Keyes, & Hughes, 2003).

In addition to the adverse effects from race-related stress on mental health and psychological functioning, a study by Karlsen and Nazroo (2002) and a study conducted by Utsey and Payne (2000) found that race-related stress was linked to diminished quality of life among African Americans. Williams and Chung (1997) examined the harmful impact of racial discrimination on life satisfaction among African Americans. They suggested that African Americans who reported experiencing racial discrimination had elevated levels of chronic health problems, increased psychological distress, and decreased happiness and life satisfaction.

Researchers have also demonstrated that persistent racial discrimination increases the impact of race-related stress among African American family dynamics, as demonstrated by heightened psychological stress reactions (Anderson, 1991; Murry et al., 2001). Kelly (2004) argues that negative experiences with racist encounters are detrimental to African American marriages. Literature suggests that African American gender roles and any socioeconomic level of African Americans are linked to discrimination and race related stress (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). Poussaint (1993) submits:

African American men and women alike face a difficult test in understanding the complexities of their dilemma because of the gender issues, whatever they may be, are compounded by racism and the subordinated roles of Blacks in American society (p. 89). Therefore it was important for this study to uncover how African American husband and wives experience race-related stress and discover how their individual experiences of it influence their marital satisfaction.

In sum, research suggest that at some point in their clinical practice, mental health professionals might encounter African American married clients struggling with the impact of race-related stress on their relationships (Blake & Anderson-Darling, 2000). It will be helpful for mental health professional to have some idea of what it is like for African Americans to experience race-related stress and how this phenomenon might impact their marital satisfaction. Therefore, the present study's findings might be beneficial for mental health professionals in order to provide treatment for African American couples dealing with race-related stress.

Theory

This study sought to explore the experience of race-related stress among African American married couples and its influence on their marital satisfaction. There are a number of empirical research studies about African American *individual* experiences with race-related stress (Brown and Colleagues, 2000; Klonoff and Landrine, 1999; Landrine and Klonoff, 1996; Utsey et al., 2002). However, large gaps remain in the research about the influence of race-related stress on marital satisfaction among African American *couples*. There is also limited research which has explored how African American married couples come to understand and create meaning about their experiences with race-related stress upon their marital satisfaction. This study was aimed at exploring the meanings couples created about race-related stress and how they perceived it influencing their marital satisfaction. To this end, three theoretical lenses guided this research to include phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and family systems theory.

Phenomenology

This study used phenomenology to get a clear and deep understanding of the experience of race related stress and marital satisfaction. Phenomenology focuses on the lived experience of

people and how they make sense of that experience (Giorgi, 1985). Phenomenology is less interested in the occurrence, prevalence, or correlates of a phenomenon but more interested in the nature of an experience.

Phenomenology emphasizes the fact that the only way to understand the lived experiences of others is to “experience the phenomenon as directly as possible” (Patton, 2002, p.106) and that researchers are not separate from the phenomena they study (Boss, Dahl, & Kaplan, 1996). I too became part of the study, as I am an African American woman who has observed and experienced the influence of race-related stress upon intimate relationships. Although I am African American, which might have blurred how I came to make sense of the phenomenon, my membership allowed me to be that much closer to experiencing the phenomenon under study. As an African American woman, I needed to be conscious of my own reactions, feelings, and beliefs about race-related stress and its influence on intimate relationships. I needed to be aware and identify my feelings and decisions as I engaged in this study. Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett (2003) state:

Self-reflexivity promotes the reconciliation of personal motivations for conducting research with a specific population and the extent of accountability owed to the population studied...[W]e must remember that our informants are not mere subjects of research but active agents in defining who we are and have been and why we do things the way we do as a collective group (p.210). Therefore I monitored my own subjectivity, maintained self-reflexivity and self-questions, and allowed participants to express their stories, be accountable to, define, and validate knowledge claims that contribute to the African American collective experience (Few et al., 2003).

An assumption of phenomenology is that if researchers are studying family or couple units, it is important to understand the meanings families and couples attach to their relationships (Boss, Dahl, & Kaplan, 1996). Consequently, the unit under exploration must be interviewed conjointly. The present study interviewed couples together in an effort to uncover the meanings created by African American married couples experiences with race-related stress and how they see it influencing their marriage. Schwandt (1997) proposes that phenomenology “is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (p.13). The qualitative interview allowed participants to define and give meaning to their experience, as well as allowed them to share their opinions, feelings, and knowledge, which added depth, detail, and meaning at a very personal level of experience (Patton, 2002). As a result, participants were in the role of expert of their experience. Phenomenological theory will provide one piece of the whole theoretical lens aimed at incorporating both the individual experience as well as the couple experience of race-related stress and marital satisfaction among African American marriages.

Symbolic Interactionism

The second theoretical lens that guided this study was symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism is a social-psychological approach most closely associated with George Herbert Mead (1934) and Herbert Blumer (1969). It is a perspective that places great emphases on the importance of meaning and interpretation of a human process in reaction against behaviorism and mechanical stimulus-response psychology (Patton, 2002). Consequently, shared meanings are created by people through their interactions and those created meanings become their reality.

Symbolic interactionism is based on the following three premises: (1) humans act towards things or situations on the basis of meanings individuals have for them; (2) meaning is created through social interactions between people; and (3) meanings are modified through an interpretive process thereby facilitating an effective way to deal with their encounters (Blumer, 1969). Focus is on the subjective aspects of social life, rather than on objective, macro-structural aspects of social systems (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). In this paradigm, society is viewed as a set of interactive exchanges among the actors (Blumer, 1969), and focuses on how people define themselves, others, and the roles and actions people adopt. LaRossa and Reizes (1993) argue that the social process of people occurs from interactions and communication with others. These interactions and communication are facilitated through symbols (e.g., language and rituals). Meanings are then created through the experiences themselves, which facilitate the development of self (Blumer, 1969).

Russell-Hatch and Ruiz (2005) posit “Symbolic interactionism places attention on how racism and other social phenomena are socially constructed, emphasizing how meanings and manifestations of racism are subject to ongoing negotiation and renegotiation” (Russell-Hatch & Ruiz, 2005, p. 1). In the present study, symbolic interactions explores the meaning African American couples create from their experience of race-related stress and its influence on marital satisfaction from their interactions with people outside the marriage. The present study also sought to understand the meaning African American married couples gave to race-related stress and marital satisfaction. Likewise, the study sought to understand the perspective, values, viewpoints, and actions these couples adopted from the interactions with each other, and interactions with their social environment.

Family Systems Theory

Family systems, the third theoretical lens, focused on uncovering the interactional process of the couple relationship rather than on the individual experience (Becvar & Becvar, 1988). Family systems theory was drawn from general systems theory developed by Austrian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy (Nichols & Schwartz, 2006). Bertalanffy (1968) proposed that “[every] organism is a system, that is, a dynamic order of parts and processes standing in mutual interaction,” and that “every system was part of a subsystem of larger systems” (p. 208). Family systems theory suggests that individuals cannot be understood in isolation from one another; that families are systems of interconnected and interdependent individuals, none of whom can be understood in isolation from the system (Stith, 2004, personal communication). Hence, family systems theory considers the larger systems as the influence on individual parts for greater understanding of the interaction in the system units. In the present study, the larger system is the marital unit. Family systems theory questions how family processes, such as communication, cohesion, conflict, and adaptability, may be understood by examining transactions among family members (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Family systems theory contributed to the present study by exploring the interactions between African American partners in the marital unit.

Phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and family systems theory uncovered the whole experience of race-related and marital satisfaction in African American married relationships. Figure 1 explains how each theory helped guide this study. The phenomenological lens uncovered descriptions of each African American couple experience race-related stress and marital satisfaction. Within this lens, the meaning of race-related stress and marital satisfaction was created and couples thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about both phenomenon were uncovered. The lens of symbolic interactionism helped to understand what

meanings were created, defined and reshaped by racist social interactions. In the present study, racist social interactions shaped how ten African American couples provided meaning to their experience of race-related stress influencing their marital satisfaction. Therefore symbolic interactionism uncovered how spouses' experiences and interactions with racist social situations influenced the way in which they related to their partners. The final lens, family systems theory, uncovered the interactional process around the experience of race-related stress influencing their marital satisfaction. The meanings created from race-related stress and marital satisfaction was exchanged within the marriage that created an interaction around these concepts among each of the ten African American married couples' relationship.

Each theory therefore influenced the other in which the experience was continuously redefined, reshaped, and co-created within ten African American couples marriages. Linking the theories of phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and family systems theory created a telescoping exploration of the lived experience of race-related stress and its influence upon satisfaction among then African American married couples.

Rationale

Clinicians and researchers agree that race-related stress is detrimental to African American marriages (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Conner, 1998; Murry et al., 2001; Utsey et al., 2002). However, research offers few examples of the meanings African American married couples give to their experiences of race-related stress and how they see it influencing their marital satisfaction. We also know there is increased risk of mental and physical health consequences related to race-related stress (Clark et al., 1999; Klonoff & Landrine, 1999; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996; Kwate, Valdimarsdottir, & Josephine, 2003; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). Yet little research focuses on whether marital relationships are at risk when faced with race-related stress

(see Murry, Brown et al., 2001, Murry, Phillips-Smith et al., 2001). The lack of current published research on African American marriages in the face of racial issue demonstrates another gap in the research. The aim of this study was to explore how race-related stress influenced marital satisfaction among ten African American married couples.

In her groundbreaking book written to therapist, social workers, and other mental health professionals treating African American families, author and clinician Nancy Boyd-Franklin (2003) argues that there is a missing link between clinical treatment issues of race for African Americans and theoretical contributions of treatment models to address this issue. Boyd-Franklin's (2003) book, *Black families in therapy: Understanding the African American experience*, is one of few that clearly explored issues of race and how therapist can come to understand race issues in their clinical work with African American couples. This study was conducted with the intention that marriage and family therapist and other mental health professionals can be accommodating while providing services to African American couples struggling with race-related stress.

I used modified analytic induction as a vehicle to understand the experience of race-related stress and marital satisfaction by way of analyzing some of my own hunches, my theoretical sensitivity, and my interpretation of the previous research. As a result, I was able to examine and re-examine my original hypotheses and modified them to capture the emerging data. The data was able to provide sufficient answers to the research questions so that the experiences of the ten African American married couples matched my modified hypotheses, and the context of the participants matched the concepts of inquiry (Rettig, Tam, Magistad, 1996); such as race-related stress and marital satisfaction.

Open-ended, qualitative interviews were used to uncover the meanings ten African American married couples gave to their experiences with race-related stress and how they see it influencing satisfaction in their marriage. These qualitative interviews captured descriptive and rich data of the participant's experience. I wanted to capture the data in such a way that therapist working with African American couples could address the issues of race in these couples marriages. To facilitate more understanding of marital satisfaction, a marital adjustment scale, the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spainer, 1976), was used to discriminate between relational distressed and non-distressed couples. The marital adjustment scale provided another layer in understanding the influence race-related stress had on marital satisfaction among ten African American married couples.

Statement of Purpose

I can recall many discussions with an African American female family member who had been married for several years. As our discussion came alive, she explained that part of the reason her marriage failed was due to the lack of understanding she had with her ex-husband's reports of racial discrimination and feelings of degradation from being an African American man in society. She reported never fully understanding her ex-husband's experience because she was not impacted as negatively as he was from racial discrimination and from her perception that sexism was more prevalent in her life than discrimination. This family member also reported that downplaying his experience led to a lack of trust, intimacy, and connection in the marriage. By having this discussion with my family member I found myself both sadden and fascinated with wanting to know more about how race-related stress influenced African American marriages.

In the present study, I wanted to understand the entire experience of how ten African American couples come to understand how the phenomenon of race-related stress influenced their marital satisfaction and what meanings they created from this experience. Importantly, I wanted to know more about how marriage and family therapist, as well as other mental health professionals, can explore the issues of race and racism with African American couples without appearing pathological and stereotypical. This study fills gaps in the research by exploring the influence of race-related stress on marital satisfaction in African American marriages. This study also generates ideas for future research, while providing insight into the experience of racism, race-related stress, and its impact on marital satisfaction. Therefore, my aim in the present study was not to answer disagreement or contradictions in the previous research, but further explore the meaning within them (Boss, Dahl, & Kaplan, 1996).

By understanding the experience of race-related stress influencing marital satisfaction among ten African American married couples, the study addressed the following research questions: How are race-related stress and marital satisfaction defined and experienced by African American married couples?; How is marital satisfaction different for couples with race-related stress and couples without race-related stress?; and How do African American married couples perceive their experience of race-related stress influencing their marital satisfaction?

Hypotheses

The hypotheses of the study were derived from existing research, literature, and hunches developed from three interacting theoretical lenses of phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and family systems theory. This study hypothesized the following:

- a) African American husbands and wives with race-related stress will have different experiences with this phenomenon.

- b) African Americans with race-related stress will feel less satisfied in their marriage than those African Americans without race-related stress.

These original hypotheses were later modified as new discoveries emerged from the data. A conceptual model of the influence of race-related stress upon marital satisfaction was created from this analytic process. The modified hypotheses and conceptual model are presented in the results and discussion chapters of this thesis.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction and Organization

The literature review explores research examining the consequences of race-related stress among African American individuals and the influence this phenomenon has on African American intimate relationships. The literature review also investigates gaps in the research between individual experiences with race-related stress and the influence race-related stress has upon marital satisfaction among African American married couples. This chapter includes: (1) an overview of racism and race-related stress; (2) the impact of race-related stress among African American individuals; and (3) the influence of race-related stress upon African American marriages. The first section explores race-related stress in general. Within the second section, the focus is on mental and physical health factors impacted by race-related stress. The final section examines the influence of race-related stress among African American marriages.

Overview of Racism and Race-Related Stress

Literature suggested that African Americans not only experience daily and chronic stress similar to the main stream population (Blake & Anderson-Darling, 2000), but also experience stressors unique to their racial group such as race-related stress (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 1998; Thoits, 1991; Utsey, Chae, Brown, & Kelly, 2002). Race-related stress can arise from various forms of the African American experience through racism, discrimination, and stereotypes that are embedded in American history (Cureton, 2003). Race-related stress is defined as the psychological discomfort that results from a situation appraised as troubling because of racism, racial prejudice, racial discrimination, or racial isolation (Plummer & Slane, 1996). Harrell (2000) defined race-related stress as “the race-related transactions between individuals or groups and their environment that emerge from the dynamics of racism,

and that tax or exceed existing individual and collective resources or threaten well-being” (p.44).

Harrell (2000) also identifies six types of race-related stress as listed below:

- (1) *Racism-related life events*: Infrequent and typically time-limited. For example, African Americans being discriminated against at work.
- (2) *Chronic-contextual stress*: Inequalities in social structure, political dynamics, and institutional racism. For instance, liquor stores on every corner in an African American urban neighborhood.
- (3) *Vicarious experiences of racism*: Observations or reports of family members experiences or high profile cases involving strangers that invoke heightened psychological and emotional states due to prejudice and discrimination
- (4) *Daily racism microstressors*: Conscious or unconscious, subtle or covert forms of marginalizing incidents, degradations, putdowns, and interpersonal discrimination. For instance, being ignored or overlooked while waiting in line.
- (5) *Transgenerational transmission*: The historical contexts of a group that are passed from generation to generation. For example, group trauma from the slavery of African people.
- (6) *Collective experiences*: Cultural-symbolic or sociopolitical manifestations of racism that affect the collective. For instance, stereotypical media portrayals of minorities showing that all African American men can play basketball or football, or all African American women have negative attitudes.

Numerous studies have supported the notion that race-related stress is a significant factor in the daily lives of African Americans (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996; Utsey & Ponterotto, 1996).

Researchers have therefore measured occurrences of racist encounters reported by African

Americans. A 1999 study by Kessler, Michelson, and Williams examined the associations between prevalence, distribution, and mental health consequences of perceived discrimination. Data were collected from a national telephone survey, the Midlife Development in the United States Survey (MIDUS), between the years of 1995 and 1996. The sample consisted of 3,032 adult African Americans, European Americans, and *an other-category* of men and women, ages 24-74 years, living throughout the United States. Discrimination was measured using questions that examined participants perceived day-to-day and lifetime exposure to discrimination to include gender, race, ethnicity, and social class (e.g., “how often on a day-to-day basis do you experience each of the following types of discrimination?” p. 211). While results demonstrated that perceived day-to-day and lifetime discrimination was common in the total population, African Americans reported higher levels of perceived discrimination than did their European American and the *other-category* participants. Although African Americans reported discriminatory encounters, they did not necessarily take notice of the phenomenon on a daily basis. While racial discrimination occurred more often for African Americans when compared with other racial groups, the stressful nature of the phenomenon was not examined.

In an ethnically diverse sample, Sanders-Thompson (2002) measured the stressful nature of recurrent experiences with discrimination. The sample consisted of 46 men and 110 women from the St. Louis metropolitan area, which included 70 African Americans, 58 European Americans, 18 Asian Americans, and six Hispanic Americans. Discrimination was measured using the Experiences of Discrimination Questionnaire (Sanders-Thompson, 1995), which examined recurrent experiences with discrimination in various areas of job, housing, police/judiciary, education, accommodations and services, personal insults/slurs, and other discriminatory experiences. The Daily Stress Inventory (Brantley & Jones, 1989) measured the

frequency and impact of minor everyday life events and the stressful nature of the items reported. Findings suggested that racism was interpreted as more stressful to African Americans than their European American, Asian American, and Hispanic American counterparts. When compared to the other racial-ethnic groups in the study (e.g., Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans), the African American participants continued to report higher levels of stressful race-related experiences.

Reported racially motivated encounters from African Americans confirm the significance of race-related stress among this culture. Landrine and Klonoff (1996) developed the Schedule of Racist Events (SRE) which measured the prevalence of racism and perceived stressfulness of racist experiences (i.e., day-to-day, lifetime, and encounters within the past year). The impact of racism on African Americans immersion in the African American culture was also examined. The 153 African American sample, in which 83 were women and the entire sample was between the ages of 15 and 70 years, were recruited from a large university. Findings illustrated that ninety-four percent of participants experienced race-related stress. Landrine and Klonoff (1996) suggested that race-related stress emerged from racial discrimination by strangers, people in service jobs, institutions, and helping professionals. Other reports of racist discrimination involved racially motivated names, threats, and participants' drastic steps taken in response to racist events. Gender did not influence how participants experienced discrimination. In other words, men and women did not experience racial discrimination differently. Findings also demonstrated that African Americans who maintained immersion in African American foods, music, and spiritual beliefs experienced increased racist discrimination than did less immersed African Americans. Findings suggested that African Americans who held strong African American cultural beliefs and values perceived more racist discrimination than did African

Americans who held less African American cultural beliefs and who were less aware of politics of race and racism as invasive to most African Americans.

Congruent with Landrine and Klonoff (1996) earlier findings, Klonoff and Landrine's (1999) illustrated that ninety-five percent of their African American sample reported experiencing race-related stress. Klonoff and Landrine (1999) cross-examined the SRE (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996) with a sample of 277 African American women and 243 African American men between the ages of 18 and 79 years. African American participants were randomly sampled for a period of four and ten-months from San Bernardino County, California. Findings revealed that ninety-six percent of the African American sample reported encounters of racial discrimination in the past year; that ninety-eight percent experienced racial discrimination over the course of their life time; and ninety-five percent considered racism stressful. Klonoff and Landrine (1999) revealed that as race-related stress increased, African Americans reported an increase in physical and psychological symptoms (e.g., somatization, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, and anxiety); which was consistent with their previous findings (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996).

Results further demonstrated that African American men reported more encounters with racism than did their African American female counterparts. This finding was remarkably different from the authors' earlier study (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996), which found that neither men nor women had different levels of racist encounters. An explanation for this difference might be that Landrine and Klonoff (1996) used a university sample of participants, while Klonoff and Landrine (1999) sample was recruited from the community. Therefore the variability in participants' encounters with racism between these studies might be explained by their demographic location of which the sample was recruited. Researchers have suggested that

the environment in which African Americans live contributes to their reports of racism (Broman, 1997). These findings illustrated that demographic location might influence encounters with racism.

Previous researchers have suggested that maladaptive stress responses might occur from race-related encounters experienced by African Americans (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996; Utsey et al., 2002). Although African Americans might encounter racist events, it seems as though his or her perception of the racist encounters determines it as stressful. In fact, both behaviors and perceptions of racially motivated encounters help to explain the phenomenon of race-related stress. Kessler and Colleagues submit, “[D]iscrimination implies not only the occurrence of an objective experience but also an attribution about the reason for that experience.... [in that] behavioral indicators (e.g., exposure to racial slurs) are more difficult to interpret in alternative ways than others (e.g., failure to get a job)” (p. 211). The present study extends the need for understanding how ten African American married couples give meaning to race-related stressors.

There has been very little qualitative research that examined the phenomenon of race-related stress among African Americans. Essed (1990) conducted one of the few qualitative studies because she wanted to present the detrimental problems of racism and illustrate the ways in which racism was experienced in the everyday lives of African American women. Essed (1990) wanted to discuss the effects and meaning of racism perceived from African American women’s everyday experiences with European Americans. Essed (1990) interviewed 25 women, in which 11 were African American and 14 were Black Surinamese-Dutch, between the ages of 25 and 30 years. Essed’s (1990) findings demonstrated that racism is stressful because it is a constant source of tension as a result of recurrent encounters. She also found that racism is an everyday battle in which African Americans are anticipating it and develop strategies to avoid or

defend oneself. Findings illustrated that African Americans are confronted by instances of being treated unfairly and not being taken seriously, creating another source of stress. Therefore, the covert and subtle nature of racism may appear to other races or ethnic groups as “trivial” or “normal,” adding another layer of stress to African Americans (p. 258).

Summary

Research examining race-related stress confirms the important and yet harmful role it plays in the lives of African Americans. It appears that one of the challenges to studying and understanding African Americans experiences with race-related stress is the complexity of racism itself. Racism is conceptualized as having many domains (e.g., cultural racism; institutional racism; individual racism; or interpersonal racism), which affect African Americans at various degrees of intensity (blatant racism vs. ambiguous racism). Because of the complexity of studying racism, it is not surprising research findings are often contradictory (Paradies, 2006).

Researchers have also suggested there are only two ways to measure race-related stress: (1) measuring the frequency with which people experience racist encounters; and (2) measuring the appraisal of race-related events or situations that are stressful (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996). Consequently, another challenge to studying and understanding race-related stress among African Americans is the frequency racism occurs, as well as how the phenomenon is perceived. These differences might result from the timeframe within which the racist encounter was measured (e.g., “past year,” vs. day to day) and from how the construct was measured (e.g., standardized measures vs. general measures). By exploring the experience of race-related stress through qualitative interviews, the present study captured the meaning of race-related stress by having ten African American married couples define what it meant to them.

Effects of Race-Related Stress among African American Individuals

The rage about racism can create a family environment that is conflicted and neglected (Murry et al., 2001). Researchers have suggested that understanding the mental health and physical health-related consequences of race-related stress is important to understand how marital and family relationships are affected by racism and racial discrimination (Brown et al., 2000). In other words, the individual experience of racism and racial discrimination that create race-related stress could influence how one interacts with significant family members.

Mental Health Consequences

Researchers have attempted to examine mental health consequences from perceived racism and discrimination (Fischer & Shaw, 1999; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996). Landrine and Klonoff (1996) found that as race-related stress increased for African American men and women, other mental health problems increased such as feelings of inadequacy; depression; anxiety; and obsessive-compulsive symptoms. In fact, African Americans with higher levels of race-related stress displayed higher levels of depression and anxiety symptoms, and feelings of inadequacy.

In a study using the longitudinal data from the National Survey of Black Americans, Brown and Colleagues (2000) examined mental health consequences of African Americans that had been treated badly because of their race. Participants were recruited from data collected from the National Survey of Black Americans at two different periods: (1) Wave 2 from 1987-1988; and (2) Wave 3 from 1988-1989. The sample included 2,107 self-identified African Americans living in the continental United States. Some feelings of distress included how often in the past month respondents felt under strain or pressure, in low spirits, or felt downhearted. Participants reported whether they or their families faced racism in the past month. Results illustrated that participants who reported racial discrimination also experienced increased levels

of psychological distress and elevated levels of depression than respondents not reporting discrimination. It appeared that respondents, who experienced psychological distress or depression as a result of racial discrimination at one period, also experienced increased psychological distress at another period. The authors suggested that self-reported experiences of racial discrimination were linked to the onset of adverse mental health problems.

Similar to Brown and Colleagues study, Klonoff, Landrine, and Ullman (1999) also found that race-related stress led to poor mental health among their sample of 520 African Americans. Specifically, the authors sample consisted of African American men and women, in which 277 were women, with ages ranged from 18 to 79 years. Participants, sampled from San Bernardino County, California, completed the SRE (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996), which measured the prevalence of racism and perceived stressfulness of participants' daily, lifetime, and racist encounters within the past year. Participants also completed a questionnaire that measured specific psychological symptoms such as somatization, obsessive-compulsive, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, and anxiety. Being a woman, having greater race-related stress, and reporting increased racial discrimination predicted increased psychological symptoms. Men reported less race-related stress and discrimination, and reported fewer psychological symptoms than women. Similarly, in a sample of 71 African American women, Kwate, Valdimarsdottir, and Josephine (2003) used the SRE (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996) which demonstrated that both lifetime and past year experiences with race-related stress increased depression, anxiety, hostility, paranoid ideation, psychoticism, and overall global functioning.

Bowen-Reid and Harrell (2002) also examined the prevalence and stressfulness of racist experiences on mental health functioning. Participants included 155 African American undergraduate students from a historically African American college in the mid-Atlantic region

of the United States. Seventy-nine percent of the sample was female and the age of the entire sample ranged from 17 to 44 years. The SRE (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996) measured the prevalence of racism and perceived stressfulness of participants' racist experiences (i.e., day-to-day, lifetime, and encounters within the past year). Findings demonstrated that encounters of racist events and race-related stress were associated with elevated negative health symptoms such as depression, anxiety, hostility, paranoid ideation, psychoticism, and overall global functioning. The similarities between Brown and Colleagues, Klonoff and Colleagues, Kwate and Colleagues, and Bowen-Reid and Harrell's (2002) study pinpoints the detrimental role race-related stress played in African American mental health.

Researchers continue to demonstrate that race-related stress impacts psychological functioning. Utsey (1997) has examined the association between race-related stress and psychological well-being in 177 African American men, ages 17 to 57 years, recruited from colleges, universities, and the community. Factors of psychological well-being that were assessed included symptoms of anxiety, depression and hostility. Participants completed the Racism Index (created by the author) that assessed frequency of racist encounters, experiences with racist encounters, and the stressful nature of racist events. Findings demonstrated that African American men experienced diminished psychological well-being as a result of race-related encounters. Utsey (1997) also examined differences between these African American men and a separate sample of 217 African American women. Results showed that even when compared to African American women, African American men continued to report higher levels of race-related stress and more diminished mental health.

In a thirteen year longitudinal study, Jackson and Colleagues (1996) examined the relationship between experiences and perceptions of racism and the mental health status. The

study recruited 623 African American men and women from the longitudinal (years 1979 to 1992) National Survey of Black Americans. Participants were selected from the continental United States, in which 80% were from urban areas. Respondents answered two non-standardized measures of race-related stress to include respondents' perceptions of European Americans intentions and their reports of encounters with racial discrimination. Mental health questions measured satisfaction with life, well-being, and psychological distress (e.g., feelings of loneliness, tiresome, depressed, jumpy or jittery, crying spells, loss of appetite, and insomnia). Jackson and Colleagues found that increased race-related stress resulted in poorer mental health among African Americans. However, findings revealed that the detrimental effects of racism on mental health weakened overtime. In fact, the authors proposed that because the impact of racism on mental health does not occur on an everyday bases, but rather through a social-situational factor, mental health functioning can be restored to healthier levels as time progressed. Despite Jackson and Colleagues findings, the authors did not indicate how mental health functioning was restored overtime. For instance, despite racism not occurring on an everyday bases, the authors did not investigate whether participants developed ways to cope with race-related stress in order to protect their mental health functioning from it.

In reviewing the research examining different levels of racism and race-related stress, researchers have revealed that perceived isolate discrimination has adverse psychological consequences (Broman et al., 2000). Isolate discrimination was defined as “individual acts of discriminatory behavior by one dominant group person that is directed at a member of a subordinate group, when that action is not embedded in a larger institutional context” (Broman et al., 2000, p.166). Broman and Colleagues (2000) used data from a second wave random telephone survey to examine isolate discrimination. The sample consisted of 495 African

American adults, ages 18 and older, living in non-institutionalized housing in an urban area of Detroit, Michigan. Participants answered questions pertaining to discrimination experienced in the past three years. Questions also examined whether participants were prevented from doing something, whether they were hassled, and if they felt inferior because of their race. Participants also answered questions regarding specific instances of discrimination such as getting a job and shopping in a store. Likewise, participants completed a study created measure to assess mental health functioning. The psychological distress scale asked participants if they felt depressed, jumpy, and restless; and felt like crying, felt like they could not get going, and whether they had a poor appetite.

Results suggested that African Americans that perceived isolate discrimination had lower levels of mastery and higher psychological distress (e.g., feelings of depression, jumpiness, restlessness, crying, and poor appetite). Broman and Colleagues also examined whether gender and age played a factor in how mental health was impacted by racism. Results suggested that when compared with older adult African Americans, younger adult African Americans' mental health diminished as encounters with isolate discrimination increased. When compared to African American females, African American males had diminished mental health as isolate discrimination increased. Results further suggested that mental health for lower income African Americans diminished as more isolate job discrimination occurred. Overall, the authors findings appeared to be consistent with other researchers (Utsey, 1997; Utsey, Payne et al. , 2002) that have found African American men reported higher levels of race-related stress than African American women; in addition to findings that illustrated racist encounters decreased psychological functioning for African Americans (Utsey, Chae et al., 2002; Utsey, Payne et al., 2002).

The African American culture is diverse within itself. Literature has theorized that various demographics factors of African American life impacts the way racism is experienced (Boyd-Franklin, 2003), which in turns influences mental health functioning. Using data from the 1995 MIDUS in the U.S. national telephone survey, face-to-face interviews, and self-administered follow-up data, Ryff, Keyes, and Hughes (2003) conducted a study to examine the impact of race-related stress on psychological distress across demographic locations. The MIDUS sample consisted of 2485 European Americans and 366 African American respondents from 48 states. The racial sub-sample respondents include 366 African Americans from New York City and 235 Mexican Americans from Chicago. Respondents from both samples answered questions pertaining to nine examples of their perceived racial discrimination and rated how often, on a daily basis, respondents experienced nine examples of racial discrimination (e.g., “How often the respondent was treated less courtesy than other people;” p.280).

Results revealed that African Americans in the national sample reported higher levels of perceived discrimination than did European Americans in the national sample. African Americans in the national sample reported higher levels of perceived discrimination than did African Americans from New York City. Findings suggested that African Americans from New York City perceived discrimination more often than Mexican Americans in Chicago. Results further demonstrated that reported self-acceptance from men was not compromised with perceived discrimination; while higher levels of discrimination compromised women’s self-acceptance, sense of growth, mastery, and autonomy. In other words, African American women with high levels of discrimination lost their sense of well-being, personal development, and a positive perception of self. These findings illustrated that although men have been found to

report more racist experiences, African American women are more negatively impacted by racism.

Much of the research examining race-related stress and psychological consequences has not examined the phenomenon in the workplace. Racial discrimination in the workplace is viewed as institutional racism/discrimination. Forman (2003) conducted a study which examined racial segmentation in the workplace. Data was collected from two surveys: the 1980 National Survey of Black Americans and the 1995 Detroit Area Survey. The probability sample from the 1980 National Survey of Black Americans consisted of 1,199 non-institutionalized African American adults, 18 years of age and older, that was representative of the United States. Meanwhile, data from the 1995 Detroit Area Survey consisted of a probability sample of 347 African Americans from three metropolitan counties in Michigan (Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb), and the metropolitan city of Detroit, Michigan. Perceived racial segmentation was measured in the 1980 National Survey of Black Americans which assessed perceived global racial segmentation in the workplace and perceived personal racial segmentation in the workplace (e.g. “In the place where you work, do Black people tend to get certain kinds of jobs?” and “Is your job one that Black people tend to get more than Whites?”; p.338). The 1995 Detroit Area Survey contained one question by which respondents answered the following yes or no question about perceived segmentation: “Do you think your job is one that people of your ethnic or racial group tend to get more than people of other groups?”

Findings demonstrated as African Americans perceived more racial segmentation in the workplace their psychological well-being diminished. Results also suggested as African Americans believed their jobs were considered “Black jobs” their levels of life satisfaction and psychological distress decreased. These results were consistent with Jackson and Colleagues’

findings that African Americans with negative racial beliefs also reported diminished quality of life and increased psychological distress. Results also revealed that African Americans with higher socioeconomic status had increased psychological distress from perceived racial segmentation, than did African Americans with lower socioeconomic status. The author posits that higher income African Americans tend to have more contact with social situations that create increased encounters with racism and discrimination. Consequently, their levels of mental health would be impacted more negatively than African Americans with fewer encounters with racist environments.

Research has suggested that increased racial discrimination lowered life satisfaction among African Americans (Broman, 1997). Broman (1997) examined racial discrimination, racial context, having European American friends, and life satisfaction in 312 African Americans. The author defined racial context in three domains: (1) the characteristic of race an individual has in their environment, to include a predominantly European American context; (2) a predominantly mixed-race context; or (3) a predominantly African American context. Data was from a second wave random telephone survey of African Americans, in which 67.3% were women, living in non-institutionalized housing in an urban area of Detroit, Michigan. Questions examined whether participants were prevented from doing something, whether they were hassled, and if they felt inferior because of their race. Participants further answered questions pertaining to discrimination experienced in the past three years. Furthermore, participants answered questions regarding specific instances of discrimination such as getting a job and shopping in a store.

Findings demonstrated that perceived discrimination was related to lower life satisfaction. Yet, African Americans with predominately-European American contexts during

developmental years had higher levels of life satisfaction in adulthood. Broman (1997) posits “it is possible that these people [African Americans] grew up with a feeling of acceptance by Whites,” which might help buffer the strain of race-related stress on life satisfaction (p.46). However, Broman’s (1997) study did not explain whether participants’ predominately-European American contexts included encounters with racism or racial discrimination. In a different study, Forman (2003) illustrated that African Americans with more encounters with racist environments (typically racism by European Americans) their mental health diminished. Consequently, there seems to be some evidence from Broman’s study suggested that exposure to predominately-European American contexts, which either include racism or not, at earlier ages created resilience mechanisms for some African Americans; which served as a buffer to the harmful mental health consequences of racism.

Despite support of race-related stress as a significant factor in the lives of African Americans, some researchers have found that race-related stress does not lead to unfavorable mental health outcomes. Fisher and Shaw (1999) examined racial socialization and self-esteem as buffers for mental health consequences and race-related stress. The sample consisted of 119 adult African American college students, ages 18 to 25 years, in which 56 were men. Recruited from the eastern-central area of the United States, participants completed the SRE (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996) that measured the incident and stressfulness of racist events (i.e., day-to-day, lifetime, and encounters within the past year). The racial socialization scale measured participants’ personal beliefs of African Americans; messages about African Americans received from parents and caregivers; and dealing with messages about the difficulty of racism in society and overcoming the barriers of racism. Meanwhile, the mental health scale measured

participants' well-being and psychological distress (e.g., "How much of the time during the past month did you feel relaxed and free of tension?;" p. 398).

African Americans who reported poorer mental health and increased race-related stress were less prepared by their families for racism. In addition, those African Americans who perceived more racist discrimination but had high levels of self-esteem also experienced fewer mental health problems. Clearly, self-esteem and preparedness of racist encounters by family members (racial socialization) served as buffers to perceived racist discrimination. Fisher and Shaw's (1999) findings demonstrated that preparedness buffered racism, which was consistent with Broman's (1997) study, suggesting that encounters with predominately-European American contexts at earlier developmental age buffered adverse mental health consequences of racism. Consequently, preparedness to either predominately-European American contexts or possible racism situations (e.g., through encounters with racism; or through family racial socialization) alleviates the harmful impact of racism on mental health. Most of the research suggests that race-related stress is detrimental to African Americans mental health. The impact it has on African Americans physical health might also lead to detrimental outcomes.

Physical Health Consequences

Researchers have suggested that race-related stress has negative physical health consequences for African Americans. Jackson and Colleagues (1996) conducted a thirteen year study which examined the impact of racism on physical-health among 623 African Americans. Respondents answered two non-standardized measures of racism from the longitudinal (years 1979 to 1992) National Survey of Black Americans, which examined perceptions of European Americans intentions and encounters with racial discrimination. Physical-health questions measured participants' doctor- reported serious health problems and reported health problems,

which kept participants from completing daily tasks. However, the author did not elaborate what specific serious health problems were reported. African Americans who perceived European Americans as keeping African Americans oppressed reported poor physical health problems. Participants who encountered racial discrimination also experienced diminished physical-health functioning and doctor-reported health problems. Another factor Jackson and Colleagues examined was whether racial discrimination was more harmful to mental or physical health functioning. Findings illustrated that physical health was more adversely affected than mental health in the face of racial discrimination. Although this study did not examine race-related stress exclusively, the maladaptive response to racial discrimination indicated these encounters were instructive to physical health.

In an attempt to uncover specific physical health consequences attributed to racism, Williams and Williams-Morris (2000) conducted a review of the quantitative and qualitative research examine the impact of racism on African Americans' physical health. Findings illustrated, in general, encounters with racism led to increased cardiovascular disease among African Americans. In a systematic review of empirical research, Paradies (2006) demonstrated similar. Paradies (2006) research illustrated among 138 empirically quantitative studies, increased reports of racism led to poorer physical health outcomes among minority groups including African Americans (e.g., increased blood pressure and hypertension; increased heart diseases; decreased infant birth weights; and increased alcohol and substance use to name a few). In another review of empirical studies, Harrell, Sadiki, and Taliaferro (1999) further illustrated that race-related stress contributed to negative physical health outcomes for African Americans such as increased blood pressure (e.g., DBP and systolic blood pressure), increased heart rate, and elevated arterial pressure. These reviews illustrated that racism and racial stressors can have

serious implications for physical health status. Nonetheless, these reviews did not provide evidence as to whether physical health consequences related to experiencing racism, or physical health consequences resulted from inadequate health care due to being African American.

In a study that examined the prevalence and stressfulness of racism, Bowen-Reid and Harrell (2002) recruited 155 African American undergraduate students from a historical African American college in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The study was aimed at examining the impact of race-related stress on heart rate and cardiovascular levels. Seventy-nine percent of the sample was female, in which participants' age ranged from 17 to 44 years. Participants reported encounters with racism (i.e., day-to-day, lifetime, and encounters within the past year) and perceived stressfulness of racism using the SRE (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996). Participants self-reported somatic complaints were measured using The Symptom Checklist 90-Revised (Derogatis, 1994). A blood-pressure monitor and a handgrip task were also implemented to measure blood pressure.

Findings demonstrated that ninety-seven percent of participants experienced race-related stress; congruent with Klonoff and Landrine (1999) earlier findings in which ninety-five percent of the African American sample reported race-related stress. Poorer physical health (i.e., chest pains, headaches, nausea, etc.) was attributed to participants who experienced race-related stress. Participants who perceived racial stress also experienced exaggerated heart and blood pressure levels. Nonetheless if participants did not perceive racial stress, then there is a likelihood of no relationship between racial stress and physical health; in such a way that poor physical health might be attributed to other factors. It appears from Bowen-Reid and Harrell's (2000) study that not only are encounters with racism detrimental to physical health, but accepting unfair treatment or denying racism were also harmful.

In a longitudinal study of African American and European American women, Gyll, Matthews, and Bromberger (2001) suggested that African American women reported more encounters with subtle and blatant forms of racism. The authors were interested in understanding the influence of racism on women's blood pressure. The sample consisted of 262 European American and 101 African American women from a larger study, the ongoing longitudinal Study of Women's Health across the Nation, recruited from the Pittsburgh research site. Participants completed an interpersonal mistreatment scale which measured subtle forms of discrimination (e.g., being ignored or treated with less courtesy and respect than other people) and blatant forms of discrimination (e.g., being threatened, harassed, or insulted) which asked how often in their daily lives they had experienced a variety of forms of mistreatment. This interpersonal measure made no reference to race. Participants also completed a discrimination measure that indicated what they believed to have been the main reason for their mistreatment to include race, ethnicity, gender, age, income level, language, physical appearance, sexual orientation and other. Consequently, the authors categorized participants who either selected race or ethnicity as having experienced racial/ethnic discrimination.

Findings illustrated that African American women who perceived interpersonal mistreatment as a result of racial discrimination experienced increased diastolic blood pressure (DBP) reactivity. These African American women also reported elevated DBP reactivity to stressful stimuli perceived as racist. The authors pinpoint that "African Americans who experience racial discrimination may be at greater risk for cardiovascular disease than those African Americans who do not experience discrimination" (Gyll et al., p. 322).

Peters (2006) took a different approach in her examination of the relationship between racism and blood pressure. In fact, the author found in a sample of 162 African Americans, race-

related stress was not associated with evaluated blood pressure. Peters (2006) had a convenience sample recruited from community sites in two urban settings in the Midwest. Of the total sample, 82% were female with a mean age of 42.65. Participants completed the Racism and Life Experiences Scale (Harrell, 1997) to measure perceptions of racism experienced. Closed-ended responses to the Racial Discrimination Questionnaire (Krieger, 1990) measured daily encounters with discrimination and how participants responded to discriminatory treatment. Participants also completed four separate measures of chronic stress, which was later analyzed to measure its relationship to racism. Blood pressure was measured from reports of somatic symptoms and levels of hypertension. Peters (2006) finding was inconsistent with previous researchers that found encounters with racism were associated with high blood pressure (Guyll, Matthews, & Bromberger, 2001). This might be because Peters (2006) used a standardized measure of race-related stress, where as Guyll and Colleagues asked questions about discrimination that made no reference to race.

Landrine and Klonoff (1996) were interested in the influence of racism on smoking behaviors and alcohol consumption. In a sample of 153 African Americans, in which 83 were women, participants completed the SRE (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996) to measure racist encounters and race-related stress. Smokers reported “more frequent racist events and found those events to be more stressful” (p.156), than did non-smokers. Non-drinking women experienced more racism than did women drinkers. Findings pinpoint that African American women who consumed alcohol may not be aware of racist encounters because their judgment and mental processes were hindered. Landrine and Klonoff (1996) findings was similar to Utsey (1997) study which found in a sample of 177 African American men, participants with histories of substance abuse reported higher instances of race-related stress than did participants with no

substance use. Both Landrine and Klonoff (1996) and Utsey (1997) study appeared to support previous findings that have suggested more cognitive processing was needed to recognize encounters as racially motivated (Utsey, Lanier, Williams, Bolden, & Lee, 2006), thus the use of alcohol consumption hindered cognitive processing of racist encounters. These findings may also indicate that substances are used as a way to cope with race-related stress.

Another aspect of physical health compromised by race-related stress is the physical health of African American pregnant women. A growing body of research demonstrated that race-related stress had adverse effects on birth outcomes among African American women (Giscombe & Lobel, 2005). Giscombe and Lobel (2005) conducted an extensive review of empirical research examining race-related stress in pregnant African American women. The authors examined peer-reviewed publications that focused on the effects of race-related stress on infant mortality, low birth weight, and preterm delivery. Their review indicated that race-related stress accounted for low birth weight and preterm delivery among pregnant African American women. The influence of race-related stress upon pregnant African American women induced prenatal stress. The authors submit “racism can be viewed as a component of prenatal stress to the extent that it involves stressful stimuli, appraisals, or response[s] that occur during the prenatal period” (p.667). Mustillo and Colleagues (2004) posit the insidious impact of racism on low birth weights for African American could be influenced either by access to healthcare or a combination of access to healthcare and race-related stress.

Summary

Much of the research suggested that race-related stress was detrimental to mental and physical health functioning among African Americans. Yet, other researchers support the notion that race-related stress does not affect African Americans mental or physical health. Reports of

the ways in which African American men and women experienced race-related stress were also inconsistent findings. When researchers measure racism, racial discrimination, and race-related stress differently, findings typically reveal discrepant results (Paradies, 2006). Williams and Williams-Morris (2000) argue, “The [various] measure[s] of discrimination...makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the associations of racial bias and health” (p.252). Researchers have suggested that inconsistencies and discrepancies in the research include evaluation of racism’s impact on health functioning (both physical and mental); discrepancies between racism exposure and outcome measures; the conceptualization that race-related stress as separate from racism; and instruments that measure (standardized vs. non-standardized) racism and race-related stress (Harrell, Sadiki, & Taliaferro, 2003; Paradies, 2006; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000).

If the context of race-related stress negatively impacts African American individuals, there might be some indication that these individual experiences influence how individuals interact with their intimate partners. The present study explored the experiences of race-related stress from the viewpoint of ten African American married couples. The present study also sought to uncover how these ten couples marriage could serve as either a buffer to race-related stress or is hindered by race-related stress. According to Boss and Colleagues (1996) research does “not need to ‘smooth out’ discrepancies or inconsistencies but rather look for the meaning within them” (p.91). Rather than incorporate inconsistent definitions and measurements that lead to discrepant findings, the present study sought to uncover ten African American married couples understanding of race-related stress and how they perceived it influencing their marriage. By uncovering participants understanding of their experiences with race-related stress, the present study hopes to increase the knowledge and awareness of mental health professionals of the phenomenon of race-related stress among African American marriages.

Effects of Race-Related Stress among African American Couples

African Americans' experiences with race-related stress could potentially affect how they interact with their significant others. Murry and Colleagues submit "Although a particular encounter with racism may be an individual experience, sharing the experience with family members transforms it into a family issues that elicits support from family members" (p.916). Not only could the family serve as a support system for African Americans experiencing racism, but the impact of racism could also adversely impact the family including their intimate marital relationships (Boyd-Franklin, 2003).

Literature exploring race factors associated with stress support the idea that racism influences relationship dynamics among African American couples (Allen, 1995; Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 1998; Jones, 2000; McAdoo, 1997; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). There is evidence that a spouse's understanding of the needs and feelings of the other spouse, as it relates to race-related stress, is critical for quality and satisfaction among African American marriages (Acitelli, Douvan, & Versoff, 1997; Hatchett, Veroff, & Douvan, 1995). Yet, few research studies have attempted to examine the impact race-related stress has on African American marriages.

In a study aimed at understanding the impact of racial discrimination on marital quality, Murry and Colleagues recruited a sample of 386 African American mothers from the Family and Community Health Study. Participants, mean age of 35 years, were either married or cohabiting and had children between the ages of 10 and 12 years. African American mothers completed the Experiences of Discrimination Scale, developed by the authors, which measured how often they experienced thirteen types of racial discrimination (e.g., "How often has someone yelled a racial slur or racial insult at you?;" p.926). Intimate relationship quality was measured by questions

pertaining to relationship stability (e.g., “within the last 3 months have you suggested the idea of ending the relationship?;” p.930) created by Booth, Johnson, and Edward (1983); and relationship satisfaction created by the authors (e.g., “How satisfied are you with your relationship with your partner?;” p.930). African American mothers who perceived racial discrimination reported dissatisfaction and instability in their marriages. These participants experienced more stress and had higher psychological distress, such as depression and anxiety, than did participants with no racial discrimination encounters.

In a sample of African American men and women who perceived their marriage as stable, Connor (1998) conducted descriptive study to identify factors that affected relationship quality. Conner (1998) interviewed 11 African American couples to uncover challenges faced in African American marriages. Partners were interviewed separately in an attempt to limit interaction and potential bias of couple’s responses. Conner (1998) found that “three of the eleven couples were aware of the resultant stress that problems of racism added to their personal lives; for example, taking the stress out on one another before learning more adaptive ways of dealing with it” (p.169). Despite the small number of participants that reported racism as a problem, findings illustrated that racism continued to impact some African Americans. Conner’s (1998) finding appeared to be consistent with other researchers who have demonstrated not all African Americans experience racism or perceive racism as stressful (Klonoff & Landrine, 1999; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996). Nonetheless, the context of racism continues to be harmful for African American marriages. By developing an understanding of what happens within the marriage, mental health professionals could provide better support and resources for African American married couples that are struggling with race-related stress.

McLoyd and Colleagues submit “another popular explanation of racial disparity in marital happiness is African Americans’ greater exposures to extra familial pressures, such as racial discrimination...(Oggins, Veroff, & Leber, 1993). The past decade bought virtually no empirical tests of these hypothesized links” (p.1078). Nonetheless, recent research provided empirical evidence that racism and race-related stress negatively influenced marital satisfaction among African American married couples (Conner, 1998; Murry et al., 2001). There continues to be some uncertainty to how African American couples make sense of their marital satisfaction in the face of race-related stress.

Summary

Although research has shown that race-related stress is prevalent and detrimental to African American men and women, we still know few details about the experience of race-related stress in African American marital relationships. Much of the research measured self-reported encounters with racism and race-related stress, rather than descriptions of African American married couple’s experiences with race-related stress. When examining the research on race-related stress among African American *individuals* findings have been inconsistent. McGoldrick and Giordana (1996) posit “people find it even more difficult to talk to each other about racism than they do about ethnicity” (p.15). Gathering the rich descriptions of how ten African American married couples come to experience and understand race-related stress and its influence on their marital satisfaction provided a broader picture of their experience. Accordingly, this study aimed to add a descriptive piece to the research by describing the experience of race-related stress among ten African American married couples. Likewise, descriptions of these African American married couples experiences with satisfaction in their marriage also add to the research. These rich descriptions provided theoretical awareness and

practical knowledge for mental health professionals to design and provide effective treatment strategies that are culturally sensitive.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Synopsis of Study Design

Although research has proposed that race-related stress influences African Americans' way of life, no study has focused on how African Americans come to understand their experiences with race-related stress and its influence on marital satisfaction. The research conducted on African Americans with race-related stress has illustrated inconsistent findings. The present study was designed to obtain the essence of the experiences from participants' verbal descriptions. I used a qualitative research method "in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the bases for reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p.13). This approach provided clarity for the influence of race-related stress upon marital satisfaction among African American couples, in which past research has been both discrepant and scarce. Therefore, a qualitative method provided rich descriptions of participants' experiences and helped to understand how race-related stress influenced marital satisfaction among ten African American married couples.

After completion of the screening process, couples recruited in this study participated in a semi-structured interview. The open nature of the interview encouraged conversations between the interviewer and participants which enabled participants to discuss various aspects of their experiences; how they made sense of their experiences; and guided the research toward the most relevant perspective of the participants. Modified analytic induction (Gilgun, 1995) was used to analyze the data from preselected hypotheses.

Participants and Recruitment

Fliers and a snowball method were used to recruit participants. The fliers (Appendix I) solicited African American heterosexual couples; married for at least one year; age 18 years and

older; lived together at least for a year, and had encounters with racism. Fliers also recruited participants interested in talking about their experiences with racist encounters. Local churches and local universities were contacted through the use of an information letter (Appendix II) and were asked to distribute flier advertisements (Appendix I) to potential participants. In addition, personal acquaintances of the researcher were asked to recommend couples for participation in the study. These acquaintances were also provided with the information letter and fliers through either email or hand-delivery. The respondents then contacted the researcher via email or voicemail. The researcher replied back to respondents via telephone. During the conversation, interested respondents' questions were answered and the eligibility screening was conducted.

The eligibility screening was conducted to ensure that interested respondents were married, met the age, length of marriage, cohabitation, racial identification requirements, and had encounters with racism (Appendix III). If respondents met all the eligibility requirements the researcher arranged a time and date for the interview and e-mailed the informed consent. The present study interviewed ten couples. Both partners had to agree to participate in the present study. Demographic information was reported for each couple interviewed (Appendix V). The sample size for the present study was appropriate given the qualitative method employed.

The researcher e-mailed the informed consent (Appendix IV) to participants after eligibility screening. During the scheduled interview, participants received the same informed consent to ensure that they understood the contents of the study. Participants re-read and signed the informed consent before completing the brief packet of written questionnaires and the interview. This packet included a demographic questionnaire and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spainer, 1976) (Appendix V, VI). The demographic questionnaire developed by the researcher asked participants about their age, gender, type of living community (rural, urban, and

suburban), length of marriage, previous marriage(s), number of children, occupation, gross income, and educational level (Appendix V). The informed consent included an explanation of the qualitative research and the efforts to maintain anonymity in the reporting of findings (Appendix IV).

Participants completed the DAS scale to assess their level of satisfaction in the marriage (Appendix VI). The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spainer, 1976) was used to provide additional data on the ten couples' marital satisfaction (Appendix VI). Participants completed the DAS at the time of the scheduled interview. Participants did not complete a formal assessment of race-related stress. Rather, participants self-defined their racial encounters as stressful, which produced a sample of African American couples who either had or were experiencing race-related stress, at various degrees (e.g., everyday experiences of race-related stress vs. occasionally experiences with it; and encounters with blatant racism vs. ambiguous racist encounters). The sample also consisted of an African American married couple who did not perceive racist encounters as stressful.

Interviews consisted of warm-up questions, followed by a series of questions investigating each partner's individual experience and the couple's collective experience of the influence of race-related stress upon marital satisfaction (Appendix VII). Interviews lasted from one hour to half past the hour. Reflective-listening and circular questions elicited information that was more detailed in order to gain a better understanding of the couples' experiences. An example of circular questions was "Tell me a little bit more about that?" or "What was that like for you?"

Each interview was transcribed soon after the interview took place. To address the issues of trustworthiness, after the transcription was completed I emailed the participants the

transcribed interview to ensure accuracy of what was said during the interview. Providing the participants with the transcribed interview also allowed them to provide any feedback or modifications of information that might reveal their anonymity. Participants were requested to provide feedback within a week of receiving the transcript. If participants did not respond to this request, it was assumed that the transcript was accurate and maintained confidentiality.

Instrument

The DAS (Spanier, 1976) is a 32-item scale developed by Spanier (1976) designed to measure the overall marital adjustment couples have within their relationship or marriage (Appendix VI). The DAS contains four sub-scales to include affectional expression, cohesion, consensus, and satisfaction (Spanier, 1976). This measure was selected because of its internal reliability (coefficient alpha = .96). The validity of the DAS discriminates married from divorced couples and its high correlation with other measures of marital adjustment (Spanier & Filsinger, 1983). The score range for the DAS is 0-151 and a score below of 101 indicates relational distress. Original mean scale scores for Spanier's (1976) divorced samples were 70.7 and 114.8 for happily married samples. Only the overall satisfaction score was used in the present study.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews created by the researcher were conducted with the couple together to capture a vivid description of the participants experience (Appendix VII). During each interview, I frequently checked my interpretation of the participants' words and meanings with them. This ensured that I had a clear understanding of the participants' experiences and meanings. Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed soon after the interview took place. To address the issues of trustworthiness, after the transcription was completed I emailed the

participants the transcribed interview to ensure accuracy of what was said during the interview. Providing the participants with the transcribed interview also allowed them to provide any feedback or modifications of information that might reveal their anonymity. Participants were requested to provide feedback within a week of receiving the transcript. If participants did not respond to this request, it was assumed that the transcript was accurate and maintained confidentiality.

Data collection also came from the demographic questionnaire (Appendix V) and the DAS (Appendix VI). Data from the demographic questionnaire provided insight into the demographic description of the participants. The DAS was cross checked with participant's verbal descriptions of marital satisfaction. Thus, I combined data collected from the participants (interview, demographic questionnaire, DAS measure) and my reaction to participant's experience. In an effort to maintain anonymity, the demographic sheet and the DAS with labeled with an identification number (ID). The participant couple unit and the gender of the participant were given an ID. The ID consisted of the couple code and the gender code. The couple code was assigned numbers in the hundreds. Therefore, couple one was coded 100, and couple five was coded 500. In addition, male partners were labeled with odd numbers and female partners had even numbers. Thus, the male and female partner of couple one was labeled as 101 and 102. Participants also received a pseudonym to further conceal their identity.

A common method of data collection in qualitative research is the use of self-reflection journals (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1989). Throughout data collection and data analysis, I maintained a journal of self-reflection. Such a journal allowed my subjective experience to become another source of data. This journal was an important way to record, keep track, identify presuppositions and biases, and capture an insider perspective on the evolution of

the research. This journal also was important since I am a member of the African American community being researched. This self-reflexivity procedure allowed space for me as the researcher to process my own reactions, beliefs, and thoughts about the study separate from the participants' experiences (Few et al., 2003).

Data Analysis

The method used to analyze the words and meanings of couples was modified analytic induction (Gilgun, 1995; Manning, 1991). Modified analytic induction has the goal of developing hypotheses prior to data analysis “to generate conceptual formations” of the emerging data (Rettig, Tam, & Magistad, 1996, p.208). Therefore, modified analytic induction is the process of “developing descriptive hypotheses that identify patterns of behaviors, interactions, and perceptions” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; as cited in Gilgun, 1995, p. 269). Consequently, by using this method, I was able to examine and redefine my original hypotheses and provide answers to the research questions. Modified analytic induction was an appropriate choice in discovering the experience of race-related stress on marital satisfaction among ten African American married couples because of the lack of research examining this process. I was able to examine my own theoretical hunches and assumptions, as well as my interpretation of the literature and research by developing hypotheses (Gilgun, 1995). Similar to grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), data emerged over the course of the analysis, but with modified analytic induction hypotheses were created before the data collection and analysis procedures. Researchers argue that “[modified] analytic induction is unlike other qualitative approaches since it begins with a pre-existing theoretical viewpoint or premise that guides the investigator’s approach to the cases that are examined (Gilgun, 1995; Miller, 1982)” (as cited in Rettig, Tam, & Magistad, 1996, p.208).

The present study examined the hypotheses derived from three theoretical lenses which included phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and family systems theory. These theories examined the lived experience of race-related stress and its influence upon satisfaction in African American marriages. The aim of using these theories was to sensitive the researcher to concrete indicators and processes (Gilgun, 1995), related to meanings and experiences of race-related stress and marital satisfaction. The use of modified analytic indication in the present study assumed that “through processes of emergence, they [researchers] will discover concepts and hypotheses not accounted for in their original hypothesis” (Gilgun, 1995, p.269).

Coding

After I transcribed each interview, I coded the transcripts using a constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This coding procedure facilitated the use of modified analytic induction because of the constant interaction between original hypotheses and data analysis. By using this process, I was able to sort and resort, and code and recode the data for emerging meanings and descriptions. Notation was provided to variations within each theme, and emerging findings were challenged with other findings (Gilgun, 1995). Lastly, I analyzed the data and searched for interrelationships between categories until one salient category was found to be an overarching category of the other themes. Therefore I was constantly referring back to the data to understand the meanings and experiences within them. The process of constant-comparative method included open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Rafuls & Moon, 1996). I used a software package called Atlas.ti to organize the coding process.

I began the coding process by reading through each couple transcript individually and examining participant’s words and meanings of their experience. I then re-read each couple transcript identifying themes and categories related to the research question and hypotheses.

Interviews were coded using open-coding initially, which is “a process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (Rafuls & Moon, 1996, p.71). After open-coding, I began axial coding to re-examine the identified categories and sub-categories to determine how they were linked. After determining how these categories were linked, I began selective coding. Through selective coding, I was able to integrate the findings into categories and explain the dimensions and associated relationships of the data (Rafuls & Moon, 1996). Therefore, I read each sentence and paragraph of each transcript to determine categories and subcategories that captured the experience of race-related stress and marital satisfaction. Themes, codes, and dimensions were also created under each pre-selected hypotheses, which were later redefined through the process of data emergence (Gilgun, 1995).

After I coded my first interview, I met with the committee advisor who independently examined and coded this transcript. We discussed our coding schemes and compared our codes. We identified similar themes and came to agreements about different codes. The committee advisor also reviewed the remaining transcripts and categories throughout the data analysis procedures to check for accuracy and contributed to the process of triangulation.

The present study explored the two hypotheses derived from the research questions, my review of the literature, and my own theoretical hunches: that African American husbands and wives with race-related stress will have different experiences with this phenomenon; African Americans with race-related stress will feel less satisfied in their marriage than those African Americans without race-related stress. For this reason, coding of the data examined words and meanings that described ways in which race-related stress and marital satisfaction were defined, how husbands and wives defined their experience of race-related stress differently, and how couples without race-related stress defined their experience of marital satisfaction as different

from couples with race-related stress. I also compared couples' DAS scores with their verbal descriptions to determine consistency between the two. When emerging findings were not captured in my original hypotheses, the hypotheses were re-examined and modified.

Self of the researcher

As an African American woman, I came into this study with a bias because of my knowledge and observation of other people with race-related stress and my own experiences with it. Despite not being married, I have a personal interest in the topic of racism and race-related stress and how they impact African American marriages. In an effort to avoid personal biases and maintain trustworthiness, during the first interview I cross-coded the data with my thesis advisor, who did not self-identify as African American. I also tried to recognize when my biases were obstructing my view of the data by checking with my thesis advisor, communicating one of my committee members (who is also African American), writing in my self-reflection journal, and discussing my thoughts with friends and colleagues. After each interview, I used the journal to record ideas that were related to the research study. I recorded emerging ideas, themes, and patterns from interview and from the ongoing data analysis (Arhar, Holly, & Kasten, 2001). Such things like questions, memos of preliminary data analysis and anything of possible interest was included in the journal. The journal also provided the opportunity for me to document my own process through the data collection and data analysis (Patton, 2001). Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to explore the experience of race-related stress and marital satisfaction among ten African American married couples. I hypothesized that African Americans who experience race-related stress will feel less satisfied in their marriage than those African Americans who do not experience race-related stress; and that African American husbands and wives who experience race-related stress will have different experiences with this phenomenon.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

A Lens into Participant Couples

The sample consisted of ten African American couples who were from the Washington, DC metropolitan area. The average age was 45 for the men and 43 for the women. At the time of the interview couples had been married between 2 and 26 years with the average length of marriage was 16.5 years. The medium length of marriage was 20 years. The average number of children for these couples was two. One couple was with child and another couple had no children. Two husbands had retired from the military. One husband was enlisted in the military prior to marriage. Individual occupations ranged from sales consultant to professor. One husband had retired from his career of almost thirty years. All participants were dual-career couples. Every individual had at least a high school diploma and several had earned a college degree. One individual was working towards a doctorate degree at the time of the interview, and two had already earned a doctorate degree.

Of the ten couples, only one couple stated they experienced no race-related stress. In an effort to examine my second hypothesis and address the research questions, the couple without race-related stress was included in my data analysis. To provide clarity to the research, participants who reported race-related stress whose partners did not were coded as couples who had experienced race-related stress. Couples with race-related stress scored an average of 91 on the DAS, where as the couple without race-related stress scored 100; both scores were below the relational distress cut-off score of 101. This indicates that both groups of couples had low levels of marital satisfaction. Because of the small sample size, no significance test was computed to determine if scores for the couple without race-related stress was significantly different than

couples with race-related stress. Table 1 provides a more detailed description of couple's demographic information.

This chapter explores the words and descriptions of the couples' race-related stress and how they see it influencing their marriage. Names and other identifying factors have been changed in an effort to protect the anonymity of participants.

Table 1

Couple ID	Age	Education	Living Community	Years of Marriage	Prior Marriages	Number of Children	Couple DAS Score ^a	Race-related Stress
John	46	Bachelors Degree	Suburban	19	No	1	102.5	yes
Erica	44	Doctorate of Philosophy						
Eric	52	Masters Degree	Suburban	21	No	2	100	no
Susan	48	Bachelors Degree						
Tony	59	Junior College	Suburban	21	Yes	2	97	yes
Kim	57	Masters Degree			Yes			
Sean	49	Bachelors Degree	Suburban	21	No	1	102	yes
Jessica	49	Bachelors Degree						
Mark	51	Law Degree	Urban	22	No	2	89	yes
Rene	48	Masters Degree						
David	30	Trade School	Suburban	5	No	2	94	yes
Patricia	30	Bachelors Degree						
Sam	35	Bachelors Degree	Suburban	2	No	0	102.5	yes
Emma	35	Bachelors						

		Degree						
Lee	48	Some college	Rural /Suburban	26	No	3	105	yes
Keisha	46	Doctorate of Philosophy						
Joshua	39	High School Diploma	Suburban	19	No	2 and with child	128	yes
Florence	37	Bachelors Degree						
Vernon	40	Masters Degree/ Doctorate Student	Suburban	9	No	2	100	yes
Angie	36	Masters Degree						

a - composite score based on the average of each spouses' score. Scores below the cut-off score of 101 indicates relational distress.

Construct of Meanings

By using the theories of phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and family systems theory, I was able to uncover how these ten African American couples experienced, created meaning, and interacted around the concepts of race-related stress and marital satisfaction. In hopes of honoring couples experience, they defined their meanings of race-related stress and marital satisfaction.

During the interviews I first asked each couple how they perceived their marital satisfaction in turns of ups and downs, requesting that they expand on how factors in their lives that attributed to both. I then asked participants to described instances in which they experienced racism and asked whether they felt a sense of stress by these encounters. Examining the feelings, thoughts, beliefs, meanings, and interactions among these ten couples, I discovered in-depth how couples experience marital satisfaction and race-related stress.

Meanings of Race-related Stress

All of the couples discussed several instances of how they experienced racism by being treated unfairly as African Americans; nine couples perceived that these experiences with racism created their race-related stress. Some of the couples (n=7) reported experiencing a combination of racist encounters. Two couples discussed their perception of not being allowed to purchase homes in predominately European American neighborhoods because they were African American. Three couples who lived in predominately European American neighborhoods stated that their neighbors would ignore them or ask them questions about how they were able to afford to live in their community. Five couples also stated that while at stores or standing in lines they perceived being mistreated or ignored because they are African American, whereas their European American counterparts were acknowledged and treated with courtesy and politeness. Six couples also felt frustrated and annoyed by having to observe other African Americans (e.g., friends or those in the media) encounter and deal with racism. It appeared that couples processed how they defined their racist situations by either the situation (e.g., because I am African American) or as targets of that situation (e.g., because that person is racist against African Americans).

Nine couples discussed feeling stress by their encounters with racism. All of the couples with race-related stress had a combination of meanings for their experience of race-related stress. Seven couples with race-related stress explained that not being in control to prevent racism from happening to them created their experience of stress. They explained that other stressors in their life arise and dissipate, but the experience of racism is constant and lurking. Two other couples explained that because they are African American, they perceived they had to prove themselves in the workplace more often than their European American counterparts. According to them,

their stress resulted from having to prove themselves as African Americans. Three couples described that racism was an added burden, which created stress by having to deal with it.

When asked to describe what it is like to experience race-related stress, nine of couples with race-related stress described feeling frustrated, angered, and annoyed. For example, Jessica said: “For me, uh, I was sadden, hurt, sometimes you get tired in your spirit.” Two husbands and one wife stated their heart rate increased when they experienced racist encounters that were stressful. Four of the couples explained that their race-related stress stemmed from having to watch other African Americans in the media they perceived were encountering racism and were in disbelief of how unfairly African Americans were being treated because of their race.

In contrary, one couple explained not experiencing race-related stress during encounters with racism. When I asked how they knew they didn’t experience race-related stress, they stated that if they were stressed, they would have stress emotions like getting upset and having an increased heart rate. They said that because they did not have these emotions, they did not feel stressed. This couple seemed to create meaning that race-related stress didn’t fit for them because they didn’t have any stressful reactions to their encounters with racism. I further describe the process of which this couple created meaning of their experience later in this chapter.

Meanings of Marital Satisfaction, in General

During the interviews couples did not describe their relationship in terms of “satisfaction” such as stating they were either satisfied or dissatisfied in their marriage. Rather, all of the couples discussed relational processes that contribute to marital satisfaction and described employing a combination of these in their marriage. All of the couples described feeling connected, understood, respected, loved and cared for. They also perceived that spending time

together was important to having satisfaction in their marriage. Six of these couples felt that because they had been married for several years and had overcome difficult times together, they had more stability in their marriage. All of the couples described communication, laughing, and joking with each other as important. Six couples perceived feeling most connected with each other when they attended church, read scriptures, and prayed together.

Three couples stated that nothing in their lives could create challenges in their marriage. These couples consisted of the couple without race-related stress and two couples with race-related stress. These two couples felt that because they had more than twenty years of marriage, the difficult challenges in their marriage were already over (e.g., child rearing). They also said that they might have individual challenges but do not allow those individual problems to impact their marital satisfaction. Meanwhile, the remaining seven couples with race-related stress perceived at times life pressures created challenges in their marriage. For two couples, these life pressures included disagreements and lack of communication. Two other couples reported that disagreements about child rearing created challenges in their marriage, and four couples reported that not having time to spend alone due to parenting created disconnection. The remaining couples with race-related stress (n=4) perceived that the challenges in their marriage were a result of conflicting schedules which prevented them from spending time together. One couple stated that their marital challenges arose from financial problems. Another couple stated that marital challenges occurred when family and friends created problems in their marriage. These seven couples also said that when life pressures are going well they felt more connected, and when life pressures are chaotic they felt disconnected from each other. I further discuss in the next section how couples perceived their race-related stress influencing their marital satisfaction.

Modified Analytic Induction

Hypotheses developed through the use of modified analytic induction aid with understanding how race-related stress influenced marital satisfaction among ten African American couples. As the first original hypotheses suggested, race-related stress differences among the African American husbands and wives of this study were revealed from the qualitative interviews. Most of the couples in the present study agreed that gender difference influenced how they experienced race-related stress. An unanticipated finding was that differences of geographic location in upbringing between spouses also influenced how African American husbands and wives experienced race-related stress. I did not assume that differences in family of origin demographics would influence how race-related stress was experienced for husband and wives. Rather, I made a broad assumption that there would be general differences between husband and wives.

A tenet of modified analytic induction is revisiting the original hypotheses over the course of data analysis in order to modify new hypotheses to best fit the emerging interpretations of the data (Gilgun, 1995). My first and second original hypotheses are more general, based upon previous research, literature, and theoretical hunches. Modified analytic indication encouraged me to re-examine both hypotheses as findings from the data emerged. Thus I modified my hypotheses in order to fully capture the influence race-related stress had on marital satisfaction. Therefore I find it helpful to modify the first hypothesis as follows: a) Gender stereotypes for African American husbands are more prevalent and intense than for African American wives; b) African American wives experience gender stereotypes that are unique from their African American husbands'; and c) Demographic differences in family of origin create different meanings for African American husband and wives with race-related stress.

Hypothesis One: Individual Differences within the Marriage

Some husbands and wives discussed how their experience of race-related stress was based upon stereotypes attributed to their gender or differences of demographic family of origin. In other words, how some husbands and wives perceived their race-related stress, either attributing it as stemming from gender stereotypes or demographic family of origin issues, influenced how they perceived its influence on their marital satisfaction. Using their words and examples, I present the descriptions of individual factors experiences of race-related stress that led to the modification of my original hypothesis.

Gender Stereotypes for African American Husbands

Nine of the African American husbands perceived that their race-related stress stemmed from other peoples' negative perceptions of them. They attributed these negative perceptions as African American male stereotypes created outside the marriage. In addition, all of the husbands with race-related stress stated that negative male stereotypes influenced how they experienced race-related stress differently from their spouse. A common theme was that African American men perceived more race-related stress than African American woman. Some of their stories are presented.

Mark agreed with his wife Rene when she stated that his race-related stress was more prevalent than her own. Vernon stated his European American counterparts were more intimidated by him and saw him as aggressive because he was a large African American man than of his wife. Vernon also found it important to wear dress-suits when traveling to be more accepted by his European American counterparts. David echoed that his European American counterparts saw him as aggressive and avoided deliberate behaviors that would upset him. Sam

explained that people from other racial and ethnic groups are surprised that he is a pleasant guy.

He stated:

If you understand the stereotypes of a Black man versus a Black woman. Black women being promiscuous and Black men being rowdy and want to steal or rob...when I walk somewhere and a White person [is] walking somewhere. [A]nd they don't see me yet [but] I am going to the elevators. So if they react, I already see it before they do it. I see the wheels turning in their head. I am waiting for them to turn. I say 'Dang, oh well.' Then I try to flip it on them, so I say something very intelligent. Sometimes it is very strange people are scared out of their minds. I am a pretty big guy; I am 6'5], you know 2[60]. But it is just, I will say something nice to them, they are like 'Thank you, oh my, thank you.' Like they just don't believe that is normal.

Two of these husbands explained that addressing stereotypes created an added stress.

Lee stated that he made it a priority to dress professionally for work everyday not only because he likes to present himself in a professional manner, but because he thought if he didn't his European American counterparts would associate him with African American male stereotypes. Similarly, John explained his race-related stress stemmed from his belief that his European American counterparts assumed he was a drug dealer. John recalled:

I think as a Black male, you know, it is sometimes unnerving. For example, when we first moved [here] my job, I actually got company cars every nine months [out of] a year. And I had a company car that had [a southern state] tags on it. And I was very uncomfortable riding around in [a state] with [a southern state] tags in a nice car because I felt that the police might think I am drug dealer or I am this, that, or the other. So I was intent in getting that car changed. Because even with the [state] tags, and even when I go

into [another state] with a [southern state] tag, I find that umm, White people, uhh you know, some of them look at me like okay and they move out [the way] when they are driving. When I let someone in, they are like ‘Oh gosh, he is really nice, thank you.’

Although not accounted for in my original hypothesis, husbands with race-related stress perceived that people from other races, particularly European Americans, conjured negative gender stereotypes about them; which they also perceived caused their race-related stress. From their stories, it did not appear that husbands’ internalized these stereotypes as something inheritably wrong with being an African American man. It also did not appear that husbands’ perceived that their wives believed that they fit these gender stereotypes that were created outside the marriage. Rather, the explanations provided by African American husbands suggested that they perceived their race-related stress was different from their wives’ because of African American male stereotypes that were created outside the marriage. Moreover, they also perceived that these African American male stereotypes attributed to experiencing race-related stress more often than their wives’ experiences of race-related stress. Husbands with race-related stress also explained that African American male stereotypes did not accurately depict their positive behaviors and well-mannered qualities. They also found that other racial and ethnic groups were surprised they didn’t comply with African American male stereotypes. Even so, husbands with race-related stress found it important to use their intelligence, show kindness, and challenge encounters with racism in an effort to alter negative stereotypes against them.

Gender Stereotypes for African American Wives

Five of the wives with race-related stress perceived that African American female stereotypes from outside the marriage created a different experience with race-related stress from their husbands’. Some of their stories are presented in this section. For instance, Emma

explained that some racial and ethnic groups fear African American women, but do not seem to be as startled by her physical appearance as they are by African American men. Emma also explained that European American men obtained positions in her workplace that she was more qualified to hold. Patricia expressed that as an African American woman she thought people would take advantage of her more often than they did her husband. Angie discussed that she was able to prosper much quicker in her career than her husband could because she thought her European American co-workers didn't see her as a threat. She recounted:

I haven't had as many, at least I don't see it [as] blatant as [the] many issues which my husband has had to deal with...I think I am really blessed to move up in my career.

Which I know, attributes to, you know, me being a Black female. And being at the point where White males don't see me as threat. So although I know I am very competent in my field, but you know, compared to African American males I feel it is a little bit harder for them.

Although African American wives perceived that their race-related stress was less pervasive than their husbands', they emphasized that African American female stereotypes that were created outside the marriage facilitated their race-related stress. It did not appear that these wives perceived that their husbands believed that they fit these African American female stereotypes. Furthermore, it did not appear that wives internalized these gender stereotypes for being African American women. Rather, they perceived that their race-related stress was attributed to African American female stereotypes created outside the marriage, and because of this they perceived their experience with race-related stress was different from their husbands'. Wives also discussed that the combination of racism and sexism influenced their race-related

stress, in which they perceived created a different experience of race-related stress from their husbands’.

Family of Origin Demographics

One couple, John and Erica, expressed that being raised in different geographic locations facilitate differences in their current perception of race-related stress. They discussed:

Erica: And I also had a very different upbringing. [John] grew up in the south and I grew up in the North.

John: Right.

Erica: And [John] grew up [in the] segregated south and grew up in a Black community. [For me] we were always the only or one of the very few Blacks. So the incidents start[ed] early and they continued. Not to say that [John] didn’t have any incidents in his childhood, but I think he was better insulated in his community of which he lived.

John: Oh no doubt, no doubt.

Erica explained that growing up in a Northern state within predominately European American neighborhoods facilitated earlier encounters with race-related stress that continued throughout her life. Her husband John being raised in segregation while in a Southern state enabled him to make connections within his African American neighborhood, which helped to insulate him from encounters that created race-related stress. John’s agreed with Erica that his African American neighborhood provided him with an added buffer growing up that his wife may have not received from her neighborhood. Consequently, these different neighborhood contexts earlier on in their lives influenced how each spouse perceived race-related stress.

In summary, couples with race-related stress created a meaning that their different experiences with race-related stress stemmed from gender stereotypes associated with being

either an African American man or woman. Additionally, one couple created a meaning that their perception of their different experiences of race-related stress stemmed from the environment in which they were raised.

Hypothesis Two: Race-Related Stress Influences on Marital Satisfaction

My second original hypothesis was that African Americans who experience race-related stress will feel less satisfied in their marriage than those African Americans without race-related stress. The DAS provides evidence that African American couples with race-related stress were less satisfied in their marriage than the couple without race-related stress. Because the couple without race-related stress didn't see the phenomenon as a reality for them, they also didn't see how race-related stress influenced their marital satisfaction. During the interview, couples with race-related stress did not say whether they were satisfied or not in their marriage. Rather, they described their marital interactions related to factors of marital satisfaction which were strengthened and challenged. However, I did not hypothesize that African American couples with race-related stress would feel some sense of satisfaction in their marriage. I assumed they would report more challenges than successes in their marriage related to race-related stress. Assuming that these couples would have more challenges, I also did not hypothesize that couples with race-related stress would find ways of dealing with race-related stress as a couple in an effort to protect their marriage from its challenges. Therefore I found my original second hypothesis inadequate.

I modified my second hypothesis as follows: a) The African American couple without race-related stress intentionally decide that race-related stress isn't a reality for them, thus it does not influence their marital satisfaction; b) African American couples with race-related share a meaning that race-related stress strengthens or challenges their marital satisfaction; and c)

Concepts of communication and spirituality are ways in which African American couples protect their marriage from race-related stress.

The couple without race-related stress described how it wasn't a reality for them. On the other hand, couples with race-related stress described how they perceived it both strengthening and challenging their marital satisfaction and discussed how they used communication and spirituality to protect their marriage from race-related stress. Using their words and examples, I present the descriptions that describe individual factors of perception regarding race-related stress that led to the modification of my original hypothesis.

Race-Related Stress Isn't a Reality

Only one couple did not experience race-related stress and perceived it as having no influence on their marital satisfaction. Eric and Susan put it this way:

Eric: What is important is what is happening now. And racism isn't really happening now for us. So that is not important for discussion... I have too many other important things to think about.

Susan: If something comes and I think we are both very assertive people and we not going to sit down and cry and moan, groan, or whine about something happening. If we notice it, we might say 'hey something happened today,' put it out there, and move on. So we don't even have the discussion I don't even remember people.

Although experiencing racism at some point in their lives, Eric and Susan reported never experiencing race-related stress. They emphasized their personal encounters with racism are rare. However, when Eric and Susan do have personal encounters with racism, they become quiet in an effort to evaluate the racist situation to determine whether it was actually racism. They explained that this processing is done on an individual level, rather than as a process

between them. They believe this processing did not influence how they interacted with each other. Instead of experiencing race-related stress, Eric and Susan reported feelings of anger. They neither discussed their feelings of anger with each other nor projected these feelings onto their spouse. The couple described that their anger was a form of “reserved anger.” The couple wanted me to learn that their anger wasn’t expressed through aggression or hate, but rather continuing to observe racism in today’s society. Erica and Susan clarified their feelings of anger this way:

The way I handle my anger is not screaming, that is not my style. It is funny because even being a child and going through that I am amazed when I do think about it. I didn’t pick up any anger. I actually, as a child, I felt kind of sorry people who didn’t understand that I was an okay person. That they, I felt their hatred or their fear, although I didn’t understand what it was, but I was kind of sad that I thought they were ignorant. That they feel like that. And when I experienced it at college I was amazed actually, because I realized that this person did not intend to hurt me. Because some people would become hurt or sad because of the reaction and become offended and let that become [inaudible]. But I can see the looks on people face, like where did that come from. And I know that just the way we are as people, we are imperfect and he didn’t realize that he had that in there.

It appears that both partners in this couple made individual decisions not to allow racism to cause them individual stress which also protected their marital satisfaction from its influence. Susan also discussed how her earlier life experiences prepared her to deal with racism, the effect of which was to insulate her marriage. Susan explained:

[It] has to do with the way I was introduced to the idea that even as a small child that I would obtain the factual information that there are people that look at you a certain way. But my parents helped me to understand that that was irrelevant to who I was, that was someone else's opinion, that was someone else's problem or issue. I did not internalize it even as a small child that was my issue. There are maybe times I might have experienced racism without knowing it because I was taught that if you work to the top of your ability to seek excellence you could do what you want. So despite whatever races may or may not have been in my path I am not aware that racism is going to stop me from doing what I want to do in my life. And so when people have reactions, they might get annoyed or I think it is stupid or whatever. But because I never let someone else control my destiny um someone else racial prejudice, it is there problem.

For Susan, her parents played an important role by helping her reframe her experience of racism as something wrong with "them" as opposed to her. This helped Susan to develop a way to deal with racism which also insulated her from race-related stress.

Race-Related Stress Strengthens Marital Satisfaction

All of the couples with race-related stress described ways in which race-related stress influenced their marital satisfaction. Some of their stories are presented in this section. For instance, couples with race-related stress described marital satisfaction as "spending quality time," "understanding and supporting each other," "appreciation," "communication," and "commitment." All of the couples with race-related stress explained that sharing their race-related stress with their spouses increased their connection and appreciation for each other, as well as their dedication to the marriage. Vernon mentioned that he shared all of his race-related stress encounters with Angie. He stated:

You communicate with your partner with situations and the partner empathizes with you, then that helps you appreciate that you have that person there that you can talk to and confide in.

Tony and Kim found it easier to manage race-related stress by having each other for support. Tony and Kim explained:

Tony: It doesn't [impact the marriage]. I mean especially because we talk about it. But once it is discussed it has no bearing on how we are to each other. So it is like to me, once it is over, once it is discussed and we found out what is going on [and] what has happened, that is that. It has nothing to do with us. That's me, she might have something different. We share. And it will show by her mannerism. [By] what you doing [and] what you [are] saying. I can look [and see] how you [are] walking. It will show. Even me, it will show.

Kim: I think the marriage and our relationship probably makes it easier to live in that kind of environment because you have someone to share it with, and kind of vent and be stressed and move on. We serve as an outlet for each other.

Sean explained that supporting Jessica while she struggled with race-related stress confirmed they were not only supposed to be married, but also confirmed their commitment to each other. Sean and Jessica explained:

Sean: I think for us, we have been open over the years. So something like racism and discrimination is really open with [us]. There is nothing not to disclose. And I think also with us, one of the things we do is checks and balances. We make sure we don't live through perception...

Jessica: Yeah.

Sean: ...when you go through something like this and then when you come home, I talked earlier about growing in marriages and I think you have like hurdles. And I think every time you jump up, especially a difficult hurdle, I just think that cements you even more. Then you think 'Hmm' we are really supposed to be together you know. We absorb for one another during those difficult times. So during those difficult times is where you really see how strong your marriage is. Because the easy way out is to say 'Just forget that.' You know, you don't want to go through all that and [say things like] 'I am not spending my money on this and I am not spending my money on that.' But I think if you really want to see if this is your mate, and I think it cements you. I think it is just like I see in some of the football teams and all. They go out and win a champion ship. Pretty much that secures that coaches job for another four or five years. So when you get over a hurdle like that it is like you can manage quiet well; I know we are going to be together for another ten years. I think it gives you, when I talk about the self assessment, you look back and you say well 'We have been doing pretty good.'

Three of the couples also said that having their spouse help them manage their reactions to race-related stress strengthened their marital satisfaction. David expressed his appreciation for Patricia when she calmed him down after experiencing race-related stress from watching the news capturing Hurricane Katrina evacuees. Patricia explained that it was important for her not be become stressed while also watching the news with David in order to calm him. In this particular instance, Patricia ignored her own reactions in an effort to assist David with managing his. Florence echoed the importance of Joshua calming her during her episodes of race-related stress. Joshua also saw the importance of providing support for Florence in such situations. They elaborated:

Florence: I don't know sometimes I am in tears. It depends. I do, I call him. I'll be in tears I had to [be]cause it was just overwhelming. I couldn't keep all of that inside. If I had internalized all of that I would be miserable. He would calm me down [and] sometimes he would just, you know, [say] 'Stay home with me today.' And [we] would do little things [like] go get pedicures, anything to take my mind off of what I am going through. You know, but try to talk me through it the reasons that, you know, I don't need to be fighting [at work]. [Joshua would say], you know, 'You need your job they not worth it. And, you know I have [Joshua] and I can't let what's going on in there affect what is going in my household. I can't let it get to that point where we, you know, it is chaos in here. So when I get in here, like I said, I tried to leave as much as could out of here. And I would call him and blow his phone up at work.

Joshua: I just try to calm her down...I think you got to tell your spouse about it, you know. I think, you know, going back to what I said before, if you keep all this stuff inside and not letting it out, it will cause more problems in your relationship. Because, like I said, no one can read nobody's mind and if something is affecting you [then] I don't know nothing about it. And you constantly being pissed off about it, then, it is rubbing off on me or the kids or visa versa. The best thing to do is to talk about it and not be afraid to talk about it. Or be afraid to know what the reaction is going to be. We are in it together. Don't be scared, tell me what is going on, I have to know. You know people die off this stuff. And people take this stuff for granted.

Though not accounted for in my original second hypothesis, notions of appreciation, support, and sharing experiences of race-related stress were prominent in reinforcing marital satisfaction for couples with race-related stress. For many of the couples, appreciating and

supporting each other strengthened their marital satisfaction, and for others sharing experiences of race-related stress strengthened their marital satisfaction. Ignoring one's own feeling of race-related stress to help his or her spouse manage their reactions also demonstrates a way to strengthen the marriage and facilitate more satisfaction.

Race-Related Stress Challenges Marital Satisfaction

Even couples that said race-related stress strengthened their marital satisfaction also stated that it posed challenges to their marriage. Couples used words like “lack of time,” “yelling or screaming,” and “not supporting” to describe their challenges. Five couples described how they saw race-related stress challenging their marital satisfaction. They also perceived a combination of challenges to their marital satisfaction. Some of their stories are presented. Sean talked about his feelings as he tried to manage Jessica's race-related stress. He explained:

Yeah it affects you two. It affects you because her stuff is directly attached to the job and what is going with her job. And your stress is the follow up from her, how it was affecting her. And because it is affecting her, and now it is affecting you. And then, at the same time to a certain extent, you feel helpless. Like you should be able to do something and you can't do anything.

Some couples (n=3) said that communication difficulties posed challenges to marriage. For instance, Mark and Rene explained that because of their conflicting schedules, it was difficult finding time to talk about their race-related stress. Angie and Vernon described that yelling or screaming at each other during their experiences of race-related stress hindered their marital satisfaction. Angie also found that expecting Vernon to immediately manage her race-

related stress posed challenges because he may not be able to do it. Vernon also saw how race-related stress created challenges between him and Angie. He explained:

Well to me, I think my experiences is always stress[ful]. And when you [are] stress[ed], I mean that is always going to affect how you interact with your partner. Because you can't laugh and joke when you are stressed out and disappointed. And then so that laughing and that joking is the bond of relationship then in some way it hurts that bond.

In addition to a shared meaning of communication difficulties, Lee and Keisha shared that their subtle reactions to race-related stress posed challenges to their marital satisfaction. Keisha explained that race-related stress makes her irritable and said that this might suggest to Lee that he had done something wrong to make Keisha this way. Lee said that not being in the mood to address his or her race-related stress caused arguments. Keisha also agreed with Lee. She stated:

Just being on opposite ends of the spectrum at that moment. You know, it is usually not a good thing because somebody, both of us, you know, going to be ticked off. The other not supporting, or appear [not] to be supportive...because me, I would want him to stand with me on it. And not that he has to say anything at the moment, 'cause I can handle it, but to have the support. So not to be supported. And so, if, you know, if I am taking the time to address this because it is important to me I expect the support, you know. [I would say] 'I wish next time you would do such and such, and so and so.' Or when I say 'Oh gosh not again, come on, can we just kind of get through this and get dinner over, come on don't do it.' [Then John say's] 'No, uh huh, did you see that, dada da.' So it has happened to the both of us...Well I don't like it. I wish it would not, you know, that could be one less stress to have to deal with.

Similarly, Erica and John stated that unconscious reactions to race-related stress may influence the way they communicated: They explained:

Erica: But I would imagine that, now that you mention it, I imagine sometimes it would play out in subtle, you know, subtle ways. You know, like sometimes being incommunicado or either a little more irritated, you know, that sort of thing. I am sure at the time we don't make that connection. If we thought about it, we probably would. But at the time we don't make that connection.

John: At the time we don't.

The challenges posed by race-related stress often compromised satisfaction in these couples' marriages. Spouses said that not being able to address their partner's race-related stress made them feel as though they weren't connecting and supporting their spouse. Likewise, not having time to communicate or communicating in unhealthy ways further diminished marital satisfaction for these couples. The subtle reactions to race-related stress also posed challenges to couples marital satisfaction by way of their interactions. It is important to note that some of the couples with race-related stress (n=4) did not perceive that it challenged their marital satisfaction. Sam said "I am trying not to let nonsense like that enter into our marriage." However, these four couples also described how they worked together to cope with their race-related stress an effort to protect their marriage from it. Although they did not perceive their race-related stress as challenging their marital satisfaction, it appeared that this was the case because they intentionally tried to protect their marriage from it. Likewise, the marital satisfaction literature suggests the ability to have discussions with one's spouse increases the level of satisfaction in marriages (Gottman & Notarius, 2000). Although these four couples

didn't perceive that race-related stress challenged their marital satisfaction, they served as a support system to deal with their race-related stress.

Protecting the Marriage from Race-Related Stress

As couples discussed how their race-related stress strengthened and challenged their marital satisfaction, they described ways of coping with the phenomenon. All of the couples with race-related stress said that communicating and having a spiritual base helped them to cope with race-related stress and alleviate the challenge it created on their marital satisfaction.

Communication. Couples with race-related stress agreed that communication was important for managing and addressing the challenges of race-related stress created in the marriage. Couples' responses often included descriptions of humor, strategizing and making decisions, and having different perspectives as ways of communicating about race-related stress. It is important to note that five couples used a combination of these communication processes to protect their marriage from race-related stress.

Four couples found that humor was important when discussing racism. Humor included making jokes as well as laughing at the racist encounters which were stressful. For Erica, being humorous with John helped her talk about her experiences with race-related stress. Erica explained that John's ability to make her laugh lowered the impact of her race-related stress. Tony said that he shared with Kim how he addressed race-related stress made light of constantly dealing with racism. Sam echoed that using humor to communicate with Emma was helpful. Sam explained:

It happens too much why talk about it...talking about racism all day is really draining. It will get you mad. Sometimes I have too many experiences...we joke about it. I also address the issue when it happens. I will make a person address it without them knowing

I am making them address it; it works. We laugh because I know how to flip it. I am so ready for it I just see it before it comes.

Mark and Rene also agreed that using humor to communicate about race-related stress made light of encounters with racism. Mark put it this way:

And at the end of the day you can either be angry or bitter about it or and sometimes you just have to laugh because some of it is so ludicrous, you know. I mean in my business I get mistaken for people other than what I do for a living all the time. And it is always a lesser position than what I really do; happens all the time.

In an effort to manage race-related stress, five couples described developing a plan to address their race-related stress. Lee and Keisha explained that they make each other aware of missed information to determine if some social situations were actually racism. Tony said that he tells Kim how she could have prevented race-related stress from happening. John stated that he encourages Erica to talk with her boss about her stressful racist encounters. Vernon said Angie's patience with him helped him address her stress more effectively. Joshua also helped Florence address her race-related stress. Joshua explained:

I mean I can't solve everything but, you know, [I] let her know that is the way some people are. And you know it is really not worth you losing your job over it. I tell her, you know, 'go complain about it.' But she says she can't complain about it, because if she complains about it then the upper ups would call her a complainer. So I am like okay, so if you have a problem at work and you tell somebody about it then they look bad on you because you tell somebody about a problem. Well to me you don't need to be working there. You know, to me the way I was brought up in the military, you have a problem you go and tell somebody and that problem will get fixed. So if you tell that

person and that problem don't get fixed by that person, then you go to person higher than [the next] person until it gets fixed. You know, but in her job situation, it is different. If she goes complain about it, they look at her as a complainer and that is just, to me are the ways things are not suppose to be. Things are suppose to be fixed. Especially a complaint that is legit.

Another couple also described how they made a decision to prevent their race-related stress from hindering their marital satisfaction. Tony and Kim explained their conscious decision:

Kim: ...we both came out of, I hate to say it, bad marriages and so we consciously talked about how important it was to [the] both of us that our home be a safe haven. You know, we had to be able to come home and relax and enjoy yourself. And I think that was like, the absolute of our relationship. You can't impose it on each other, you got to work it out.

Tony: It is like this. When we first got married, we wrote down on cards, we found the things that would make us happy and the things that would make us sad, [and] what we expect from each other. And on [those] cards, we spelled out what we thought and then shared. And basically was like, I don't argue. I shouldn't have to come home to argue. So if you have a stressful situation out there in the streets and it's stressful I will listen to it. It is not a part of my marriage; it's not a part of family. So when you walk in the door you can relieve [it], tell me all. [But] you not going bring it and now think you going to let that dictate how I am going to be treated and how you going to treat me. It doesn't work that way. So it is like once it is said, once it is [done], it is over. Let's move on to

something else. So it is not going to affect my marriage it is not going to affect how we get along.

Kim: And our children will even tell you that they seen us disagree which is on a regular basis.

Tony: [laughs]. But our children will tell you they, I don't think they have ever seen us argue. You know, that definitely was something about that. We just, when we did have an argument, we would go somewhere anywhere. A lot of time when you are raising kids you disagree about the kids. But we wouldn't do that in front of them. It was just very important to both of us coming into a second marriage that, that we lived in a conflict-free household.

Four couples talked openly about their decision not to communicate about race-related stress as a strategy to protect their marriage from its challenges. They felt that because race-related stress wasn't explicitly connected to the marriage there was no need to make time to discuss it. One couple, Keisha and Lee, said "talking about race-related stress could be bothersome." Mark explained that because Rene knew him enough, there was no reason to have a discussion with her about his race-related stress. He also explained that growing up in segregation prepared him for his everyday battle with race-related stress, and sharing with Rene his current and more trivial experiences was pointless. David and Patricia decided that because race-related stress wasn't an everyday battle, the need to talk about it was irrelevant. Joshua and Florence echoed this sentiment. They recalled:

Joshua: Not often. Because a couple things I have mentioned to you she didn't even know about.

Florence: Yeah and vice versa because I don't. Like the comment by my Director made, I don't. [For instance]...I had a co-worker that said 'How come Black people don't pronounce the words A.S.K.--Acts instead of ack. They say acts instead of ask.' It is little things like that because to me they are little. So I just don't even come home and do that. And before, [Joshua] used to say don't bring work home. We had this thing where we don't bring your work home. Because a lot of times when you are at work and you get stressed and you get frustrated and you bring that stuff home, and then it spills out onto your family. Because I was one, in the beginning that would do that. And [Joshua] was like okay we are going to have to make a rule here, don't bring [our] work home. So when you walk in this door, it is about us in here. It [isn't] about what's going on out there, you pick that up when you go back out there. Now when I am at work, and there is something really, really, really, bothering me that I can't, you know...

Florence later discussed an instance of needing to communicate with Joshua about her race-related stress. Florence recounted:

And you know what to be honest, I am going to put it out here. I think we experience more problems with our own kind, than we do with people of other races. I know me personally; I get a lot of that, you know with females on the job. And one lady said to me 'Well you shouldn't be as light as you are!' You know, and that was from somebody that is my own race, you know. I get a lot of static from people on my job, at least especially lately. Yeah that stuff will bother me. I guess because it is my own kind. And so yeah, I will come [home] and I will talk to [Joshua] about that. I've talk[ed] to him a lot about that it because it was getting to a point where it bothered me. I had to 'cause it was just

overwhelming. I couldn't keep all of that inside. If I had internalized all of that I would be miserable.

For Joshua and Florence, it was important that they allow time to communicate about race-related stress. This was a similar strategy reported by other couples (n=2). For instance, Keisha discussed how she and Lee worked together to discuss a strategy to deal with race-related stress, despite stating that talking about race-related stress was bothersome to their marriage. It appears that when individual reactions to race-related stress become unbearable, these couples made time to address the issue *before* it posed challenges or *before* challenges became unmanageable.

Appreciating different perspectives was another common communication process used to talk about race-related stress. "Understanding" and "empathizing" were ways five couples reported coping with race-related stress in an effort to protect their marital satisfaction. Keisha and Lee explained that exchanging ideas helped with understanding each other's experiences with race-related stress. Tony stated that during discussions with Kim, he gives his opinion of how she might have been taken advantage of by her European American counterparts. Sean found that being objective about Jessica's stressful racist encounters enables her to determine whether her experiences are actually racist. Sean also explained that at times it is challenging to understand Jessica's perspective. He stated:

Not being able to help but also to acknowledge. Because one of the things the person develops earlier, you know, it starts from that. When someone comes and tell us that they have been discriminated against you know, we ask silently 'I wonder if she was really discriminated against, she probably did something wrong to deserve this.' And so when you start out looking at these situations and then when you get into them there are

some situations I have seen people have you know, you say no you really don't want to get into that. Because some of it, when you get into you start reading and studying, you are like man I can't believe this. It can be mentally draining for you just to decipher everything that is going on. We can we can assess how mentally draining somebody is. You know, I mean, on yourself because you too live it. Everybody has to have that outlet. In other words, you can either [say] 'I don't want to hear this.' And that is the part [of] you [that is] thinking, but at the same time you know that she needs an outlet. And so you know that things are occurring and she really is talking about this, when you are feeling that there is something [else] going on. And the only way the stress is going to stop [is if] someone does something about it or [there is] some kind of way you are able to get out of the environment.

John and Erica also found that having different perspectives posed challenges to their communication. John and Erica explained that when discussing racism in the African American community, conversations become conflictual because they might see various issues like the intersection of race, class, and gender different. However, they found discussing personal issues of race-related stress was more harmonious. They explained:

Erica: I think we usually try to understand. Like when [John] shares an experience, I will not tell him that wasn't racism. You know, if he is in the middle of it I am not going to say 'Oh that is not true or that I don't think that is racism.' I am not going to, you know, I am going to try to listen and help him try to problem solve. You know, [find] what's the best thing to do.

John: Yeah I don't think we try to, you know, although if [Erica's] talking I may not agree with what she is saying or how she experiences something it is her experience. I need to

listen and let her go through it. I don't really think anything [is] challenging. I think just because of our backgrounds.

Rene agreed that having different perspectives was challenging, but discussing it with Mark was cathartic. In fact, Mark and Rene were one of the couples that did not perceive race-related stress as challenging their marital satisfaction. Nonetheless, during the interview they agreed that communicating about race-related stress was helpful for their marriage. Vernon also echoed that it was challenging for he and Angie to understand each other's perspectives with race-related stress. Nonetheless, Vernon explained that having different perspectives was useful. He stated:

When things occur, I mean I only talk about it with [Angie]. The only difference is that I am a very emotional person, where I laugh because people always assume that she is in the military. Because she is very straight by the book, very, very conservative. And sometimes when I have a discussion I need to have a discussion with her because I know that her point is going to be grounded in a very conservative view point. And so if I describe a situation [for] her and she sees something in it then I know that mine is not a totally emotional reaction to a situation. And I laugh sometimes about our relationship because I am the glass half full, and she is the glass half empty person sometimes in situations [laughs]. And I think at times that balances a perspective in terms of how we look at a situation. Especially to situations like when it relates to race and racism.

In sum, the emphasis on communication was a common theme for couples. The use of humor, strategies, decisions, and having different perspectives were ways in which couples coped with race-related stress. Although communication helped couples deal with race-related

stress, some couples explained that having different perspectives posed challenges to communication.

Spirituality. A common theme among the couples with race-related stress was a shared belief and trust in God which helped them to manage their race-related stress and protected their marriage from its challenges. In addition to communicating about their race-related stress, three couples stated that having a shared sense of spirituality and religion helped them to deal with race-related stress and reinforce their commitment to each other. Couples' explanations demonstrated that dealing with race-related stress through spirituality facilitated some level of satisfaction in the marriage. Florence and Joshua stated that God helped them individually and as a couple to deal with their race-related stress. Florence explained it being hard to pray for forgiveness of racial strife against her, but that doing so helped her become a better person. John stated that he could link his stressful racist encounters to the Bible, which enabled him to turn his stress over to God. Sean and Jessica echoed a similar experience. They explained:

Jessica: You know you have to have God in your life, number one. For me, without Him, you can't make it. I mean not just with racism but I am just saying every day, you know issues in life. Because [our] faith and having Christ in our life, you know, we did things together. We talk about how race relates to the Bible.

Sean: It is amazing that it teaches you everything. And you can relate it to real life, whatever the case maybe. In addition to having faith and trust in God, you do have to give your partner ample opportunity get through what they going through. Even on those days when you not as receptive as you can be. But at least that you give them a chance to let that out, you know. Because if you don't let them let it out, it could affect the

marriage. You have to be supportive. Let them figure things out when they need to. And if you not being supportive it is useless. You have to be there.

Sean also talked about how having a spiritual base helped him get through Jessica's race-related stress. He recalled:

I think also in the case here, you know, the thing that comes to my mind. It takes a long time, you know, when [Jessica] was going through it. We spent a lot of time on the computer typing together. And so uh, and then even mentally, you know, the humanistic part of you, you know, as a husband part of you [say's] you really don't want to hear this today. The inside thing is that you really don't want to hear it [but] you know you got to be there for them...

Conclusion

As I immersed myself in the data, I learned how these couples defined their experience of race-related stress and marital satisfaction. I also learned how these couples perceived race-related stress influencing their marital satisfaction. While exploring the experience of both phenomenon among these ten African American married couples, I found that my original hypotheses were too broad to account for the complex narratives of the couples. Therefore, the modified hypotheses provided more clarity in understanding how race-related stress influenced these ten African American married couples' marital satisfaction.

In summary, couple participants discussed that differences of gender stereotypes and demographic differences in family of origin influenced they ways in which their experience of race-related stress differed from each other. Only one couple reported not experiencing race-related stress. By individually evaluating the racist encounter and being taught not to internalize racism, the couple perceived race-related stress not influencing their marital satisfaction. On the

other hand, couples with race-related stress described how their race-related stress facilitated connection, bonding, and reinforced appreciation for each other. Couples with race-related stress also described how feeling helpless, having a lack of time, and not managing their emotions posed challenges to their marital satisfaction. They also explained that having high expectations and different perspectives challenged their marital satisfaction. In an effort to manage their race-related stress and protect their marriage from its challenges, couples found ways to deal with their race-related stress together.

All of the couples with race-related stress relied on communicating with each other through use of humor and understanding each other's perspectives to address their race-related stress. Couples also found that developing a plan to manage their race-related stress was also important in protect their marriage from its challenges. Although some couples found the need to communicate about race-related stress, others didn't see the importance of having discussions despite describing how they protected their marital satisfaction from race-related stress by way of communicating. Further, some of the couples added that having a spiritual base allowed them to cope with race-related stress and further protect their marriage from its challenges. In summary, it may be that simply agreeing on a strategy for dealing with race-related stress (e.g., agreeing to talk about it, or agreeing not to talk about it helped couples to preserve or enhance their marital satisfaction.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Overview

In this chapter, I will present a discussion of the study findings. I briefly discuss how modified analytic induction was used to develop and modify the original hypotheses. I will highlight consistencies and inconsistencies between my findings and existing research. I will present clinical implications of the findings and discuss limitations and suggestions for future research. I will reflect upon my experience through the process of this research.

Conceptual Model

This qualitative study explored the influence of race-related stress on marital satisfaction among ten African American married couples. Through phenomenology, I discovered the descriptions, thoughts and feelings about their experiences. The use of symbolic interactionism revealed how these couples created meaning around their racist social interactions, how they perceived it impacting them as individuals, and how they discovered these racist social interactions influenced their marital satisfaction. Furthermore, the use of family systems theory allowed me to unearth how these spouses interact with each other around the concept race-related stress, which they perceived influenced their marital satisfaction. The process by which couples interacted as race-related stress influenced their marital satisfaction was interconnected and interdependent.

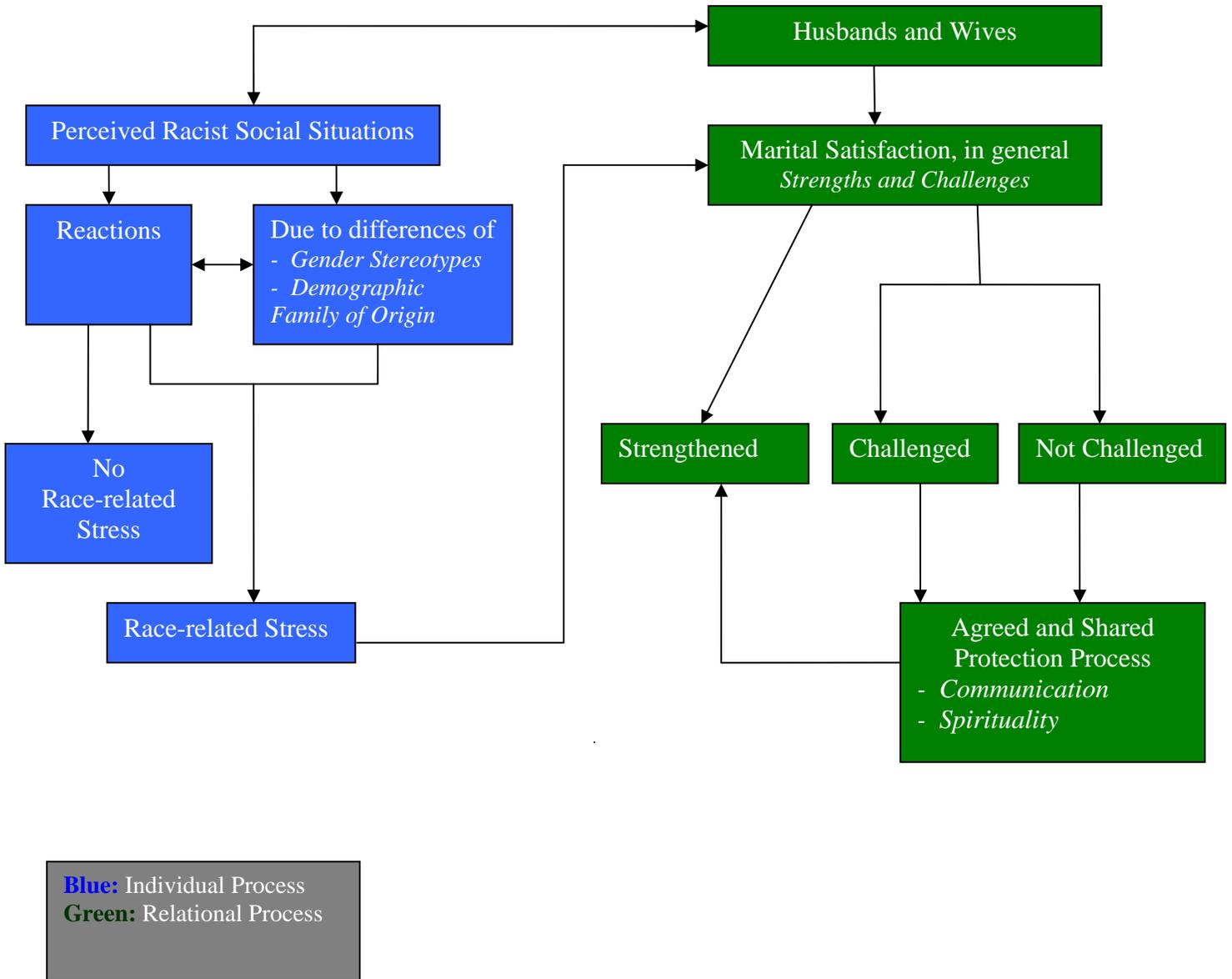
By exploring how race-related stress influenced marital satisfaction among these ten African American married couples, I was able to develop a conceptual model of their experience. This model (see Figure 2) addresses both the research question and modified hypotheses of this study. Couples described how they perceived satisfaction in their marriage. They created a meaning that being connected, feeling love, understood and their needs were met attributed to

their marital satisfaction. Some couples found that challenges to their marital satisfaction stemmed from life pressures to include finances, lack of time to connect, disagreements around parenting, and lack of communication; these were not necessarily related to race-related stress.

While the spouses interacted with each other, it appeared that individual perceptions of racist social situations influenced their experience of race-related stress, and the latter influenced their perception of marital satisfaction. The experience of these couples involved by perception of being treated unfair because they are African American, or perception that situations occurred by racist people who targeted them for being African American. Their experience of the racist social situation and their reaction to it therefore defined the experience of race-related stress. For some of these couples, it appeared there was a combination of perceived situation and being targets of that situation, which is consistent with previous research (King, 2003). Some of these couples perceived that gender stereotypes from racist social situations influenced their race-related stress. One couple perceived that their family of origin differences influenced how they perceived race-related stress differently from each other. It appeared that reactions to the perceived racist social situation created an interrelated and interconnected context with couples' perceptions of their differences, that latter resulted to race-related stress.

When couples felt they experienced stress reactions (e.g., anger, frustration, increased heart rate, and no control) from being treated unfairly as African Americans they defined this as race-related stress. Upon having reactions to race-related stress, couples created a shared meaning as to how it could influence their marital satisfaction. Couples with race-related stress described how it could both strengthen and challenge their marital satisfaction. Processes employed to address race-related stress, which contribute to marital satisfaction include these

Figure 2: Conceptual Model of Interactional Process between Experiencing Race-Related Stress and Marital Satisfaction among African American Married Couples.



couples perceived appreciation, support, and understanding. Some couples found they were able to spend more time with each other by having to deal with race-related stress. When race-related stress challenged their marital satisfaction, couples perceived disconnection, irritability, and helplessness, and felt unsupported in their marriage. As couples perceived race-related stress challenging their marital satisfaction, they implemented communication strategies (e.g., humor, developing a strategy, different perspectives, making decisions to communicate) and utilized their spirituality to cope and protect their marital satisfaction from it. Although some couples with race-related stress stated it could not challenge their marital satisfaction, they still implemented communication strategies in an effort to protect their marital satisfaction. Consequently, the process of these couples context was interrelated and interactional within the marriage, and interconnected with the perceived racial social situation.

Hypothesis One: Individual Differences within the Marriage

Gender Stereotypes for African American Husbands and Wives

As expected, African American men and women experienced race-related stress differently. Being an African American man in general and being a physically large African American man was perceived as accruing more racist encounters that contributed to race-related stress. Both husbands and wives agreed that African American men are seen as aggressive and intimidating, and described that these stereotypes create race-related stress. Moreover, couples said that race-related stress among African American men was facilitated by European American's perceptions of African American men's inferiority and incapability of positive behavior. This finding was consistent with research suggesting that African American *male individuals* report more race-related stress and are at greater risk from the stressful effects of

racism (Elligan & Utsey, 1999; Utsey, 1997; Utsey et al., 2002), due to the onslaught of racism and oppression (Franklin, 1999).

African American wives said that their perceptions of being taken advantage of and being perceived as feeble were ways they experience race-related stress. One wife talked about prospering in her career because of these stereotypes. This was an interesting finding such that societal stereotypes of African American women suggest they are “sexually promiscuous, sexually aggressive, morally loose, independent, strong, and assertive” (Greene, 1994, p. 16). Some of the women described their race-related stress as stemming from encounters with both racism and sexism. This finding echoes previous research suggesting African American *female individual* experiences with race-related stress include a combination of racism and gender discrimination (King, 2005). Some of the women described their race-related stress as stemming from encounters with both racism and sexism. This finding echoes previous research suggesting African American *female individual* experiences with race-related stress include a combination of racism and gender discrimination (King, 2005). According to Hill-Collins (2002) and Ransby (2001), racism and sexism uphold each other as African American *women* experience an “interlocking system of domination” through racism, sexism, and class (Simien, 2004, p.85). Although couples described that race-related stress was more prevalent in men, it is important that clinicians and future researchers continue to explore African American *wives* experiences with race-related stress, and how these experiences influences their marital satisfaction.

The couples’ narratives of how their gender differences influenced race-related stress corroborated existing literature and research describing African American *men and women’s* experiences of living in our society with a legacy of oppression and racism (Jones, 1997). Stereotypes that facilitated race-related stress in African American husband and wives support

both Franklin and Boyd-Franklin (2000) and Boyd-Franklin and Franklin's (1998) concept of the "invisibility syndrome:" African American men, because of their visibility, are often ignored, feared, or hated; and African American women are often denied and subordinated against in a society where European American patriarchal features and behaviors are favored. Poussaint (1993) suggest that these negative stereotypes could also impact gender roles within African American marriages, creating an environment in which African American husbands and wives victimize each other based on European American stereotypes. However, none of the couples discussed how these gender stereotypes that created race-related stress influenced they way they perceived each other's role in the marriage. It would be interesting for future research to explore more in-depth the influence negative gender role stereotypes has on marital satisfaction among African American couples.

Family of Origin Demographics

Cultural diversity within the African American *community* appears throughout the literature and research examining African American marriages (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Cutrona et al., 2003). One couple's demographic differences in family of origin influenced how they currently experienced race-related stress differently from their spouse. Despite research that has suggested African American *individuals* with predominately-European American neighborhood contexts during developmental years have higher levels of life satisfaction in adulthood (Broman, 1997), which might buffer the impact of experiencing race-related stress, little research has looked at this phenomenon within the context of the marriage. In the present study however, findings suggested that living in a predominately-European American neighborhood contexts during family of origin did not necessarily buffer race-related stress. Rather, findings revealed

that race-related stress was perceived to start earlier than African Americans growing up in predominately-African American neighborhood contexts.

On the other hand, consistent with findings from Fischer and Shaw's (1999) research in which social support networks failed to buffer psychological distress from racism, the husband of this couple described that he was not buffered from racist encounters during development and continued to experience race-related stress in his present life. In an effort to buffer its negative influence, literature suggests that social support networks must have the same beliefs, values, and attributes regarding racism (Barnes, 1980). Future research should examine how different geographic locations during family of origin facilitate differences in race-related stress that influence marital satisfaction among African American married couples.

Hypothesis Two: Race-Related Stress Influences on Marital Satisfaction

Race-Related Stress Isn't a Reality

It wasn't surprising that only one couple reported no experience with race-related stress but did reported encounters of racism at various points during their entire lifetime. This is consistent with other findings that suggest only between 1% and 5% of African American *individuals* report racist events not being stressful, and that the majority of African American *individuals* have experienced racism (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996; Klonoff & Landrine, 1999). It is important that clinicians be cognizant that some African Americans experience racism but did not experience any stressful reactions to it.

The same couple also reported that their parents taught them to believe racist encounters were due to other people's ignorance, and as a result they perceived racism not influencing their marital satisfaction. McAdoo (2002) referred to this process as racial socialization, in which parents teach their children to have pride in being African American and educate them about

racism in an effort to prepare them for it. Researchers have suggested that racial socialization increases African American *individuals'* ability to coping with racism through development of coping strategies (Harrell, 2000; Scott, 2003). This finding also supports research that African American *individuals* who received messages from their parents about racism used more distancing practices (e.g., I tell myself it doesn't matter) to cope with racism (Scott, 2003). In addition, the couple reported processing their reactions to racism individually in an effort to prevent its influence on their marriage; which supports research that African American *individuals* who received messages from their parents about racism used less social support to cope with it (McAdoo, 2002). Future research should examine more in-depth how African American *couples* without race-related stress deal with racism in an effort to prevent it from influencing their marital satisfaction.

Strengthens and Challenges to Marital Satisfaction

Only couples that experienced race-related stress discussed how the phenomenon strengthened or challenged their marriage. Couples did not describe how race-related stress strengthened their marriage in terms of satisfaction; rather they discussed how race-related stress strengthened various relational processes such as commitment, appreciation, and connection with each other. These relational processes were similar to ones found in research and literature that describe marital satisfaction *in general* (Gottman & Notarius, 2000) and within African American marriages *in general* (Conner, 1998). Couples with race-related stress also described that spousal understanding and empathy, affection, minimal disagreement and compromises, appreciation, friendship and connection, and quality of leisure time spent together was strengthened by race-related stress, which is also similar with the research and literature outlined within African American marriages *in general* (e.g., Conner, 1998). Nonetheless, more research

is needed to understand how race-related stress strengthens marital satisfaction among African American marriages.

Some factors that challenged couples marital satisfaction were not being understood, not being supportive of their spouse, and choosing inappropriate times to discuss race-related stress. Expecting one's spouse to address race-related stress or feeling helpless in the face of race-related stress were other issues that challenged marital satisfaction. Oftentimes, couples subtle reactions (e.g., being irritated) to race-related stress were taken out on the spouse, which challenged their marital satisfaction. This finding is consistent with Conner's (1998) study which demonstrated that race-related stress was often misdirected on to the marriage prior to use of effective ways of cope with the stress. It appears that it is important for clinicians working with African American couples to broach the concept of racism, and to understand the meaning racism holds in relation to presenting problems in therapy (Day-Vines et al., in press). It would also be important for clinicians to address the stress symptoms and reactions, identify and explore healthy ways of how stress is handled and managed, and strengthen the couple relationship during times of race-related stress.

Most of the couples with race-related stress discussed how this phenomenon influenced their marital process. What I found surprising is that four couples with race-related stress didn't see it as challenging their marital satisfaction. This was interesting because these couples later described ways of communicating with their spouses by way of dealing with race-related stress in an effort to protect their marital satisfaction from it. Gottman and Notarius (2000) have found that communication is imperative to successful marriages. These couples experiences therefore supports the research which indicates race-related stress can strengthen intimate relationships (Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, & Cancelli, 2000), because the marriage can serve as a buffer to

the consequences of racism (Body-Franklin, 2001). In fact for all of the couples with race-related stress, it appeared that social support networks (e.g., the marriage) was a coping mechanism for dealing with race-related stress (Harrell, 2000; Utsey, Lanier et al., 2006; Utsey, Ponterotto et al., 2000) that showed to strengthen their marital satisfaction.

Protecting the Marriage from Race-Related Stress

Communication. All of the couples discussed various patterns of communication as a coping strategy for race-related stress. Couples described that understanding each other's perspective, strategizing, and humor helped to cope with race-related stress and protect their marriage from its challenges. Couples also described that either communicating or not communicating about race-related stress was helpful for the marriage. Little research has looked at various communication patterns or coping strategies for race-related stress within African American *marriages*. However, researchers have suggested that social support coping (e.g., sharing thoughts and feelings; accepting help from others) and problem solving (e.g., confronting the situation) helps to alleviate race-related stress among African American *individuals* (Barnes & Lightsey, 2005; Elligan & Utsey, 1999).

Most of the couples stated that being able to share feelings and thoughts about their race-related stress prevented the negative influence this had on their marital satisfaction. For these couples, having different perspectives helped to communicate about race-related stress as well as share their thoughts and feelings about it. Consistent with Elligan and Utsey is (1999) findings, couples in this study reported that social support buffered stressful racist events. In fact, Hatchett, Veroff, and Douvan (1995) found that African American wives understanding of their husbands' needs and feelings of powerlessness caused by racial discrimination is imperative for longevity in their marriage. Couples also found that having different perspectives about race-

related stress posed challenges to their marital satisfaction in that spouses didn't feel understood. This was also consistent with Hatchett and Colleagues research suggesting not understanding spouse needs and feelings related to racial discrimination hindered longevity in the marriage. Most couples also said that strategizing ways to address race-related stress helps not only to alleviate the phenomenon, but also helps to protect their marriage from its challenges. This result lends support to previous findings that actively confronting race-related stress helps couples cope with the phenomenon (Barnes & Lightsey, 2005), and buffers its negative influence on the marriage.

Through use of humor couples were able to lessen the burden of coping with race-related stress. Much of the research suggests that humor plays an integral role to make light of adversity, moderate adverse reactions, and enhance coping strategies during stressful situations for *individuals* (Masten, 1994). Dorsin and Boskin (1998) stated that historically, African American *individuals* have used humor to cope with oppression, and that humor enables this culture to easily cope with race-related stress (Benjamin, 1991). The results from this study also suggested that by using humor to communicate about race-related stress, couples were able to strengthen their marital satisfaction. Much of the literature on marital process demonstrates that humor is important for bonding and connecting in family relationships (Beavers & Hampson, 1993), and that humor is a form of intimacy in marital relationships (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995; Walsh, 2003). Nonetheless, little research has focused on the use of humor among African American couples with race-related stress.

Another tactic some couples described was making a decision of either talking or not talking about racism. Some couples felt that because race-related stress wasn't connected to their marriage the need to talk about it was irrelevant. In this instance, couples perceived that not

talking about it did not pose challenges to their marital satisfaction. This is consistent with Williams and Williams-Morris (2000) research who submit “At least some victims of discrimination are active agents who attempt to manage and control exposure to negative experiences and the impact that these experiences may have on them” (p.260).

Meanwhile other couples saw the potential hazards of not talking about it with each other. It appeared that some couples made a decision to discuss their race-related stress depending on the intensity and duration of the race-related stress in an effort to protect their marital satisfaction from it. This finding is also consistent with research that suggests the use of coping resources for African American *individuals* is contingent upon the intensity and extent of the race-related stress (Clark et al., 1999), in which African American *individuals* can “call on their entire repertoires of coping strategies” to cope with race-related stress (Plummer & Slane, 1996; as cited in Utsey et al., 2000, p. 73). It might be beneficial for clinicians to refrain from forcing a couple with race-related stress to have discussions about their encounters, but rather allow the couple to determine how these discussions can be helpful for their marriage.

During the interviews couples appeared to make an agreement as to how they communicated about race-related stress in an effort to protect their marital satisfaction. For instance, one couple discussed how prior to marriage they made a conscious decision as to how they would protect their marriage from challenges posed by factors outside the marriage. Two other couples also discussed that after twenty years of marriage they learned how to deal with challenges in an effort to prevent outside factors from hindering their marriage. The consensus couples had about the ways to deal with race-related stress together demonstrates how they protected their marital satisfaction. This is consistent with research that suggests minimal disagreements influences marital satisfaction (Gottman & Notarius, 2000). More research is

needed to understand *how* African American married couples come to agree on ways to cope with race-related stress in an effort to protect their marital satisfaction.

Spirituality. Most of the couples acknowledged their spirituality and religion helped to protect their marriage from the challenges race-related stress created. Religious practices and support, such as prayer, attending church, or reading the Bible are mechanisms couples used to combat race-related stress. In fact, one husband reported that having a spiritual base helped him to maintain his commitment to help his wife during her encounters with race-related stress. This result lend support for the findings that African Americans use religious and spiritual coping when confronting racism and race-related stress (Lewis-Coles & Constantine, 2006; Mattis, 2002; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Spirituality and religion play an important role in the lives of African Americans and is a strength within the African American culture (Littlejohn-Blake & Anderson-Darling, 1993). However, no research has examined how as a married couple, African Americans with race-related stress utilize religion or spirituality in an effort to protect their marriage from its challenges. More research is needed to uncover how the use of religion or spirituality influences marital satisfaction among African American couples with race-related stress.

Resilience

Although not a theme of the study, resilience was heard throughout the descriptions of the couples. Many of the couples described ways of educating themselves, socializing their children, and developing ways of coping with race-related stress as important for strengthening their marital satisfaction. This supports literature that African American families continue to overcome race-related stress by being resilient in the face of adversity while also empowering themselves (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). According to Hill (1999), strong work ethics, high

achievement orientation, and strong religious orientation are not only important strengths of African American families, but also demonstrate resilience within these families. Froma Walsh (1998) explains resilience in a way that reflects the descriptions of couples in the present study:

“Resilience can be defined as the capacity to rebound from adversity strengthened and more resourceful...resilience involves struggling well: experiencing both suffering and courage, effectively working through difficulties both internally and interpersonally. In building resilience, we strive to integrate the fullness of a crisis experience into the fabric of our individual and collective identity, influencing how we go on to live our lives...resilience is forged through adversity, not despite it.” (pp.4-6)

Many of the couples in this study developed resources to cope with race-related stress in an effort to protect their marriage from its challenges. Some of these couples explained instances of suffering from race-related stress but also developed the courage to overcome it. Pinderhughes (2002) suggest that resilience of African Americans with race-related stress must “*carefully regulate flexibility and vigilance*” (p. 277). Couples in this study were able to be flexible by utilizing coping strategies to cope with race-related stress. Couples in this study were also aware of the harmful impact that race-related stress had on their marital satisfaction and were aware of the ways race-related stress strengthened it.

Clinical Implications

Findings suggest that race-related stress appeared to strengthen and challenge marital satisfaction for the nine African American married couples with race-related stress. Thus, it is important for clinicians to understand the legacy of racism in the African American experience. This also means that clinicians should become knowledgeable about the impact of individual, institutional, and cultural forms of racism. It might be beneficial for clinicians to understand

how racism challenges gender roles around marital interaction within African American marriages. Clinicians can help clients uncover ways in which gender stereotypes influence the way African American men and women relate within intimate relationships. It would be helpful for clinicians to explore their own biases around racism. It would also be helpful for clinicians to acknowledge and recognize how their own race and gender affect the therapy process. It might also be beneficial for clinicians to explore a couple's history with race-related stress, and ways in which past experience with race-related stress have challenged other intimate relationships.

Often times when couples come to therapy they report communication difficulties. For African American *men*, in particular, the expression of feelings and emotions is often seen as a sign of weakness, which is also projected by societal perceptions of African American *men* (Franklin, 2004). It is important for clinicians to join, be non-judgmental, and be accepting of the couple's experience. It is essential that the therapist create a balance between the couple. It is also beneficial for clinicians to educate the couple about the value of harmonious interactions and effective communication to include more listening, empathizing, understanding, and client introspection.

Oftentimes African American couples come to therapy when the problem has become severe or after a crisis (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). Because of societal perceptions that African Americans are inheritably weak there is hesitation about seeking therapy. Clinicians should honor and support the courage of coming to therapy and acknowledge their concerns and feelings about therapy. Even so, African American couples might not come to therapy stating that they have marriage problems because of race-related stress or racism. It is imperative that clinicians working with such couples become knowledgeable of the underlying factors and pressures of racism. As Boyd-Franklin (2003) explains, African American men and women continue to face

overt and covert forms of discrimination at work and in their racial and cultural diverse communities. She states:

“These more subtle forms of racial bias can be just as deadly as the more overt forms. Such cumulative pressures on the psyche of Black people take their toll on couple relationships. Some African American women and men experience a sense of powerlessness in their interactions with the world that they angrily act out in their intimate relationships” (p. 93).

It is also beneficial that clinicians help couples understand the sources of their problems might be connected to racist societal influences. Clinicians should help couples develop healthy ways to interact in an effort to improve their relationship in the face of societal influences.

It is also important for clinicians to understand and honor the various healthy coping strategies (e.g., such as racial socialization, communication strategies, spirituality, and religion) African Americans employ when faced with race-related stress. Clinicians should encourage couples to access these resources to facilitate the therapy process. For instance, some couples explained that having a spiritual base, in addition to therapy, would be important for clinicians treating African American couples with race-related stress. It might be beneficial for clinicians to understand how African Americans want these resources involved in their treatment. Thus, it is beneficial for couples to discuss with clients how accessing these resources could help treatment, rather than assume African Americans would utilize spirituality and religion in their treatment process. In addition, clinicians can help African American couples find additional avenues, such as empowerment strategies, to cope with race-related stress.

Some of the couples explained that empowering themselves and their children was an important factor in coping with race-related stress. Clinicians can also use empowerment as a

therapeutic intervention (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). Pinderhughes (2002) states that taking a “Therapist stance, as a collaborator and learner, can itself be therapeutic since it empowers clients whose life experiences may have led them to expect much less. Because of the strong emphasis on communalism and spirituality among African Americans, encouraging couples to connect with resources such as support groups, advocacy, and religious organizations can help satisfy those needs” (p. 278). Clinicians can also empower African American couple clients by encouraging those with children to teach their children about the legacy of racism and to share messages that in spite of this legacy, African Americans continue to prevail over racism.

Clinicians should also become knowledgeable about the diversity within the African American community. For instance, couples in this study varied in age, length of marriage, and occupation. Likewise, couples were both middle- to upper class families, and most were college educated. It is important for the therapist to understand how this diversity reflects differences of experience with race-related stress. For instance, one couple had numerous encounters with racism but didn’t indicate stress. Thus, it may be beneficial for clinicians to explore the socio-cultural factors within African American couples, particularly how these socio-cultural factors relate to African American men and women. It is also important for clinicians not to assume that all African Americans experience racism.

In sum, it is important that clinicians working with African American couples acknowledge the strength and courage these couples possess in the face of race-related stress. Clinicians not only need to be knowledgeable about the dynamics within the African American culture, they also must challenge their own biases, values, and beliefs about racism, oppression, and injustices. It is important that clinicians not pathologize African American clients because of their experiences with racism. Rather, clinicians should honor African Americans experiences

and encourage them to find ways to empower themselves and utilize effective ways to cope with race-related stress.

Study Limitations and Future Research

The results from this study demonstrate the influence race-related stress has upon African American marital satisfaction. Some limitations of this study must be noted. For example, although I used a standardized measure to examine levels of marital satisfaction (DAS), I did not administer any standardized assessment of race-related stress. This was done intentionally in hopes of honoring my couples' perceptions of their experience. In retrospect however, it may have been useful for participants to have had a standardized definition of race-related stress from which to start. On the other hand, through their words and descriptions, I learned that nine of the couples experienced race-related stress. Their stories provide a good foundation to further explore the experience, understanding, and meaning of race-related stress among African American married couples and how it influences marital satisfaction.

As previously noted, racism is the "subjective experience of thoughts beliefs, attitudes, institutional arrangements, and acts that tend to denigrate individuals or groups because of phenotypic characteristics or ethnic group affiliation" (Clark et al., 1999, p. 805). Therefore it must be noted that participants' notions of race-related stress were based on their perception/interpretation of their experience. Nonetheless for these couples their experiences of racism and subsequent race-related stress were real, whether based off perception or not, and had consequences that impacted their marital satisfaction. Similar to Broman and Colleagues (2000) argument, the words and meanings from couples in the present study cannot pass judgment on the issue of race-related stress. More research is needed to understand the phenomenon of

perceived race-related stress and *how* it influences marital satisfaction among African American married couples.

While not an eligibility requirement of the study, all of the couples in this study were middle-to upper class African American married couples from the Washington, DC metropolitan area. It is important to note that African American couples with higher socioeconomic status “often [find] themselves caught between two worlds. They are in an increasingly privileged position vis-à-vis the Black community, but they may have received relatively little acknowledgement in White society at large” (Boyd-Franklin, 2003, p.104). Future research should examine how race-related stress influences marital satisfaction within low or working class African American married couples. Another limitation is that most couples had a mean age of 44, with the average length of marriage being 16.5 years. Often times older couples in the present study reported that the race-related stress they experience in today’s society is minute when compared to race-related stress they experienced during the Civil Rights Era. It would be important for future research to explore how age, life experience, and length of marriage influence the impact of race-related stress on marital satisfaction.

Future research could incorporate a Black feminist theory to understand the influence of marital satisfaction on African American marriages. The legacy of slavery and oppression of African American people have facilitated gender roles and messages of African American men and women that may burden on male-female intimate relationships. Briefly, the philosophy of Black feminist theory investigates the historical and ongoing struggles against race and gender, while maintaining a desire for a progressive vision of social justice (Hill-Collins, 2002). This theory emphasizes that African American women have visibility and are centered in research in an effort to bring about new knowledge that is empowering to subordinate groups (Hill-Collins,

1990). By the African American woman being the center of analysis, future research can further understand their experience with racism and its influence within intimate relationships.

Although the present research is not viewed through a Black feminist lens, it appears to be consistent with this framework in its recognition of African American women's legacy of struggle with racism and sexism, and promoting African American female empowerment through voice, visibility and self-definition from their narratives (Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Hill-Collins, 1993).

Although not a limitation, it is important that results not be generalized to other African American married couples with race-related stress. This study does not make assumptions about race-related stress in African American marriages, but focuses on the experience of these ten African American married couples. While conclusions cannot be drawn from the results of this study, it seems imperative to conduct more extensive research examining the several themes that emerged from the qualitative data. Future research could explore more extensively how African American married couples utilize coping strategies together in an effort to combat race-related stress, and how working together to use these strategies influence marital satisfaction. Future research could also explore how different encounters of race-related stress (e.g., racism between African Americans and institutional and cultural racism) influence marital satisfaction among African American couples. A longitudinal study of African American married couples with race-related stress could further explore how the phenomenon of race-related stress and marital satisfaction changes over time. Another interesting study would include exploring the experience of clinicians working with African American married couples with race-related stress.

Researcher's Reflexivity

Historically, African American marriages have demonstrated strength and courage in prevailing over racism. Likewise, couples in the present study also exude a level of strength and courage in the face of race-related stress. Throughout this research I utilized a journal to help organize salient themes created by couples to further understand their process of race-related stress in relation to their marital satisfaction. Another essential use of the journal was keeping notation of my own reactions and interactions with the couples. Through this research, I continued to discover that as an African American woman, I too exude strength and courage in the face of race-related stress. Not only experiencing race-related stress from engagement in predominately European American contexts, but I have also experienced race-related stress from racist messages from other African Americans. Although at the time of this study I was not married, I have observed within the African American community how race-related stress creates marital dissatisfaction, which ultimately leads to separation and divorce. I have also observed how countless African Americans overcome race-related stress and protect their marriage from its challenges. In addition to the journal, discussions with my committee chair and one of my committee members, who is African American, helped to monitor my reactions to this study. I learned that through the use communication, and spirituality and religion couples in this study worked hard to strengthen their marriage in despite of race-related stress. Participants in this study have also shown me the importance of acknowledging race-related stress in therapy with African American couples. They also taught me how my race and gender plays a role in the therapy process with African Americans clients and clients of the opposite gender, race and ethnicity. As Nancy Boyd-Franklin (2003) has posited, I hope this thesis will motivate more

research and “inspire more discussion and debate in the clinical field” of the influence race-related stress has upon African American marriages (p. 334).

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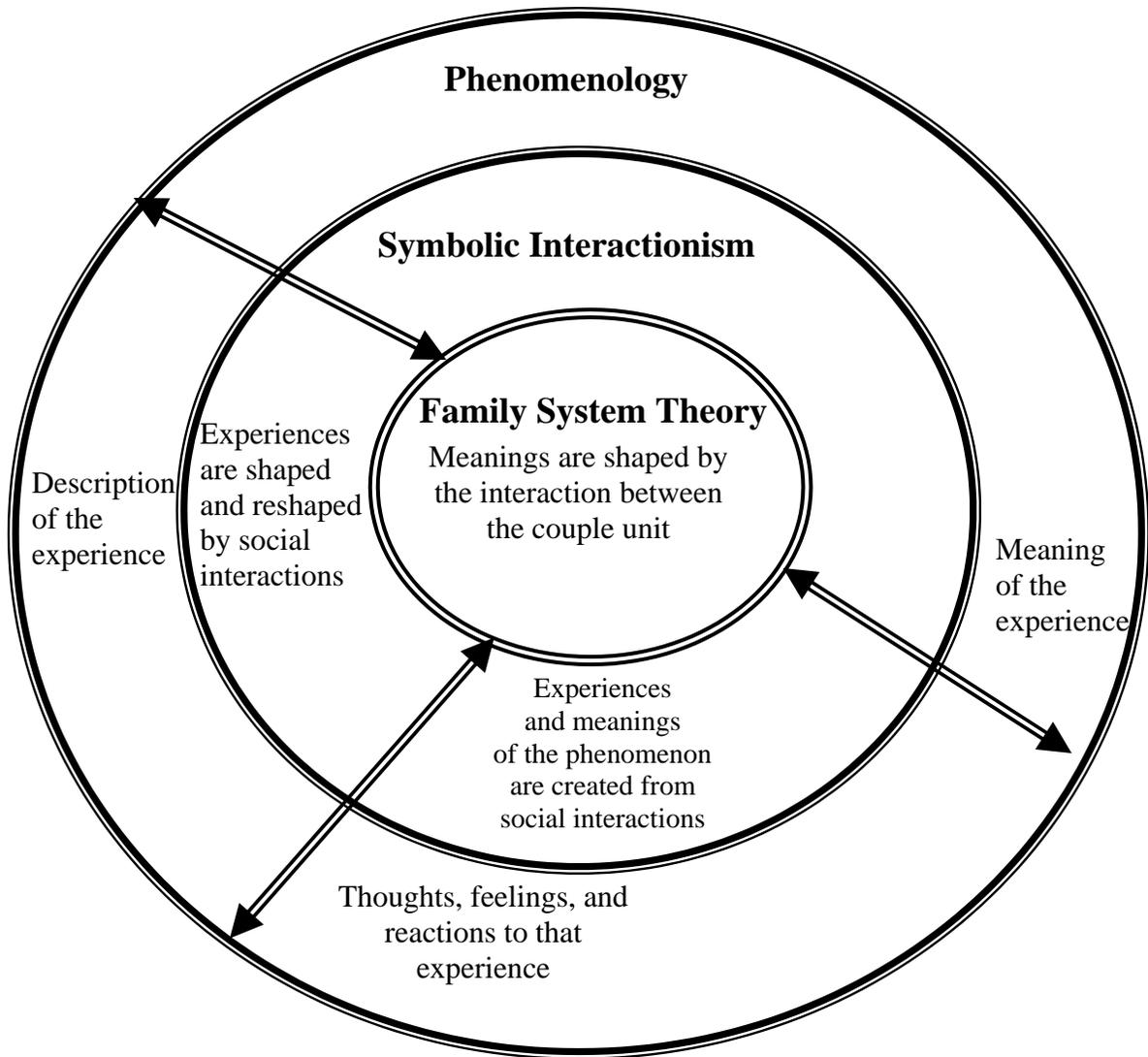
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Figure 1. Theoretical lens of race-related stress and marital satisfaction.



Flyer

Are you an African American Married Couple?

Are you over the age of 18 years?

Do you and your spouse currently live together?

Have you been living together for at least the last 12 months?



Would you like to talk about your encounters with racism?

If you meet the eligibility requirements and are interested in participating in an interview for a Virginia Tech graduate research study about your marriage and racial issues, email me at racemarriageresearch@hotmail.com or by telephone at 301-839-xxxx. Please provide your email address/phone number so I can contact you to answer any questions you may have and to schedule a time to hold interviews.

<p>Marriage and race research: racemarriageresearch@hotmail.com; Or 301-839-xxxx</p>
<p>Marriage and race research: racemarriageresearch@hotmail.com; Or 301-839-xxxx</p>
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<p>Marriage and race research: racemarriageresearch@hotmail.com; Or 301-839-xxxx</p>
<p>Marriage and race research: racemarriageresearch@hotmail.com; Or 301-839-xxxx</p>
<p>Marriage and race research: racemarriageresearch@hotmail.com; Or 301-839-xxxx</p>

Cover Letter

July 21, 2007

xxx

Dear xxx,

I am graduate student at Virginia Tech. This letter is to ask your help in recruiting couples for my research study. I am looking for African American couples who have been married for a least a year. They need to be older than 18 years. These couples must be living in the same house for a year. Also, these couples need to have faced racism.

The purpose of this study is to learn about racism. I also want to learn about African American marriages. I want to know how African American married couples deal with racism. I would like to talk with each couple for 60 to 90 minutes. I will also ask couples to fill out two brief surveys that will take no longer than 15 minutes. Names and information about participants in this study will be kept private.

If you know any African American married couples, I would enjoy telling them more about this study. I have given you a flier with this letter to post in your location.

I will contact you within the next week to answer any questions you might have. If you have any questions before then, feel free to contact me by e-mail at racemarriageresearch@hotmail.com or by telephone at (301) 839-xxxx.

Thank you for your help

Narkia Green
Marriage and Family Therapy Master's Degree Candidate
Department of Human Development
Virginia Tech-Northern Virginia Center
7054 Haycock Road
Falls Church, VA

Participant ID: _____

Telephone Eligibility Screening

Thank you for your interest in my research project. I have a few questions to determine your eligibility to participate.

Check one for each question:

1. Are you married? Yes NO
2. Are you over the age of 18 years? Yes NO
3. Do you and your spouse currently live together? Yes NO
4. Have you been living together for at least the last 12 months? Yes NO
5. Do you self-identify as African American? Yes NO
6. Have you experienced racism? Yes NO

If you said yes to all six of the above questions, I would like to schedule an interview with you and your spouse. Interviews will be conducted with both of you together. Interviews will last between one hour to half past the hour.

Interviews can be conducted at your home, or at a mutually convenient location (e.g. Virginia Tech in Falls Church, VA). You will be asked to fill out 2 brief questionnaires prior to beginning the interview; Both should take no more than 15 minutes to complete. I will also ask you to complete the consent form for your participation in the study.

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.

Participant ID: _____

Informed Consent

Project Title: Understanding Encounters with Racism in African American Marriages.

Researchers: Narkia M. Green, M.S. Student, Department of Human Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Angela J. Huebner, Ph.D., Associate 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 understand African American married couples' encounters with racism and how it influences their marriages.

What will I be asked to do? You will be asked to fill out a short form with demographic information and another brief form about your marriage. It should not take more than 15 minutes to complete both forms. After completing the forms, the interview will begin. The interview will be with you and your spouse together. You and your spouse will be asked to take part in a 60 to 90 minute interview. You will be asked questions about your encounters with racism and questions about your marriage. The interview will be set at an agreed upon time and location. The face-to-face interview will be audio-taped to make sure we understand exactly what was said. After completing your interview, you will be given the option to read your typed interview and make any corrections.

Are there any risks to me? There are few risks with taking part in this study. These include feeling a little emotional discomfort as you talk about racism and your marriage. You may refuse to answer any question at any time. You are free to stop the interview at any time. Please be reassured that you are volunteering for this study. All information is kept private. If any portion of the interview process raises concerns, a list of local counseling services will be provided. Neither the researchers or Virginia Tech will be responsible for any costs associated with counseling services.

Are there any benefits to me? As a result of taking part in this study, we hope you feel empowered by talking about your encounters with racism and your marriage. We also hope you feel satisfied because you sharing your story might benefit other African American couples facing racism. Information from this study may help mental health counselors working with African American couples.

Are my responses kept private? All of the information you provide will be kept private. No names will appear on the typed responses or forms. Your responses will be kept in a locked cabinet. Only those people directly involved in the study will have access to the study information. Your name and any other identifying information will not be reported in any publications or presentations. Audiotapes will be destroyed at the end of the study. However, if you are dangerous to yourself or others, or if there is a suspicion of elder or child abuse, the

researchers are required by law to inform the appropriate authorities with or without your consent.

Will I be compensated for my participation? Your participation is completely voluntary and there will be no compensation other than the researchers' appreciation for your time.

Do I have the freedom to withdraw? You have the right to stop the interview, not answer certain questions, or quit the interview entirely, at any point in during the interview.

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:

Narkia Green, Marriage and Family Therapy Candidate
301-839-8079, nagreen1@vt.edu

Angela J. Huebner, Ph.D., Committee Chair
703-538-8491, ahuebner@vt.edu

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

Participants' Permission:

I have read and understand the Informed Consent and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent:

Printed Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Printed Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Participant ID: _____

Demographic Questionnaire

Gender _____ Age _____

Type of Living Community:

Rural _____ Urban _____ Suburban _____

Highest Education Completed _____ Occupation _____

Check one to indicate your gross annual family income:

- ___ Under \$14,999
- ___ \$15,000-49,999
- ___ \$50,000-99,999
- ___ \$100,000 and over

How long have you been married? _____

Have you been previously married? _____ If so, how many times? _____

Have you and your spouse ever been separated or divorced ? _____ If yes, when _____

Do you or your spouse have children? _____

If yes, please list their ages and genders below:

_____	_____
age	gender
_____	_____
age	gender
_____	_____
age	gender
_____	_____
age	gender
_____	_____
age	gender
_____	_____
age	gender

(please indicate if child is from a previous relationship)

Participant ID: _____

Dyadic Adjustment Scale

Most persons have disagreements with their relationships. Please indicate below the appropriate extent of the agreement or disagreement between you and your partner for each item on the following:

- 5 = Always agree
- 4 = Almost always agree
- 3 = Occasionally disagree
- 2 = Frequently disagree
- 1 = Almost always disagree
- 0 = Always disagree

- _____ Handling family finances
- _____ Matters of recreation
- _____ Religious matters
- _____ Demonstration of affection
- _____ Friends
- _____ Sex relations
- _____ Conventionalness (correct or proper behavior)
- _____ Philosophy of life
- _____ Ways of dealing with parents or in laws
- _____ Aims, goals, and things believed important
- _____ Amount of time spent together
- _____ Making major decisions
- _____ Leisure time interests and activities
- _____ Career decisions

Please indicate below approximately how often the following items occur between you and your partner.

- 0 = All of the time
- 1 = Most of the time
- 2 = More often than not
- 3 = Occasionally
- 4 = Rarely
- 5 = Never

- _____ How often do you discuss or have you considered divorce, separation, or terminating the relationship?
- _____ How often do you and your mate leave the house after a fight?
- _____ In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well?
- _____ Do you confide in your mate?
- _____ Do you ever regret that you married (or lived together)?

___ How often do you and your partner quarrel?
 ___ How often do you and your mate "get on each other's nerves?"

		Almost			
Do you kiss your mate?	Every Day	Every Day	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
	___4___	___3___	___2___	___1___	___0___
		All of	Most of	Some of	Every few
Do you and your mate engage		them	them	them	of them
in outside interests together?	___4___	___3___	___2___	___1___	___0___
		None of			them

How often would you say the following events occur between you and your mate.

- 0 = Never
- 1 = Less than once a month
- 2 = Once or twice a month
- 3 = Once or twice a week
- 4 = One a day
- 5 = More often

___ Have a stimulating exchange of ideas
 ___ Laugh together
 ___ Calmly discuss something
 ___ Work on a project together

These are some things about which couples sometimes agree and sometimes disagree. Indicate if either item below caused differences of opinions or were problems in your relationship during the past few weeks. (check yes or no)

Yes	No	
___	___	Being too tired for sex
___	___	Not showing love

The dots on the following line represent different degrees of happiness in your relationship. The middle point "happy," represents the degree of happiness of most relationships. Please circle the dot which best describes the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
•	•	•	•	•	•	•

Extremely Unhappy	Fairly Unhappy	A little Unhappy	Happy	Very Happy	Extremely Happy	Perfect

Which of the following statements best describe how you feel about the future of your relationship? (pick one)

___ I want desperately for my relationship to succeed, and would go to almost any length to see that it does.

_____ I want very much for my relationship to succeed, and will do all I can to see that it does.

_____ I want very much for my relationship to succeed, and will do my fair share to see that it does.

_____ It would be nice if my relationship succeeded, but I can't do much more than I am doing now to help it succeed.

_____ It would be nice if it succeeded, but I refuse to do any more than I am doing now to keep the relationship going.

_____ My relationship can never succeed, and there is not more that I can do to keep the relationship going.

Participant ID: _____

Interview Questions

Warm-up

How did you two meet?

Experiences and meaning of marital satisfaction

- I am interested in knowing what you two do together. Walk me through your day during the times when you and your spouse are together. What stands out for you?
 - We know that marriages have their share of ups and downs.
 - When you have ups, what is that like? To what do you attribute the “up”? For example, is it connected just to your relationship or do outside forces play a role (e.g., your job, friends, family, finances, etc).
 - When you have downs, what is that like? To what do you attribute the “down”? For example, is it connected just to your relationship or do outside forces play a role (e.g., your job, friends, family, finances, etc).

Experiences/meanings of race-related stress

- Most people agree that we live in a context of racism. Does that fit for you? How so? How not?

I am interesting in understanding your experiences with racism.

- Tell me about a time you experienced racism?
 - How did you know this was racism?
 - When did this happen?
 - How much do you talk about your experience(s) with each other?
 - How do these conversations go?
 - How do these experiences impact you emotionally? physically? mentally?
- Have you experienced a feeling of stress from these situations (of racism)?

IF YES:

- What was it like? How do you handle it?
- How is this stress from racism different from other stressors in your life?
 - Have you shared this stress (from racism) with your spouse?
 - How do these conversations go?
 - If you did not share with your spouse, what kept you from sharing?
- Tell me about any mental or bodily changes due to this stress?
- How do your experiences with stress (from racism) play out in your relationship with your partner?
 - What thoughts and feelings do you have about this interaction?

- What has been challenging to you as you shared your experiences with stress with your spouse?
- How do you keep this stress from impacting your satisfaction in the relationship?
- Do you think dealing with stress from racism on your own is more helpful than working with your spouse to deal with it? How so/not?
- Do you think using both (individually and with spouse) to deal with race-related stress is helpful? How so/not?
- Do you think experiencing racism and experiencing race-related stress are similar or different? Can you elaborate?
- Do you think your experiences with stress from racism are similar/different from your spouses? In what way? If not, how so?

IF NO:

- How did you know that your experiences with racism were not stressful?
- What reactions did you have to the racist encounters?
- How did you handle those reactions?
- Have you shared these reactions with your spouse?
 - What was that like?
- If you didn't share, what kept you from sharing?

I'm interested in your response to the following statement:

Racism and discrimination have a negative impact on the lives of many African Americans. Both impact every aspect of family life including marriage. They also influence the way in which many African Americans relate to each other and to the outside world.

Does that fit for you?

If it doesn't fit, how have you kept this experience from happening?

Wrap-up

- What advice would you give to other African American couples regarding their satisfaction/connection with each other?
- What advice would you give to other African American couples facing stress from racism?
- What advice would you give about addressing racism and its effect on the relationship to therapist working with African American couples?

Thank you

Curriculum Vita

Narkia M. Green

8708 Dover Street
Fort Washington, Maryland 20744
nagreen1@vt.edu
301-653-2163

Education

- M.S. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, June 2007
Human Development-Marriage and Family Therapy, COAMFTE Accredited
Master's Thesis: *Exploring the Experience of Race-related Stress and Marital Satisfaction among African American Married Couples*
- B.S. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, May 2004
Major in Sociology

Scholarship

Peer Reviewed Publications

- Green, N., Piercy, F., & Bird, G. (in press). Stressors, coping, and perceptions of African American Undergraduates at a predominantly White institution. *The Qualitative Report*.
- Stith, S.M., Green, N., Smith, D.B, Ward, D.B. (in press). Marital satisfaction as a risk marker for intimate partner physical violence: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Family Violence*.
- Stith, S. M., Pruitt, I., Dees, J., Fronce, M., Green, N., Som, A. & Linkh, D. (2006). Implementing community-based prevention programming: A review of the literature. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, 27(6), 599-619.

Manuscript in Preparation

- Gil, E., & Green, N. *Play-based extended developmental assessments: Clinicians guide*. Springfield, Virginia: Author

Professional Presentation – Peer Reviewed

- Green, N., & Stith, S. (2006, October). Marital satisfaction and partner violence: A meta-analysis. Poster presented at the meeting of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy, Austin, Texas.
- Green, N., & Stith, S. (2006, February). Marital discord and partner violence: A meta-analysis. Poster presented at the Mid-Atlantic Conference on the Scholarship of Diversity; Blacksburg, Virginia.
- Green, N., Bird, G., & Piercy, F. (2004). Stressors and coping strategies of African American undergraduates at Virginia Tech. Poster presented at the Mid-Atlantic Conference on the Scholarship of Diversity; Blacksburg, Virginia.

Green, N., Bird, G., & Piercy, F. (2004). Stressors and coping strategies of African American undergraduates at Virginia Tech. Poster presented at the Virginia Tech 2nd Annual Undergraduate Research and Potential Graduate Student Conference; Blacksburg, Virginia.

Grant Writing

Green, N. (2006) Travel Fund Program. Graduate Student Association, Virginia Tech (funded for \$250).

Teaching

Courses Taught/Training Received

Suvery.vt.edu training

Virginia Tech, 2004. Completed online survey software training. Developed and implemented several online surveys while as an undergraduate and graduate student at Virginia Tech.

Teacher's Assistant, Dr. Sandra Stith

Virginia Tech, 2004-2005. Responsibilities included management of course handouts, tracking attendance, and organizing and maintaining a course website. (HD 5404 Systems Theory and Family Therapy; and HD 5434

Professional/Clinical Recognition and Experience

Academic Awards and Honors

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| 2006 | Minority Fellowship Recipient, American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy. |
| 2005 | Featured Graduate Student of the Month, Virginia Tech's Graduate School. |
| 2005 | Ronald E. McNair graduate assistantship, Virginia Tech. |
| 2004 | Ronald E. McNair Scholarship, Virginia Association of Educational Opportunity Program Personal. |
| 2004 | National Dean's List, Virginia Tech. |
| 2003-2004 | Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement Scholar. |
| 2003 | Virginia Tech Deans List. |
| 2000 | Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc, Upsilon Tau Omega Chapter, Scholarship Award. |

Committee Membership

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| 2006-2007 | <i>Student Representative</i> , Marriage and Family Therapy Faculty Search Committee, Department of Human Development, Virginia Tech, Falls Church and Blacksburg, Virginia. |
|-----------|--|

Professional Organizations

- 2006-present *Student Member*, Mid-Atlantic Division of American Association Marriage and Family Therapy.
- 2006 *Interim Newsletter Editor*, Mid-Atlantic Division of American Association Marriage and Family Therapy.
- 2004-present *Student Member*, American Association Marriage Family Therapy.
- 2004 *Student Member*, Psychology Club.

Clinical Experience

- 2007 *Group Co-Therapist*, Corpus Christi Family Services, Chantilly, VA. Offered by Robin Cohen, LCSW, MSW and Susan McCarty, MFT Intern, the program, *For Better or Worse—Winning at the Marriage Game*, is a three-day program designed to help couples learn skills to better their marital or couple relationship. Was one of five group co-therapists that participated in program. Utilized couples therapy interventions to process specific stressors, risk issues, and competencies of couple participants which were identified and discussed throughout program. Observed and assessed couples interactions within group and during individual couple sessions. Collaborated with facilitators offering the program in order to coordinate services to couples.
- 2006-2007 *Family Life Counselor*, Chaplain Family Life Center, United States Army; Fort Belvoir, Virginia. Provide therapy, mental health services and case management to individuals, couples and families in a spiritually-based agency. Conducted assessments, identifying specific stressors and risk issues. Developed and implemented treatment plans. Discussed safety planning and/or hospitalization with clients when suicidal and/or homicidal risks were apparent. Utilized couples therapy, grief counseling, cognitive behavior interventions, and solution-orientated therapy models to provide effective therapeutic treatment. Domestic violence and suicidal interventions were also utilized when appropriate. Collaborated with other mental health professionals within the military community in order to coordinate services for clients and provide comprehensive care for each client. Fulfilled administrative duties and maintain client files, according to AAMFT and agency guidelines.
- 2005-2007 *Marriage and Family Therapist Intern*, Center for Family Services, Virginia Tech Falls Church, Virginia. Provided therapy, mental health services and case management to individuals, couples and families. Conducted assessments, which include providing a multi-axial DSM diagnosis, identifying problem areas and stressors, family strengths/assets and risk issues. Developed and implemented treatment plans, which address treatment goals and objectives, and reassess when appropriate. Utilized couples therapy, grief counseling, cognitive behavior interventions, and solution-orientated therapy models to provide effective therapeutic treatment. Participated in case planning sessions with supervisor and other therapists. Collaborated with other therapists, psychiatrists and other mental health professionals in order to coordinate services for clients when appropriate. Fulfilled administrative duties and maintain client files to AAMFT and agency guidelines.

- 2006 *Community Support Specialist*, Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services, INC. Mount Vernon, Virginia. Provided community living skills training, counseling, medication monitoring, symptom management, and case management to adults with serious mental illness in community settings. Implemented vocational rehabilitation and substance abuse counseling with dually diagnosed clients. Utilized living skills interventions and behavior management to achieve progress toward achievement of client-created goals and objectives. Monitored, reviewed and revised client-created treatment plan. Completed progress documentation, including monthly and quarterly progress and counseling summaries. Provided case management and coordination of living skills services for clients and their immediate family members. Collaborated with other mental health professionals to coordinate services for clients when appropriate. Coached clients to utilize skills to increase successes and achieve personal goals. Supported clients to live independently, maintain healthy lifestyles, and contribute abilities to others. Fulfilled administrative duties and maintained client documentation to HIPPA guidelines.
- 2005-2006 *Co-Facilitator*, Nurturing Parenting Program, Falls Church/Fairfax, Virginia. Assisted with presenting the Nurturing Parenting Program 10-week curriculum to children ages 9 to 11. Duties included classroom preparation and teaching, note-taking, one-on-one interaction with the children, involvement in observation and assessment of children and their development and growth in the program. Facilitated family meals while monitoring nurturing family behaviors, and encouraged alternatives to physical discipline.
- 2003-2004 *Resident Advisor*, Student Programs, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia. Delivered residential services and developed a residential community that supported the academic learning and personal growth of residents.
- 2003-2004 *Day Care Assistant*, Blacksburg Day Care, Blacksburg, Virginia. Assisted in child entertainment. Enhanced child development through interaction. Assisted in learning through various play activities.
- 2003 *Intern* for Lenore McWey Ph.D. The Family Therapy Center, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia and through the Sociology Department, Peggy deWolf, Ph.D. Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia. Observed clinical cases. Maintained potential application packets. Transcribed doctoral student's dissertation data.
- 2001 *Volunteer*, Carilion Hospice, Radford, Virginia. Provided symptom and pain management for terminally ill patients. Provided support for terminally ill patients' families. Served as a liaison between patients and their families and caregivers.

Professional/Research Experience

Publishing Experiences

- 2007-present *Student Intern* for *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* Virtual Internship Program. Edit and review articles for the journal periodically.

Research/Related Professional Work History

- 2006-2007 *Thesis*. Master's thesis research investigating race-related stress and marital satisfaction in African American marriages. Research included collection and analysis of qualitative

data. Conducted ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews with African American married couples, used three theoretical frameworks (phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and family systems theory), and incorporated modified analytic induction in analysis of findings.

- 2006-2007 *Assistant Manual Editor* for Eliana Gil, Ph.D. Multicultural Clinical Center, Springfield, Virginia. Assisted with constructing clinician's guide to conducting play-based extended developmental assessments for traumatized children.
- 2004-2006 *Research Assistant* for Sandra Stith, Ph.D., Department of Human Development, Virginia Tech, Falls Church, Virginia. Assisted with constructing instruments for use by domestic violence clinicians. Created and maintained training packets for domestic violence clinicians. Reviewed and summarized research articles as part of a United States Air Force funded research team studying community based prevention research. Assisted with published literature review in *Journal of Primary Prevention*.
- 2004-2006 *Graduate Assistant* for Sandra Stith, Ph.D. and Pat Meneely, Program Department of Human Development-Graduate School, Virginia Tech, Falls Church, Virginia. Responsibilities included preparing departmental promotional materials, conducted orientation meetings with incoming graduate students, assisted in various administrative tasks, constructed and analyzed program surveys for alumni and students, and developed and managed program self-study report for COAMFTE 2006. Other responsibilities included role as Webmaster for program website, Editor for 2005 and 2006 program annual newsletter, and program List-serve manager.
- 2003-2004 *Student Researcher* with Fred Piercy, Ph.D. and Gloria Bird, Ph.D. Department of Human Development, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia. Composed and conducted qualitative study on stress, coping strategies, and perceptions of African American undergraduates at a predominately White University. Study in press in *Qualitative Report*.
- 2004-2004 *Project Assistant/Recruitment Monitor -Summer Intern* for Gayle Lester, Ph.D., National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Disease, National Institute of Health, Bethesda, Maryland. Provided research recruitment to the Osteoarthritis Initiative (OAI). Monitored and tracked recruitment and enrollment at several clinical centers in the United States. Established rapport with recruitment coordinators. Assisted in review of submitted grant applications. Prepared and posted updated information on OAI website. Provided assistance in conferences with various research committees.

Research Training

- 2007 Atlas.Ti Training
- 2005 DSTAT Meta-Analysis Training
- 2005 Number Cruncher Software Training
- 2003 SPSS Software Training
- 2003 Tailored Designed Model Training

Citizenship/Service

Presentations, Lectures, and Publications

Stone, J., Green, N., and Perozzi, M. (2007, April). *Marriage 101*. Psychoeducational group seminar for military couples required to have pre-marital education from the Fort Belvoir Chaplain Family Life Ministry and Training Center, United States Army; Fort Belvoir, Virginia (6 hours, 6 participant couples).

Stone, J., and Green, N. (2006, September). *Marriage 101*. Psychoeducational group seminar for military couples required to have pre-marital education from the Fort Belvoir Chaplain Family Life Ministry and Training Center, United States Army; Fort Belvoir, Virginia (6 hours, 4 participant couples).

Green, N., & Stith, S. (2006, March). *Marital discord and partner violence: A meta-analysis*. Poster session presented at Virginia Tech's Graduate Education Week, National Capital Region; Falls Church, Virginia.

Training & Conferences Attended/Organized

2007 *Story Circle Facilitator*. The Community Calls Forth the University-The Fourth Annual University-Community Partnership Conference. Facilitated a 2.5-hour dialogue session following the Keynote Address. Received 4-hour training in story circle methodology. Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia.

2006 VAMFT Conference. Fredericksburg, Virginia.

2006 Play-Based Extended Developmental Assessments; Received 2-hour clinical training. Led by Eliana Gil, Ph.D., Multicultural Clinical Center, Springfield, Virginia.

2006 *Registration Attendant*. Marriage: End the Blame, Not the Bond; Clinical training conference. Bowen Center for the Study of the Family-Georgetown Family Center, Falls Church, Virginia.

2006 Winning Over Anxiety: How to Play the Game; Clinical training conference. Mid-Atlantic Division of AAMFT & University of Maryland, Family Studies Department. College Park, Maryland.

2004 *Registration Attendant*. Beyond Blame: Adolescence in the Family; Clinical training conference. Bowen Center for the Study of the Family-Georgetown Family Center. Falls Church, Virginia.

2004 *Assistant*. Domestic Violence Couples Treatment; Clinical training. Led by Sandra Stith, Ph.D. and Eric McCollum, Ph.D. Marriage and Family Therapy program, Virginia Tech. Falls Church, Virginia .

2004 *Assistant Organizer*. Spiritually Sensitive Family Therapy; Clinical Training Conference. Led by Harry Aponte, Hosted by Marriage and Family Therapy program, Virginia Tech. Falls Church, Virginia.

2004 VAMFT Annual Conference. Charlottesville, Virginia.

References

Upon Request