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Shamika Yolanda Latrell Hall

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ASSESSING AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES ON SUCCESSFUL HETEROSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

by

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Dr. Mary Zwoyer Anderson, Advisor

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ASSESSING AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES ON SUCCESSFUL HETEROSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

Shamika Y. L. Hall, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University, 2007

This study seeks to understand successful African American relationships from the perspective of African American females. Recognizing the impact of structural factors on African Americans, as well as the limits of imposing Eurocentric definitions of successful relationships, this study seeks to understand how African American women themselves describe successful relationships and to identify factors that have influenced their ideas about what is required for them to have healthy, happy, long-lasting, nurturing relationships. Design of the present study is informed by findings from Stephens-Williams' (1992) study of successful African American relationships, as well as a broader review of structural, sociological, and psychological systems influencing African American relationships. In this study, participants have certain characteristics such as identifying as African American women, and knowing about or having experience with what they would consider to be successful heterosexual relationships. A phenomenological approach is used to explore how African American women define their relationships, understand the messages and factors that have influenced their ideas about successful relationships, and explore what they feel makes or would make their relationships successful. Four themes were uncovered as the participants shared their experiences with successful heterosexual relationships. These four themes are components of successful relationships, factors and
characteristics needed to facilitate and model successful relationships, barriers to having successful relationships, and optimism for successful relationships in the future. Findings are discussed within the context of Afrocentric and Eurocentric models of relationships. Research and counseling implications for psychologist and other mental health professional are also discussed.
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I would first like to thank God for allowing me this opportunity to achieve this goal. I know that it has been your divine plan for me because you have placed the most amazing people in my life to help me in my journey. You have also been a comfort and support in those times when I thought about giving up. I would also like to thank my parents, Henry and Sheila, for their financial, mental, and emotional support. The two of you have been very inspiring to me throughout my life and school journey.

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Thank you to my family and friends who supported during my graduate program. To my brother and sister, Godfrey and Najda, I want to let you know that I am proof that you can accomplish anything. Reach for the stars!! To my best friend, Shakeeb Lawrence, thanks for those late night talks; they got me through many nights. My dissertation buddy, Sharon Carney, we did it!!! I think we work well as a team. I would like to dedicate a poem to the women who have participated in my study. I could not have done this without you. Thank You.

Phenomenal Woman

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.
I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size
But when I start to tell them,
They think I'm telling lies.
I say,
It's in the reach of my arms
The span of my hips,
The stride of my step,
The curl of my lips.
I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That’s me.

I walk into a room
Just as cool as you please,
And to a man,
The fellows stand or
Fall down on their knees.
Then they swarm around me,
A hive of honey bees.
I say,
It’s the fire in my eyes,
And the flash of my teeth,
The swing in my waist,
And the joy in my feet.
I’m a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That’s me.

Men themselves have wondered
What they see in me.
They try so much
But they can’t touch
My inner mystery.
When I try to show them
They say they still can’t see.
I say,
It’s in the arch of my back,
The sun of my smile,
The ride of my breasts,
The grace of my style.
I’m a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That’s me.

Now you understand
Just why my head’s not bowed.
I don’t shout or jump about
Acknowledgments—Continued

Or have to talk real loud.
When you see me passing
It ought to make you proud.
I say,
It’s in the click of my heels,
The bend of my hair,
the palm of my hand,
The need of my care,
‘Cause I’m a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That’s me.

~Maya Angelou

Finally, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my grandparents, Hellon Green, the late Luther Green, Henry E. Collins, and Leona Collins. You all have worked so hard and invested so much in others, including me, and I want to say thank you. Thank you so much for allowing me to come “home” on the weekends to refuel.

Shamika Y. L. Hall
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CHAPTER I

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Review of Related Research

African American relationships are an integral part of the African American family and the community. Yet, little research has focused on African American male-female relationships (Bethea, 1995). Within the relatively small body of existing literature, the primary focus has been on the conflict between African American men and women, with almost no focus on positive relationships (Bell, 1989; Franklin, 1980; Willis, 1990). Indeed, review of existing literature identifies only a single study that looked at successful African American relationships (Stephens-Williams, 1992).

With respect to the primary focus on relationship conflict, some researchers have argued that responsibility for conflict lies with the male (Wallace, 1990). Other researchers indicate that relationship conflict lies with the female and still others suggest that the conflict comes primarily from within the White dominant culture (Karenga, 1979; Staples, 1981; Zoller & Williams, 1987). Zoller and Williams also believe that conflict in African American relationships stems from structural and psychological barriers. Although there is not much agreement about where the blame should be placed, researchers generally acknowledge that there are in fact major conflicts within the relationships that are failing and that dialogue must begin to take place and continue in order for these relationships to get better and become healthy and more fulfilling.
(Aldridge, 1991; Cazenave, 1983; Franklin, 1980). Despite what has been published in the literature, however, there are many successful African American relationships that are surviving. Research intentionally designed to give voice to the experiences of African American men and women in successful relationships is sorely needed.

In approaching the study of African American male-female relationships, it is important to consider the impact of structural, sociological, and psychological systems (Aborampah, 1989; Bell, Bouie, & Baldwin, 1990; Burgest & Goosby, 1985; Zoller & Williams, 1987). Researchers indicate that there are many structural aspects in American culture that hinder African American relationships (Aborampah, 1989; Aldridge, 1991; Burgest & Goosby, 1985). Aldridge (1991) reports that four major structural factors have a direct impact on these relationships: capitalism, racism, sexism, and Judeo-Christian ethics. In addition to the four structural factors that have been identified by Aldridge, psychological and sociological barriers have also been identified as having a direct impact on African American relationships (Burgest & Goosby, 1985; Parker, Berieda, & Sloan, 1984; Porter & Bronzaft, 1995; Willis, 1990).

In addition, some researchers state that African American relationships are assumed by many to be governed by the same values, viewpoints, and lifestyles as those of White American heterosexual couples (Bell et al., 1990; Haile & Johnson, 1989; Hutchinson, 1999). Yet, Asante (1981) believes that when African American relationships are viewed from a Eurocentric perspective or from the same values, beliefs, and ideas as Whites, then they are seen as being deficient. Based on Asante's idea that the understanding of African American people and their relationships should not be
examined through a Eurocentric lens, he coined the idea of Afrocentric views as a way to approach understanding the African American culture.

The purpose of this dissertation is to understand successful African American relationships from the perspective of African American females. Recognizing the impact of structural factors on African Americans, as well as the limits of imposing Eurocentric definitions of successful relationships, this study seeks to understand how African American women themselves describe successful relationships and to identify factors that have influenced their ideas about what is required for them to have healthy, happy, long lasting, nurturing relationships. Design of the present study is informed by findings from Stephens-Williams (1992) study of successful African American relationships, as well as a broader review of structural, sociological, and psychological systems influencing African American relationships.

As noted previously, Aldridge (1991) offers a useful framework for outlining the structural factors impacting African American relationships. This framework will be used to outline the themes that exist in current literature about African American relationships. Karenga (1979) also discusses ideas that are directly related to Aldridge's perspective, identifying four connections that he believes represent how African American men and women fall in love with each other. Discussion of these four connections—the cash connection, the flesh connection, the force connection, and the dependency connection—will be interwoven into the review of structural factors. Additionally, Benjamin (1983), Burgest and Goosby (1985), Parker et al. (1984), and Porter and Bronzaft (1995) identify several psychological and sociological barriers that they also believe impact African American relationships; these factors will also be included as additional
subsections within the literature review. Thus, the remainder of this literature review is organized around Aldridge's four structural factors and the sociological and psychological barriers suggested by other researchers. The sociological barriers consist of same-sex relationships, interracial dating, and the sex-ratio imbalance of men to women. Psychological barriers include stereotypes, myths, and assumptions that men and women hold about each other. Prior to discussing these ideas, the chapter will begin with an extensive discussion of Stephens-Williams' (1992) study of successful African American relationships. Some background information concerning the experiences of African American women and the status of African American relationships is provided as important additional context.

Aldridge (1984) points out that the problems in African American relationships are no more different than in any other cultural group. However, African American relationships must sustain through issues of racism, discrimination, and other societal pressures and that there are enough single African American people in the country to warrant studying their relationships. Furthermore, we have very little information about how some couples have been able to maintain long-lasting and nurturing relationships, while others seem to struggle and succumb to the pressures of trying to make their relationship work. As mentioned earlier; Stephens-Williams (1992) produced the only study of successful African American relationships. Stephens-Williams examined successful marriages from both the male and female perspectives. Stephens-Williams's dissertation involved conducting an exploratory study using an ethnography design looking at successful African American couples. Her study included five African American couples that were married for no less than 10 years. She purposely selected
couples who were married and did not include cohabitating couples or couples who were in committed long-term relationships without marriage licenses. She examined the social construction of participants' marriages and presented findings concerning the sociological, psychological, and sociocultural characteristics that influenced participants' relationships.

Stephens-Williams (1992) understood that more qualitative research is needed and did an excellent job of trying to understand successful African American relationships from the perspectives of African American couples, through their narratives and her own personal observations of their behavior, their customs, and the way they lived. She used a strength-based model for her study and spent a significant amount of time with her participants. Her observations included spending time in each couple's home and engaging with them in activities that occurred during the time of her study. She gathered her sample population of successful couples by recruiting them based on the recommendations of others' observations of the couple's success, happiness with each other, and the stability of their relationship.

Stephens-Williams (1992) used a sociocultural theory to frame her study. The sociocultural theory involves focusing on the attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and reality of the population you wish to study. She administered a questionnaire to evaluate each person's personality construct of African Self-Consciousness (ASC) and their level of acculturation to the dominant culture. She conducted her study using a multipart process of interviews, videotaped sessions, collection of demographic information, assessing participants' ASC scores and receiving feedback from the respondents about the process.
Stephens-Williams (1992) took the themes that she found from interviewing the couple and placed them into three factors for fostering successful relationships. These factors are sociological, psychological, and sociocultural. Ironically, parts of these three factors have also been identified in the literature as having a negative impact on the success of African American relationships. For example, the Judeo-Christian ethic is identified in the literature as having a negative impact on African American relationships (Aldridge, 1991; Asante, 1981). Yet, Stephens-Williams indicates that church and the African American community both play a role in the success of African American relationships. She identified "flexibility, interdependence, commitment, and strong family ties" as being very important for having a strong marriage (p. 127). The 21 themes that her participants identified as being important were also reported. They were strong marriage, co-creation (becoming one), family traditions, contributing to black causes, remembering where you came from, commitment to the relationship, marital stability, handling disagreements, role equity, role models, intimacy, hard work, mutual support, financial stability, good sex, racial pride, racial continuity, racial responsibility, courtship, patience, and religiosity. One interest of the present dissertation is finding out if these themes or factors hold true for African American people who were not necessarily married or living together. The proposed study will also allow exploration of whether or not African American women still identify these factors regardless of their relationship experiences. The African American couples in Stephens-Williams study did identify themselves as having successful relationships; however, little is known about their previous relationship experiences.
The present study seeks to understand positive aspects of African American relationships and how African American women are defining their relationships. Additionally, this study intends to understand what messages and factors may have an influence on African American women's ideas about successful relationships. In contrast to Stephens-Williams (1992), this study looks at African American women's perspectives about successful relationships regardless of their marital status.

History of African American Women

In order to understand African American relationships from African American women's perspectives, a brief background about African American women is given to help understand the psychology of African American women. Thomas (2004) defines the psychology of Black women as "the systematic study of the motivations, cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors of Black women taking into consideration the contextual and interactive effects of history, culture, race, class, gender, and other forms of oppression." African American women are often identified as a multiple oppressed group (Patterson, 2004; Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2004). They not only face discrimination due to their race, but also because of their gender. The dual role of being African American and woman should lead African American women to have low self-esteem and a low self-concept, yet this is not the typical outcome. Rather these perceived negative statuses result in African American women adopting an alternative model of being independent and self-reliant (Haile & Johnson, 1989; Jones & Shorter-Goeden, 2003).

Adams and Jackson (2000) and Patterson (2004) suggest that from birth African American women have been given resources to help them cope with racism and sexism.
They state that strong informal support networks, frequent contact with family members, and intergenerational transmission from their mothers and grandmothers allow African American women to maintain healthy thoughts and concepts of themselves. Social support networks include extended family, friends, church members, and fictive kin (people who are not directly blood related but are considered a member of the family). Additionally, Adams and Jackson (2000) and Thomas (2004) emphasize that the maintenance of healthy thoughts and concepts not only comes from external forces such as those listed above, but also comes from internal forces as well, such as inner strength, resiliency, motivation, hope, optimism, and spirituality.

Historically, in American society African American women have been oppressed, and devalued; however, they have prevailed in maintaining their strength and ability to survive or, at the very least, cope with their disadvantaged status (Thomas et al., 2004). African American women have had to be strong in their families as well as their relationships and are often seen as the backbones in African American families and as pillars in the African American community.

Although many have been oppressed, there is a sense that this population is strong and resilient. African women were brought over to America along with African men and children and were often seen as sexual objects by White males. Although African people were not originally brought to America to become slaves, due to capitalism and other factors, Africans were later singled out and were enslaved. African American women were raped, dehumanized, and disrespected by their masters as well as by their masters’ wives (Brown-Collins & Sussewell, 1986). This type of abuse led to the idea that African women and later African American women were nothing more than
sexual beings and that they should be treated as such (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). It is important to acknowledge that women in America from all cultures are often objectified; however, in many ways women from other cultures are placed on pedestals while Black women are not (Haile & Johnson, 1989). The abuse that African American women have endured occurred generation after generation, and while the African American woman tried to have her dignity and respect, the abuse later trickled over from White men and also allowed her to be mistreated by African American men as well as White women.

These African slaves and later African Americans were often seen as not human in order to justify the mistreatment of the race. Laws were created to continue the justification of enslaving this group of people. White men developed a plan to divide and conquer the slaves, which allowed the lighter skinned African slaves to do house work while the darker skinned slaves were left to do the fieldwork. This division among the slaves caused them to believe that the lighter your skin tones, the greater your worth. The meaning behind this is that if your physical characteristics are similar to those of European descent, then you are somehow better than someone who has a darker complexion (Jewell, 1983). These divisions have also been carried over from generation to generation and play an important role in current African American relationships. This idea of skin complexion is further perpetuated by images of darker complexions of African American women being viewed as being less attractive. Skin complexion only offers one view of the idea behind one possessing physical characteristics similar to those of European descent. Hair texture is also identified as being very important in level of attractiveness of African American women. For example, women who have straighter
and less course hair are often identified as being more attractive. This is believed to be
the reason why many African American women put chemical relaxers in their hair to
straighten it out. Women who tend to wear their hair in natural hairstyles are perceived
as less appealing to some men. This is seen by many to be a true form of self-hatred
when one does not want to embrace who they are in order to fit into the dominant
culture (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

Throughout history African American women have had to adapt to changes in
the community and family while remaining strong. In the past, African women had to
deal with the issue that often their partners may not be around for long because of the
risk of being sold off to other slave owners or being killed by their slave masters. This
risk of losing one’s partner continues to be a reality for African American women today
given that researchers believe between 20-25% of all African American women will
never get married due to many structural factors such as African American men’s
likelihood of spending some part of their lives incarcerated or their risk of dying young
(Aldridge, 1984; Davis, Emerson, & Williams, 1997). Blake and Darling (1994) state
that African American males between the ages of 15-30 years old are three times more
likely to die than Whites. They go on to indicate that African American males have a
50% greater chance of dying by the age of 20 years old than their White counterparts.
The experiences of losing one’s partner or never having a partner often define the
psychology of African American women. During slavery, African American women
began to realize that they must be strong in order to take care of their families.
Furthermore, African American women knew that there was a possibility that they must
be able to support themselves in case their partners were not around to help support them.

As the years passed and slavery became illegal, the effects of slavery and racism kept the African American community in this state of mind. Although the laws around slavery and later racism began to change in American society, the mindset of the people did not, and racism still affects African Americans today. It is important to address the history of African American women because their treatment in the past continues to have an impact on their relationships with African American men. Many African American women still conduct their lives in a manner consistent with their beliefs that African American men will not be around to help them support their families. For example, many African American women will forgo marriage because they are less likely to find a suitable partner for marriage, but still would like to have children and start their families with a possibility that the children will be fatherless and they will be without a spouse. African American women also have become very independent. In many ways this is seen as the superwomen syndrome and African American men will often complain that they do not feel needed in their relationships.

History of African American Relationships

African American relationships have been changing over time. During the first part of the century, African Americans married early and rarely divorced. However, these patterns have changed drastically over the past 50 years (Allen & Olson, 2001). In the mid 1990s, two thirds of all African American adults identified themselves as being single (Davis et al., 1997). Since this dissertation intends to explore how African
American women are defining successful relationships, it is helpful to discern that these relationships are often viewed from Eurocentric lenses, which evaluate African American relationships from a deficit model. Some authors suggest that African American relationships should be viewed from an Afrocentric model (Asante, 1981; Kelly & Floyd, 2001). Whether or not relationships are looked at from a Eurocentric model or an Afrocentric model, divorce is continuing to rise and is having a major impact on American society. The divorce rate for all couples is alarming and is even higher for African American couples (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Kposowa, 1998; Norment, 1983). According to the U.S. Census for 2003, 11.9% of African American couples divorced compared to 10.6% in 1990 (U.S. Census Bureau 2004-2005). This problem seems to start out small; however, it is having a major impact on African American families and even the African American community as a whole. Psychologists will begin to see the effects of how male/female relationships and male/female interactions are having an impact on the African American population and might see an increase in the number of African American clients they see in therapy regarding issues around relationships (James, Tucker, & Mitchell-Kernan, 1996).

Research on African American relationships often focuses on dysfunctions in the relationship, is usually pathology centered, and takes a deficit perspective based on Eurocentric views of relationships (Bell et al., 1990; Mack, 1971). Using a Eurocentric model assumes that African American values and beliefs about relationships are similar to the dominant culture. These Eurocentric values focus on individualism, materialism, and physical gratification and often affect African American relationships because African Americans do not have a foundation based on these values but rather one that
emphasizes collectivism, having mutual respect, and sacrificing for one another (Bell et al., 1990; Slight, 1940). History has shown that African American people did not typically have many material items and often had to rely on family and each other for financial and emotional support.

Due to the four major structural and value systems of capitalism, racism, sexism, and the Judeo-Christian ethic in America, African American relationships are affected and are faced with obstacles that have an impact on their relationship (Aldridge, 1984, 1991; Franklin, 1980; Kelly & Floyd, 2001). This can be evidenced in Black men being shut out of positions that they are qualified for based on their race (Franklin, 1984). It can also be seen in how the government chooses to help poor African American women support their families by providing support to the women only if there is no man in the home. African American relationships must sustain through oppressive experiences such as these.

Asante (1998) offers an alternative lens for viewing African American relationships. He asserts that African Americans cannot be understood using a Eurocentric model because they are an oppressed group. He also insists that when African American people hold a Eurocentric view, they are likely to become anti-Black, which contributes to self-hatred. Instead he contends that all African American relationships are better understood using an Afrocentric model. In Asante’s (1998) Afrocentric model, he emphasizes that harmony with oneself and with nature is very important to African American people. He also identifies four major value components of African American relationships that are central to the Afrocentric model: sacrifice, inspiration, vision, and victory. He identifies sacrifice as being important because the
individual looks at what is most important to their relationship and makes the relationship more collective rather than individualistic. The idea behind sacrifice is that the individual positions the spiritual characteristics over the physical and material features in the relationships. The inspiration value emphasizes that each partner should be supportive and encouraging of each other along with giving and taking from each other when necessary. The third value component is being a visionary in the relationship. Asante identifies this as making plans and decisions that will be for the advancement of the Black family and the Black community. Victory is identified as the fourth value component and states that couples should rejoice in the accomplishment and the advancement of African American people. Asante believes that all four aspects are needed for African American couples to have a solid foundation (Bell, Bouie, & Baldwin, 1998).

Acknowledging the alternative perspectives found in Eurocentric and Afrocentric models of relationships, this dissertation seeks to discern African American women's story about successful relationships outside of the constraints of either model. These models are used as a discussion point following analysis of the data collected from the participants to understand whether or not either of these models fit for these women, but these models will not be imposed upon the participants. Instead this study will look at the experiences and testimony of African American women to illuminate their understanding of successful relationships.
The Effects of Racism on African American Relationships

Many researchers discuss the negative impact that racism has on African American male-female relationships (Aborampah, 1989; Bell, 1989; Bell et al., 1990; Bethea, 1995; Franklin, 1980; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). According to many, racism in America has had detrimental effects on African American relationships and dates as far back as when Africans were brought over to America and enslaved. Black men were often not allowed to assume a masculine role and were regularly beaten into submission by their White slave owners and possibly killed if they did not comply with the demands of their owners (Franklin, 1980). African American women realized that African American men may not be around and often had to be in charge of the family household. African American mothers continually passed down to their daughters that they must be able to support themselves because of the possibly that African American men would not be around to support them (Franklin, 1984; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Although these mothers intended this to mean that African American men might not be around to support them due to death, the expectation was continued in the future to imply that men might not be around for other reasons as well. This style of thinking continues today with female children being told by their parents that they must be able to support themselves because they can never depend on a man to be there for them. Some African American women appear to have taken this way of thinking further by suggesting that Black men are worthless, irresponsible, and incompetent to truly be suitable partners (Franklin, 1980). Jewell (1983) also cites the mass media as a culprit in introducing images of Black men being passive and lacking motivation to work or take...
care of their responsibilities. These images of African American men are continually perpetuated by the images that we see in the media.

There is also a sex-ratio imbalance among African American men and women that is in part due to racism in America as well as other sociological factors. James et al. (1996) and Jones and Shorter-Goode (2003) report that African American women have outnumbered African American men since the 1920s. Aborampah (1989) states that the sex-ratio imbalance is most prominent in the age range of those seeking marriage. There are several reasons why women outnumber men in the Black community. First, Black men are incarcerated for long periods of time at alarming rates (Brownsberger, 2000; King, 1993). Brownsberger also reports that these men are often sentenced to very lengthy prison sentences that often do not match up to the crime they have committed. African American men are given harsher sentences than any other cultural group, including White men. Their prison terms are often longer for nonviolent crimes such as those involving drug use or drug sales (Brownsberger, 2000).

Prison is not the only cause of the sex-ratio imbalance. The infant mortality rate is higher for African American boys and is partially due to the limited access to healthcare and/or poorer quality of healthcare received by them than for any other racial or sex group in America (Davis et al., 1997). Across the lifespan, Black males life expectancy is significantly lower than that of Black females, White females, and White males (Braithwaite, 1981; Hatter & Wright, 1993). The low life expectancy of these males can be attributed in part to the infant morality rate but also must be attributed to the reality that African American males are more likely to be killed in a homicide than any other group of males (Davis et al., 1997). It is suggested that a number of African
American males will be killed before they reach the age of 25 (Simms, Knight, & Dawes, 1993). According to the U.S. census for 2003, the death rate of African American males doubles in size between the ages of 15-24 years old and 25-34 years old, making them the leading racial group in death rate (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004-2005). African American men also have to contend with drug addiction and the fact that there are health issues that they must be concerned with because they are the leading group when it comes to certain terminal illnesses and diseases such as hypertension, certain types of cancer, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease (Franklin, 1984; Hatter & Wright, 1993). All these factors that contribute to the sex-ratio imbalance have negative consequences toward African American relationships and cause African American men and women to be single, or to be less committed to the relationship, and to become parents out of wedlock (James et al., 1996).

African American men and women often struggle with wanting to embrace the African part of them, which is often oppressed due to racism and other prejudices, and the “American” part of them that is never fully accepted by the dominant culture because of the color of their skin. These different parts often cause internal conflict within them. The “American” part is socialized to expect the male to have more masculine roles such as being the head of the household and having the ability to be the primary care provider, whereas the female is expected to be more feminine, passive, emotionally and financially dependent, warm, and nurturing (Aborampah, 1989). In contrast, the African part of African American men and women is socialized into a collective perspective expecting they will work together to make their relationship, family, and community more cohesive (Asante, 1981). It can be seen how these conflicting messages (internal and external)
could have a negative impact on African American people's relationships with each other.

Racial discrimination around unemployment and inequality also has a major impact on African American relationships. Bell (1989) and Dixon (1998) argue that employment practices in America have negatively affected these relationships. An example of this is when African American women make more money than African American men. Many men feel that their masculinity and manhood are being challenged because they cannot be the breadwinner or the head of household (Benjamin, 1983). Furthermore, some researchers cite that African American women have been given more opportunities than African American men in work and business settings, causing resentment in their relationships (Kposowa, 1998). Many African American women have begun to take the attitude of not needing a man in relationship because they feel that they can take care of themselves. Based on these factors, African Americans are defining their own ideas of successful relationships.

Racial discrimination in employment puts African American women in a position where they must begin to make choices around what they are willing to accept in their relationships if they choose to have ongoing relationships with African American men (Porter & Bronzaft, 1995). African American women must begin to deal with their possible internal conflict in that they have been taught that they should be able to support themselves but also that they must find a man who will take care of them. This is often impossible because of the differences in income between Whites and Blacks, meaning that there are very few African American males who could support them without them also having to work. Research indicates that African American people still make less
money than their White counterparts (Aborampah, 1989; Bell, 1989). Black males are said to make one third less than White males, and black females are said to fare even worse, coming in last when compared to White males and females and Black males.

African American females have attempted to narrow the income gap between themselves and other racial groups as well as White women by obtaining higher education. African American women pursue more education and obtain more professional positions than African American men. Although Affirmative Action has helped African American women become more educated and employable, the impact has not been the same for African American men (Bell, 1989). Bell contends that Black women hold two thirds of professional positions among African Americans. This negatively impacts the relations between African American men and women because of the competition between males and females. Finances or the lack thereof are often a major cause of African American relationship breakup (Aborampah, 1989).

Black women in America have traditionally been the least paid group of people by sex and race and this inequality still continues today (Dixon, 1998; Lorde, 1979; Sojourner, 1979). Black women make approximately 63 cents to the dollar of every White male (Dixon, 1998). In the 1970s, Black women outnumbered Black men in unemployment rate and income, even if they had the same educational level (Jordan, 1979). This reality is believed to come from the patriarchal idea that men should be the head of the household and the breadwinners in the family. However, with more women entering the workforce each year, there still have not been any changes in the rate of equity of income that women make when compared to men. Furthermore, many African
American women are faced with the reality that they must take the leadership role in the family because many are likely to have never been married (Davis et al., 1997).

In addition to the differential income between men and women, the duties that were and are still in some cases traditionally assigned to women often paid less money until the workforce jobs became more blurred and men and women began doing many of the same jobs. For example, women were often tracked in occupations such as becoming nurses, social workers, and teachers, which in many cases paid less money than the nontraditional careers for women in business related fields and the sciences (Evans & Herr, 1991; Willis, 1990).

Now, as African American women obtain professional positions, they are likely to embrace the ideas that were originally taught to them by their mothers, which is that they should be able to take care of themselves. This may be the primary reason that educated African American women are the least likely group to get married and are often seen as less desirable mates by African American men (Bethea, 1995). They must either marry down or not get married at all. If they elect not to get married at all, then they must face the reality that they will possibly spend their lives alone (Bethea, 1995). Furthermore, if they decide that they would like to have children, they are often faced with having children out of wedlock. The fact of having children out of wedlock is not a problem that only affects educated African American women, but all African American women due to the shortage of African American men.

If educated African American women elect to marry down, then there is possible conflict for African American men and women who hold on to the Eurocentric idea that men are supposed to be the primary breadwinners in the family. If the woman makes
more money than the man, then she probably expects to be the head of the household, often making the man feel inferior or less than a man.

Uneducated and/or unemployed African American men and women are also affected by racism. African American men who live below the poverty level are less likely to get married (Bethea, 1995). African American women who are uneducated and/or unemployed and have children are regularly forced to make a decision between having a male in the house and having financial support (Aborampah, 1989). Most government programs specify that in order to have governmental support such as food stamps or other forms of financial support the women must be the only adult in the house. This often leads to breakups in the family structure, resulting in no male role models in the household for the male children. Furthermore, this often has a negative impact on African American relationships, as well as the African American family and more specifically the African American children.

The Effects of Sexism on African American Relationships

Sexism in America led to the revolution of the women’s movement to help women gain their equality. Matthews (1979) reports that Black women were very active in the racial or civil rights movement and that they were also active in the women’s movement. African American women participated in the women’s movement, assuming that it would be advancement for all women, not realizing the implications that it would have on African American people or, more specifically, African American relationships (Braithwaite, 1981). The effect that the women’s movement had on the Black movement (or civil rights movement) was to shift the attention from race to gender issues. Many
researchers believe that the women’s movement specifically had a positive impact only on White women’s liberation (Burrow, 1992). Burrow further states that the Women’s movement was rooted in racist ideology because White women did not see African American women as equal to them, and thus did not demand the same equal treatment of African American women that they demanded for themselves. African American women believed that the Women’s movement would help them become equals in America; however, they did not take into consideration that they are still African American. Although all women continue to struggle with issues of sexism, African American women continue to be affected the most. Stated another way, African American women did not reap the benefits of the women’s movement and in some ways suffered setbacks as a result of the women’s movement. Although women were seeking several things from the women’s movement such as equal rights, African American women were never protected and respected by the women’s movement due to racism (Burrow, 1992). The liberation movement did have an impact on African American women; however, the impact was negative in that it put a strain on African American relationships because of the competition for limited resources between African American men and women (Aldridge, 1991).

Sexism also exists in the American system of exploiting women in the media (in the news, on television shows, and in music videos). Often, African American women are portrayed in ways that perpetuate the stereotypes of them not being very feminine and having man-like qualities (Jewell, 1983). They are often depicted as “mammy” and “Aunt Jemima.” Subsequently, these stereotypes make the African American women less desirable to African American men. Furthermore, African American women are
portrayed as being oversexed and loose in music videos and in movies. The fantasy these images encourage lead men to begin treating African American women as if they are sexual objects rather than people. Karenga (1979) believes that there is a link between the sexual objectification of women and the flesh connection, which states that men and women strictly seek sex from each other as the ultimate relational goal. Women are also sexually exploited in magazines when they dress in provocative ways to sell products. While it may not be considered sexual exploitation, there is a sexist undertone around women raising children because women are often seen as the person who should be responsible for child rearing. Men and women have bought into this idea and take issue if the man decides that it is best for the woman to be the breadwinner and the man to stay at home and care for the children. Many of these sexist beliefs are frequently connected to the Judeo-Christian ethic.

As discussed further in the section on sociological impacts, a sex-ratio imbalance of Black men to Black women also increases the likelihood that sexism will continue in the Black community because Black men realize that they are at an advantage when interacting with Black women. Many Black men realize that there are more Black women than Black men, thus allowing them to have more opportunities for mate selection. Furthermore, they also realize that they can exploit women by turning them against one another. According to Staples (1981), Black men did not have the ability to force and control women on the institutional level; however, they can noticeably show sexist behavior in the church and within the family.
The Effects of Judeo-Christian Ethic on African American Relationships

Religious orientation is cited as being very influential in African American relationships (Aldridge, 1991; Allen & Olsen, 2001; Asante, 1981). Allen and Olsen report that a couple's religious orientation is central to helping them maintain a positive relationship. They indicate that many African American couples draw on their relationship with God to help them cope with the stresses of racism and other structural issues they will face in American society. Religion, or more specifically Christianity, can be used to spiritually ground couples in their relationships. However, some researchers disagree with these ideas, believing instead that the Judeo-Christian ethic has had a devastating effect on African American relationships (Aldridge, 1991; Asante, 1981; Gray-Little, 1982). For example, Asante describes Christianity as overpowering women into believing that they should obey the man, or specifically, their husband. There is an emphasis placed on the woman’s role as being passive, submissive, and subordinate to men. Furthermore, American values are reflected in a manner of the Judeo-Christian ethic that the man is supposed to be the head of household and the provider, while the female is supposed to take a more passive role in the relationship (Aldridge, 1991). Karenga (1979) identifies the force connection as being directly related to the Judeo-Christian ethic in that the male feels that he can forcibly take what he wants. The male may believe that the woman is an object and therefore can be owned by him (Aldridge, 1984). Asante (1981) believes that African Americans should have a more collaborative approach to their relationship. Asante also states that Christianity instills in all the worship of a White man, which is problematic because “they [African Americans] are in

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effect denying their own godliness” (p. 76). Although the effects of Christianity continue
to be debated, if we were to compare the core beliefs around Christianity to the core
beliefs around what it would take to foster healthy and successful relationships, there
would be much incongruency.

African American relationships are often characterized as being matriarchal in
nature (Bell et al., 1990; Gray-Little, 1982). However, Gray-Little (1982) and Mack
(1971) both report in their study that there is no evidence to support this
characterization. In fact, some researchers report African American relationships as
being primarily egalitarian (Gray-Little, 1982; Mack, 1971). Furthermore, these same
researchers report that egalitarian relationships prove to be most successful in African
American relationships.

The Effects of Capitalism on African American Relationships

Many authors indicate that capitalism also has a negative impact on African
American relationships (Allen & Olsen, 2001; Bell et al., 1990; Dixon, 1998). Aldridge
(1984) defines capitalism as “the socio-economic system in which private ownership is
the primary means for satisfying human needs.” The economic changes of Black male
joblessness in American society have generated shifts in employment opportunities for
Black men and women (Dickson, 1993; Dixon, 1998). These shifts in employment
opportunities permit more Black women to be employed than Black men, allowing for
Black women to believe that they do not need to marry. The Eurocentric value of having
material things often creates a problem when looking at African American relationships.
When someone seeks out the material things in America, it is often tied to capitalism
because with capitalism everyone wants to have the big house with the white picket fence and feel that they have accomplished or achieved by having material things. Bell et al. (1990) indicate that African Americans are often not given the same opportunities to achieve in this way due to racial oppression; thus, defining success in this Eurocentric way is harmful. When African American people take on the capitalist perspective, they often believe that money and material things will solve all their problems; they construct the idea that they are living the American dream. Karenga (1979) describes this idea as having the "cash connection." The cash connection is rooted in capitalism and simply states that everything has a price and can be bought and that potential partners will consider you more attractive if you have money. Although this idea of the cash connection is supposed to be strictly connected to African American women, African American men may also seek relationships with the opposite gender for this reason. The cash connection and flesh connection can be seen as being mutual in that you may see a successful African American professional male who makes a great deal of money (cash connection), but is less attractive with a woman who is more attractive (flesh connection) but has little or no money.

In a model developed by Asante (1981), Afrocentric relationships are the premium. Asante informs scholars that all African American relationships should subscribe to an African American worldview in that there should be an emphasis on oneness with nature and survival of the group. Furthermore, according to Bell et al. (1990), African Americans should embrace more Afrocentric values such as having mutual respect, sharing with each other, and sacrificing for one another in order to foster a healthy relationship between each other. American society is often driven by money.
and having high financial status. Financial and economic barriers often affect African American relationships because African American men and women are not making money that is equivalent to that of their White counterparts (Allen & Olsen, 2001). The unemployment rates of African American males and females are twice that of White people. Male unemployment conditions and high divorce rates have been shown to have a high correlation with one another (Dickson, 1993).

Capitalism affects how African American men and women select their potential mates. In addition to capitalism, socioeconomic status factors also shape marital prospects for men and women. Males base their decisions about marriage on their economic capability, and females often base their decisions of mate selection and marriage on the ability of the male to have a solid economic foundation (Allen & Olsen, 2001). Furthermore, Dixon (1998) reports that African American men's inability to attain a financially viable job has a negative outcome on African American male-female relationships. A large number of African American men are often stuck in part-time or manual labor jobs, and African American women are often expected to be employed in jobs that would cover where the men cannot because they have part-time or low-paying jobs. Although females usually report higher income ratios than Black males, these same females expect the males to earn more money than they do (Davis et al., 1997). This is possibly due to the fact that African American women are often sent messages stating that they are expected to marry men who earn more money than they do so that the man can take care of them (Marshall, 1983).

African American women often perceive African American men who do not work or who only work part-time as being less desirable for marriage or any type of
intimate partnership (Dickson, 1993). In addition to Black women wanting to find mates that are economically stable, Black men believe that Black women are given greater chances to find better paying and more reliable jobs than they have and that this also contributes to the low standings of Black men (Dickson, 1993). Education and employment tend to have a culturally alienating effect on Black heterosexual relationships (Bell et al., 1990; Braithwaite, 1981). For example, African American women who are highly educated are the least likely group to get married, causing them to remain single or date outside of their race (Porter & Bronzaft, 1995). African American men also might feel threatened by African American women who are educated because they will make more money.

Sociological Impact on African American Relationships

In addition to the internal and external conflicts that African American men and women have within themselves, there are also sociological issues that exist in American society that have an impact as well. There has been a continual decline in the number of available African American men in the United States (James et al., 1996). Although some aspects of the sex-ratio imbalance can be attributed to racism, some cannot. The sex-ratio imbalance is one sociological issue that has a negative outcome on African American relationships. It is estimated that there are about 71 black males to 100 black females as a result of incarceration, death, and same sex partnerships. The sex-ratio imbalance makes mate selection for African American females challenging due to the fact that there is competition among females to select a good mate, as well as for them to decide whether or not they should date or marry down in order to have a mate. This idea
of having African American women date or marry down refers to the idea that the African American male will not have as much to offer her in their relationship. This could possibly mean that the male is less educated or less attractive than she is, or it could mean that he is older or has had previous committed relationships and will bring children into his relationship with her.

Same-sex partnerships and interracial relationships impact African American male-female relationships and are seen as being more sociologically related than as a result of racism. African American male-female relationships are impacted by same-sex partnerships through the impact on the sex-ratio imbalance because it limits the number of available men for women. It is important to address that the number of both men and women available for heterosexual relationships may be affected by same-sex partnerships; however, in the issue of male-female sex-ratio imbalance, women are more significantly affected because women already outnumber the number of available men. In addition, African American men have been socialized to believe that men are not masculine and less than male if they are physically and sexually attracted to other males because of the stigma attached to this sexual orientation. However, the stigma does not always stop men from engaging in sexual behaviors with other men, all the while carrying on a relationship with their wives or girlfriends. This behavior is often referred to as being on the “down low” (Mays, Cochran, & Zamudio, 2004). Being on the down low is intentionally hiding important information from your partner in order to continue to live your life in a manner that you may perceive as being more acceptable to the group with which you belong. These men are often bisexual, but their denial or insecurities only contribute to them engaging in risky behavior with men and women. These bisexual men
either carry on partial relationships with women while having relationships with men or
they totally engage in relationships with men and do not have any relations with women.
Nonetheless, there are consequences for successful heterosexual relationships. These
consequences include infidelity or the break-up of existing relationships and the
unlikelyhood of these men and women connecting.

Interracial dating further increases the sex-ratio imbalance. It limits the number of
eligible Black men more than the number of eligible Black women because Black men
are more likely to date outside their race than Black women. In addition to the
contribution to the sex-ratio imbalance, an African American woman often sees
interracial dating as a personal rejection of her (Aldridge, 1984; Braithwaite, 1981).

These examples of the sex-ratio imbalance limit the number of available men to
women. Aborampah (1989) indicates that in certain geographic locations only one Black
male is available for every five Black females. In other cities, these numbers may be even
greater. African American women are at a disadvantage when it comes to mate selection
because there is often a competition with other women for the limited number of men
(Braithwaite, 1981). Furthermore, African American men are aware of this competition
between African American women and often use this to their advantage. This is referred
to as being a buyer in a buyer’s market (Aldridge, 1984).

The Effects of Psychological Factors on Relationships

Babies in America start the gender socialization process at birth. Little boys wear
blue and little girls wear pink. Throughout their lives, little boys and girls continue to
receive messages about how they should behave and respond in different situations. For
example, little boys are taught that they should not cry or that they should not play with baby dolls. Little girls are taught about their future gender roles of having children and fulfilling their future “wifely” duties such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for their children. Although there have been some clearly defined roles for men and women in America, these roles do not always fit for African American people or more specifically African American couples. For example, African American couples are not often afforded the opportunity to have the wife stay home with the children while the husband goes to work and financially provides for the family. In many cases the wife often has to work outside the home to supplement the husband’s income for the house to run effectively. In addition to the wife working outside the home, the couple’s family often actively participates in caring for the children.

African American people are further socialized in ways that are destructive to their male-female relationships (Franklin, 1984). African American men are receiving messages that they should always be cool, nonexpressive, and hard toward the world, including toward African American women (Aldridge, 1991). In addition to being cool and nonexpressive, men are also taught that in order to be a man you must be aggressive, dominant, and able to take care of your responsibilities. However, being an African American male in America, they are also taught by their families that they cannot be aggressive because of the possibility of being seen as a threat to the dominant culture (Franklin, 1984). Furthermore, historically African American men were painfully reminded that if they were to become too aggressive, they were likely to be killed, maimed, or incarcerated. In many ways, African American males are often conflicted on how they are supposed to act, not only in the world but also when dealing with African
American women. Franklin (1984) indicates that African American men often deal with this conflict by internalizing all the messages they have received and acting out the negative actions such as being sexually aggressive, sexist, and violent. These men struggle to obtain the dominant culture’s idealist view of masculinity, although this view may not fit with who they are as African American men.

African American women have received messages that they should be sexual beings. This is evidenced by the way they are portrayed in the media. African American women are often shown in music videos as being hypersexual and aggressive. These images often lead to the objectification of women (Aldridge, 1984, 1991). This portrayal of African American women is not something that is new in American society, as it dates back to the arrival of African women into America. African American men also are perceived as very sexual beings. They are often portrayed in the media as trying to be with as many women as possible while having as many children as they can have with as many women as possible. This may not be an accurate portrayal; however, it is often an image that is left in many people’s minds through different social outlets.

African American men and women often engage in game-playing activities with each other. In fact, this is cited as one of the major problems in starting and maintaining healthy and stable African American relationships (Burgest & Goosby, 1985; Parker et al., 1984). Burgest and Goosby (1985) further argue that people often engage in game playing unconsciously and without realizing that they are playing the games and that the unconscious game playing can be the most destructive to their relationships. In their study, they indicate that people play games for many different psychological reasons. For example, if a woman had been hurt or abused in a previous relationship, she may enter a
new relationship to inflict pain onto the new partner or because she does not understand
what is acceptable in a healthy relationship. Nonetheless, the game player is often
seeking some sort of payoff for his or her game playing (Burgest & Goosby).

Burgest and Goosby (1985) outline the most common and the most destructive
games that are played in relationships. The psychological games that they identify
encompass a way of thinking about how one should be treated or a way of gaining and
maintaining power in a relationship. These game-playing strategies are summarized in
statements such as “If you love me you will . . .” “If it weren’t for you, I could . . .”
“Why don’t you make me happy?” “I am unhappy and I want you to be unhappy,” and
“If you don’t tell me you love me, you don’t love me.” It is evident from their findings
that these statements can have a harmful impact on relationships. To be more specific,
individuals who believe in these statements often are looking for something in a
relationship that can be found only within themselves. Many people are given the illusion
through the media and society that you can reach a utopia by being in a relationship. Yet,
if you are unhappy before you enter a relationship, you will most likely be unhappy in the
relationship. Burgest and Goosby describe this as the misery loves company syndrome.

Bell et al.’s (1990) research suggests that conflict in African American
relationship stems not only from the psychological games that are being played but also
from the stereotypes, myths, and assumptions that African American men and women
believe about each other. Among these stereotypes that contribute to the failure of
African American relationships are that African American women are domineering, too
independent, materialistic, self-centered, and emasculating. Parker et al. (1984) report
that embracing such myths, assumptions, and stereotypes about each other often breaks down the lines of communication between men and women in relationships.

In the media, African American women are often portrayed as being oversexed, loose, dominating, aggressive, rude, controlling, rebellious, outspoken, and loud (Thomas et al., 2004). These negative images often play a major role in the stereotyping of African American women and how African American men and White men and women treat them. Black women are often viewed negatively in the mass media and more recently in “rap” music videos (Aldridge, 1984). It is almost impossible to find African American music videos or television that does not portray African American women in this manner. Each of these examples of how African American men and women are portrayed further perpetuates the stereotypes held by many and negatively affects their relationships.

Some researchers report that married people tend to be happier and have greater life satisfaction than single individuals (Zoller & Williams, 1987). However, statistics continue to show that there is a steady decline in African American relationships (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004-2005; Kposowa, 1998; Zoller & Williams, 1987). These negative images and attitudes left for African American men and women to grapple with often have a negative impact on their relationships. These negative images and the lack of communication between men and women often lead to game playing between the sexes (Aldridge, 1991; Benjamin, 1983; Willis, 1990).

Bell et al. (1990) suggest that instead of focusing on the negative myths and stereotypes, African American couples should focus on the positive qualities that their partner has, such as moral character, sharing, and mutual respect, to sustain healthy
relationships. Furthermore, they believe that having an African American worldview combined with an Afrocentric relationship would be ideal for successful relationships. In summary, more research is needed to generate models for fostering healthy, successful relationships between African American men and women. Generating models is only one step to understanding healthy relationships; it is also necessary to assess the role of cultural variables and other related factors in order to more fully understand Black heterosexual relationships. The understanding of African American relationships and the development of models that accurately assess African American relationships should result in culturally valid interventions and plans that are geared more toward fostering healthy and successful African American relationships.

There has been a paucity of literature that focuses on African American relationships (Bethea, 1995; Mays, 1988). Past research is limited by an overuse of deficit models when looking at African American relationships and failure to look at the African American population from a view that would be conducive to how African Americans live today. In addition, research also has focused on what is wrong with African American relationships and the factors that could be potentially destroying African American relationship, yet there are couples that have been able to foster what they would consider to be an ideal relationship, and there are women who have positive ideas of what a successful relationship looks like. It is undeniable that racism, sexism, and Judeo-Christian ethics have a major impact and play a critical role in African American relationships (Aldridge, 1991). This study seeks to understand how woman are defining successful relationships with African American men and to learn more about the experiences of many women that have led to their beliefs about successful, healthy,
happy, and ideal relationships. It seeks to provide more insight into African American relationships from a perspective that is more culturally sensitive and to explore how African American women come to understand what a successful relationship means for them.
CHAPTER II

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to understand successful African American relationships from the view of African American women. In this study, participants had certain characteristics, such as identifying as African American women and having had experience with heterosexual relationships. A phenomenological approach was used to explore how African American women define their relationships, to identify what participants feel made or would make their relationships successful, and to understand the messages and factors that have influenced their ideas about successful relationships.

This chapter reports the rationale and research methods used in this qualitative study. The first section introduces the research questions. The second section discusses the specific qualitative approach employed and provides a rationale for use of this approach. The third section addresses the recruitment and sampling method, and criteria for selection of participants. Strategies for data collection, the procedure for conducting the study, and ethical considerations are presented fourth. The process of analysis, coding method, and criteria for rigor are discussed in the fifth section.

A review of the literature on African Americans yielded a limited amount of professional literature on African American relationships (Bethea, 1995). Furthermore, existing literature acknowledges the underuse of qualitative research methods for studying African Americans (Ponterotto, 1988). There are several reasons for deciding
to use qualitative methods for the present study. First, there appears to be a need for more qualitative research on race. Second, currently there are no measures to assess relationship success of African Americans, leaving researchers who may want to explore this area needing to develop an assessment tool. There are basic research instruments that look at relationship satisfaction, yet these instruments may not be appropriate measures because they more than likely were designed and normed on majority couples, which could potentially have negative consequences when used with a marginalized group (McDowell & Jeris, 2004). Finally, there is richness in studying African American culture qualitatively.

Research Questions

The research questions chosen for this study sought to allow deeper understanding of what African American women believe is important for them to have successful relationships. The primary focus for this study was to learn about the meanings that African American women have made of their experiences of relationships. African American women from varying backgrounds were selected for this study because African American women’s voices have not been heard concerning their relationships and because of the structural realities of society. We cannot afford to assess African American relationships only from an outsider’s viewpoint of what their experiences are like without allowing African Americans themselves to explain what it has been like for them regarding successful relationships. This study provides valuable insight for psychologists in working with and understanding African American women’s
experiences and provides African American women an opportunity to have a voice about their perspectives on relationships.

The following research questions were explored:

1. How are African American women defining successful heterosexual relationships?

2. What are African American women's views of the factors or characteristics needed to have a successful and happy relationship?

3. What are the messages that African American women received that influenced their thoughts about successful relationships?

4. What factors are impacting African American women’s perceptions of successful relationships?

Qualitative Research and Phenomenology

A qualitative method was proposed for this study following the guidelines given by Creswell (1998). First, qualitative research questions usually seek to understand the what or the how of a situation to better describe what is happening. Second, it is useful for considering questions that are concerned with exploration of relatively unstudied topics or perspectives. And finally, qualitative methods are well-suited to developing an in-depth description or view of the topic being explored by studying the research participants in their natural setting.

The present study is an exploratory study using a phenomenological method. The primary rationale for this type of design was to assess the current status of African American relationships in that there has been limited research on the relationship success...
of African Americans specifically from the female's perspective. This particular method of study was used because it is important to understand the lived experience of women who are currently living this phenomenon. It also allows African American women to have a voice about their experiences with heterosexual relationships because often their experiences are not researched. Research within the phenomenological attitude is usually discovery oriented rather than hypothesis proving or theory testing (Giorgi, 1986; Giorgi and Giorgi, 2003). Therefore, in this present study no theoretical framework was imposed on the data collection or analysis. This facilitated a discovery oriented approach to the study.

Phenomenology is a qualitative method that was initiated by Edmund Husserl in the early twentieth century (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Phenomenological analysis is concerned with knowing and understanding how individuals who are living the experience constitute the world. It also seeks to understand how one gives meaning to what has occurred (Schwandt, 2000). Additionally, Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) state that "phenomenological psychological research aims to clarify situations lived through by persons in everyday life . . . and to investigate and analyze the lived examples of the phenomenon within the context of the participants' lives" (pp. 26-27). This study follows Giorgi's guidelines for conducting phenomenological inquiry.

Recruitment and Sampling

The recruitment and sampling of participants was conducted in several different stages. First, selecting information rich participants is very important to qualitative research. Participants were African American women ages 21-55 years old. This age
range was selected because it is believed that women within this age range have begun to
experience the possible changes in relationships that have occurred more recently.
Participants were recruited from the Midwest because the researcher lived in the
Midwest when data collection was initiated, and she intended to interview each woman
in person. Prior to selection for participation, each potential participant was asked if she
had ever had experience in successful heterosexual relationships. If she had not had
experience in successful relationships, she was asked if she had experience in
heterosexual relationships in general. She was further asked if she had seen successful
relationships modeled, and whether or not she sees these models as possibly fitting her
own future relationships. Phenomenological researchers suggest that you have 8 to 10
participants to provide enough valuable information about the lived experience
(Creswell, 1998). The final number of participants in this sample was 10, which provided
enough valuable information to ensure the depth of phenomenon being studied
(Sandelowski, 1986). Using a small sample and interviewing participants in-depth
provided a great source of information about the participants to be studied, and although
qualitative research cannot be generalized, it provided in-depth information about the
group studied.

Following the guidelines of Creswell (1998), this study utilized a sample of 10
African American women to describe what they perceive as successful relationships and
also what factors contributed to their ideas about successful relationships. African
American women were recruited from a few Midwestern cities through community
services, churches, and universities. Access was gained through identifying one
gatekeeper from an African American university program and one from the church. This
particular combination of gatekeepers was used because of the importance placed on religion/spirituality and education in existing literature concerning African American women.

Once access was gained, participants were verbally invited to participate in the study. Participants indicated their interest in the study by making contact with the researcher following the verbal invitation from the researcher, or the researcher may have contacted them at a later date when they provided their contact information to the gatekeeper who passed along their information. In order to secure rich information from the participants, each woman who agreed to participate was given a demographic questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire included a question about the preferred method of contacting the participants. Demographic information was used to select a diverse group of women for participation in the interview phase of the study. Efforts were made to invite and select women who varied in religious affiliation, marital status (if married, how long), socioeconomic status, and education. After some of the women had volunteered to participate, the researcher determined which demographics (e.g., age, relationship status, employment status) needed to be further represented and asked the gatekeepers if they knew of other participants who would fit these demographics. Once identified, those participants were asked if they were interested in participating in the study. This process of using gatekeepers to assist in identifying potential participants with varying demographic backgrounds allowed the researcher to develop an information rich sample using the first 10 women who volunteered to participate. Women who were selected to participate in the interview portion of the study were contacted by phone using the contact information they provided from the demographic questionnaire. The
phone call served as a time to schedule them to complete the in-person interview. The specific criteria for participation in the present study were:

1. Identify as an African American female between the ages 21 to 55 years old
2. Live in Midwest
3. Have experience in heterosexual relationships
4. Had been in or at least witnessed successful relationships
5. Volunteer to participate in the study

African American women who expressed interest in participating in the study and met the criteria for selection were given an informed consent that provided them with detailed information concerning their participation in the study and were asked to complete and sign the informed consent form and mail the form back to the researcher in the postage-paid self-addressed envelope. The informed consent summarized the purpose of the study, pertinent information about the process of data collection, confidentiality, benefits and risk to participating in the study, and participants rights, including the right to terminate or withdraw from the study at any time; participants were also given contact information for the Human Subject Institutional Review Board. Participants who returned the informed consent and met the criteria for participation were contacted by phone to invite their participation in interviews.

Summary of Participants' Demographic Information

The women who participated in this study were all African American and had some experience in African American relationships (see Table 1). The participants lived in the Midwest during the course of this study. The women participants range in age
Table 1

**Demographic Information of Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th>Years in Relationship</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>Income Level</th>
<th>Religious Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Full Time</td>
<td>30,001-40,000</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melinda</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Post Graduate</td>
<td>Full Time</td>
<td>&gt;100,000</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marilyn</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Post Graduate</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>&lt;10,000</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>6½</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>Full Time</td>
<td>30,001-40,000</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oprah</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Full Time</td>
<td>30,001-40,000</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandy</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Post Graduate</td>
<td>Full Time</td>
<td>40,001-50,000</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexis</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>&lt;10,000</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenna</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>Full Time</td>
<td>10,001-20,000</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corissa</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Full Time</td>
<td>&lt;10,000</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alyssa</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Living Together</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Associates</td>
<td>Part Time</td>
<td>&lt;10,000</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Between interview 1 and interview 2 Wendy filed for divorce from her husband.

from 23 to a woman who declined to give her age, but reported being married for 36 years, so is presumably in her mid 50s. Two of the women were in their 20s, four in their 30s, three in their 40s, and one presumably in her 50s. Two women described their relationship status as single, one woman described her relationship status as living together, five women described their relationship status as married, although between the first interview and second interview, one of these five women was in the process of filing for divorce. Two women described their relationship status as divorced. Of the six
women who identified as currently being in a relationship, the length of the relationship ranged in years 6 to 36.

The educational attainment of the women in this study ranged from high school, some college, associates degree, bachelors degree, to post graduate study. The highest level of education was a woman who was completing her Ph.D. The women categorized their employment status from currently enrolled student to full-time work in their respective fields. Their income level ranged from less than 10,000 to greater than 100,000. Eight of the women identified as being Christian and two identified as having no religious background. The women in this study identified growing up and/or currently living in rural, urban, and suburban neighborhoods. They identified living with both of their parents, mothers, aunts, step-fathers, and siblings. Some of the women in this study identified having children, while others reported having none.

Data Collection and Procedure

Phenomenology is a qualitative research tradition usually found in philosophy, and the social and human services. Phenomenologists seek to describe the meaning of the lived experiences for individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). Patton (2002) indicates that qualitative findings come from three different kinds of data collection, which are in-depth, open-ended interviews; direct observation; and written documents. For this study, two in-depth, open-ended interviews were utilized. The purpose of using open-ended interviews was to capture the essence of African American women's experiences and enlighten the researcher about the points of view of the participants without the assumptions of the researcher's thoughts.
contaminating the research itself (Patton, 2002). Data were collected through two face-to-face interviews with each participant individually. The first interview served to get a broad understanding of the women's experience with heterosexual relationships. The second interview served to provide an opportunity for the researcher to check her understanding of the themes presented in each participant's first interview, to seek clarification of the initial interview where needed, and to probe for any additional ideas based on themes identified through initial analysis of the entire group of first interviews. Eight of the 10 participants completed the second interview in this study. The other two participants could not be contacted due to changes in their contact information.

The interviews consisted of structured and unstructured interview questions, allowing the participants an opportunity to give additional information about their experiences. The participants agreed to be tape-recorded during the interviews. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in a quiet, private area and were recorded using an audio and digital recorder. The interviews lasted approximately an hour and a half for the initial interview session. This interview was designed to allow the women to talk about their experiences in relationships as well as their views, feelings, and thoughts about relationships. The second interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour. The second interview consisted of follow-up questions the researcher had about the participant's story and allowed the participant to give more in-depth information and correct any inaccuracies in the researcher's representation of them. Prior to beginning the interviews, each woman was informed about confidentiality and was also reminded that confidentiality would be strictly maintained throughout the interview process and into the completion of the study. Each participant was informed that confidentiality would be
broken if there was any indication of child abuse, threat to do harm to self or others, or if the researcher was court ordered to do so. Participants were also invited to ask any questions they would like answered in order to feel comfortable with participating in the study. Allowing the participants the opportunity to ask questions helped establish trust between the researcher and participants and helped with building rapport.

Following each interview, a professional transcriber transcribed tapes verbatim. The researcher told the transcriber that confidentiality must be strictly maintained. As detailed in the data analysis section, the researcher reviewed the transcripts and identified significant statements and themes. The computer program called NVivo 7 was used to help with coding the themes of the women's statements. Each woman's transcript was used to construct meanings and develop themes. Significant statements were drawn out and written down to discover significant themes. After determining the common themes from the initial interviews, the researcher wrote an initial narrative summary of the participants' statements. These narrative summaries or individual stories were shared with participants prior to the second interview, during which time the researcher spoke to participants to determine whether the researcher's descriptions of their experiences fit their ideas about successful relationships. This was an important part of the second interview and gave the researcher an opportunity to get more in-depth information and to ask individually appropriate questions. Any discrepancies between the researcher's understanding of what was reported and how participants understood their experiences were corrected during this time. This ensured that the essence of each participant's story was correctly represented in the results of the study.
Data were also collected through a demographic questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire asked such questions as the participants’ age, their religious affiliation, socioeconomic status, educational background, and relationship status. This information was important to provide context for understanding each participant’s experiences and perspectives about successful relationships. The demographic questionnaire was also used to select a diverse group of participants, thus increasing the breadth of study results.

To ensure that confidentiality was maintained, all data were securely locked in a file cabinet in the researcher’s home and were kept according to the specific protocol of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB). Anonymity could not be maintained due to the nature of the design used in this study. However, to ensure that confidentiality was maintained throughout the study, participants were asked to provide a pseudonym different from their given name.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is used to help the researcher convert raw data into more conceptually meaningful data. In this study, data analysis approaches were adapted from Giorgi; however, additional sources were used to accommodate the present study where necessary. Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) describe four basic steps of data analysis. The first step of data analysis is that the researcher must prepare to achieve a psychological viewpoint to understand the phenomenon being studied. This may be obtained by reading all of the raw data in order to become familiar and develop an understanding of what each participant has said during the interview. This first step involved the researcher
taking a psychological perspective in which the researcher can begin to read over the transcribed information from the participants (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Although this step is fairly simple, Giorgi and Giorgi state that this step is important and is often skipped in other analyses. In this study, all of the participants' transcripts were read individually and important ideas were initially recorded in the margins.

The second step involves beginning to break down the raw data into parts based on the meaning made by the researcher. During this step, the researcher begins to make meaning of data for the participants and begins to explore the themes that may be emerging from the presented data. This step reduces the data so that the researcher can develop codes or categories and sort text into categories (Creswell, 1998). Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) note the importance of understanding that making meaning of the data is a subjective process for the researcher when analyzing the data. During this stage, the researcher determined which meanings from the data were most important and the meaning made may not necessarily match what another researcher may determine as being important. Given that this study is psychological in nature, the researcher used a psychological lens to make meaning of the data. The crucial goal to this step was for the researcher to break down the raw data into meaning units. In this study, participants' transcripts were reread more carefully one at a time and aspects of the transcripts that were relevant to the research questions were highlighted and assigned labels using the qualitative software program NVivo 7.

In the third step, the researcher began to transform the raw data to make them more applicable to the field of study, in this case, psychology. This transformation usually takes place in multiple stages. During the initial stage, transformation permits the
analysis to uncover meaning in the lived experience of participants that may not have been completely articulated by them. Once meanings were articulated, the researcher sought to generalize the analysis so that it is not situation specific, yet can be described and analyzed in a way that reflects each participant’s story. In this study, all the entire set of coded transcripts were reviewed in order to begin identifying collective themes.

The fourth and final stage of data collection was developing a summary of the data that illustrated the structure of participants’ experiences. This stage requires that the researcher assume an intersubjective attitude when analyzing the data. Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) describe the intersubjective attitude as one in which the researcher is objective although the participants’ experience is subjective. That is, the researcher is to be subjective in the analysis but will also remember that others will be reviewing what he or she has described. Although the researcher is subjective in the analysis, he or she must balance the subjective analysis with an objective attitude. This fourth step involved the researcher examining the last transformations of meaning units and attempting to determine the experiences of the participants that have been reported (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). In this study, narrative summaries of each individual participant’s experiences were developed following the first interviews. These individual stories were discussed with participants as part of the second interview in order to assess accuracy of the researcher’s understanding. Following the second interviews, analysis steps 1-3 were repeated for the new transcripts, and a collective story was written to summarize the core experiences of participants as a group.
Background of Researcher

The researcher is an African American female in her mid 20s. The researcher developed a strong interest in successful African American relationships prior to the completion of her senior year in high school. She noticed that many African American people were struggling to make their relationships work and decided that it would be worthwhile for her to determine how some African American couples were able to make their relationships work, while others were not so successful. Upon completion of high school, the researcher entered college at a predominantly White university and rarely saw African American couples together, which further piqued her interest. She verbalized her intentions of becoming a “relationship expert” to an academic advisor, but was uncertain about the type of schooling that was required. The academic advisor indicated that the researcher would probably need to major in psychology to become a relationship expert.

The academic advisor explained to the researcher that she would need to go to graduate school to do work in psychology. The researcher decided to enter a counseling psychology doctoral program to receive training in how to work with individuals, couples, and families. In the doctoral program, the researcher has had an opportunity to conduct a psycho-educational group with African American college students who were seeking information about African American relationships. She found that many African American males and females were struggling with relationships and with what she was attempting to learn about relationships. Running this group, along with talking to friends and families about their relationships, continued to pique the curiosity of the researcher about successful relationships. It was at this time that the researcher recognized that
more research was needed in order to help others understand and share their experiences about successful relationships.

The researcher, along with another doctoral student, presented the information they discovered about African American college students’ experience with relationships at a conference. The researcher felt that the college age group was most appropriate because many African American people within this dating range are ready to settle down and look for partnerships. At the conference, many people indicated that indeed they found the topic very interesting and that they also felt more research is needed that looks at successful African American relationships.

The researcher continues to have a strong interest in working with African American men and women individually and who are in relationships to build healthy relationships with each other. The researcher sees this dissertation as the first step to helping her understand the experiences of African American women who have been exposed to or who are currently in successful relationships and to learn what makes their relationships successful. Furthermore, if the African American women are not in relationships, then what perceptions or idea about relationships do they hold? Once beginning to understand African American women’s relationships, the researcher wants to help others learn more about successful relationships to facilitate more discussion within the African American community.

Experience With African American Relationships

The researcher acknowledges limited experience of dating relationships with African American men. Her experience in dating has been limited due to extensive travel
with the military; however, she has been in relationships that did not work for a variety of reasons. Despite her limited experience and failed relationships, she has seen long-term relationships. Her parents have been married for a significant amount of time and her father’s grandparents have also been married for over 45 years. Her knowledge and exposure to successful African American relationships has been limited to only a few couples. Furthermore, what she noticed was that younger African American individuals were not having similar fates as that of her parents and grandparents. It appeared that many people were questioning the state of African American relationships within the African American community.

Researcher’s Assumptions and Bias

1. Many African American males and females are having difficulty with successful relationships.

2. The sex-ratio imbalance has a negative impact on the success of African American relationships.

3. The lack of role models influences the lack of success in African American relationships.

4. Because the researcher has not been exposed to very many successful relationships, then there must not be very many successful relationships.

5. African American people have very different ideas about successful relationships than the dominant culture.
Criteria for Rigor of the Study

This section intends to discuss how rigor or trustworthiness of the study was maintained. According to Tobin and Begley (2004), “rigor is a way of demonstrating the legitimacy of the research process” (p. 390). Qualitative research uses different standards of rigor than quantitative research. In qualitative research, transferability or fittingness, dependability or reliability, credibility, and confirmability or objectivity, are central to maintaining rigor (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

Credibility can be established through several strategies, such as prolonged engagement with the population you wish to research. This could include engaging with the culture and learning the language and peer debriefing, which could include allowing an independent researcher to provide feedback about the information. Sandelowski (1986) suggests that “a qualitative study is credible when it presents such faithful descriptions of a human experience that the people having the experience would immediately recognize it from those descriptions as their own” (p. 30). Member checking or allowing the information that you learn from the participants to be reviewed by each of them also helps to assure accuracy of the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Morrow & Smith, 2000; Tobin & Begley 2004).

In this study, the researcher provided credibility by using a three-step process. First, the research was initially audited by the researcher’s doctoral chair; then the researcher conducted member checks with each participant to validate that the information understood by the researcher was accurate; and finally, an external auditor was consulted. During the data analysis phase, the researcher’s doctoral chairperson
provided feedback after reading each participant’s transcript, each participant’s individual story, and the group’s collective story. During this process, she audited whether or not their individual stories and the collective story were representative of the transcribed interviews. She offered feedback and suggestions, which allowed the researcher to further immerse herself in the data. During the data analysis phase, this served as an internal audit. As noted previously, each participant was also consulted concerning the accuracy of their individual story and the fit of collective themes during the second interview. These member checks confirmed that the researcher had adequately represented the initial data. After each participant’s individual story was complete and approved by the participants, an external auditor was consulted. This external auditor was a woman in her 30s who has had experience in relationships, is trained in providing counseling, and has experience with phenomenological research. The external auditor was given the coded data from the NVivo 7 program, the individual and collective stories, and the results. After reviewing these sources, the external auditor provided feedback and asked questions about themes, and statements made by the participants. The auditor indicated that she felt the results accurately represented the data. Any concerns the auditor had were addressed. In response to the auditor’s questions and comments, the researcher clarified the process used to capture the diverse experiences the participants had with the media and how the researcher came to understand the media as not only a facilitator, but also a barrier to successful African American relationships.

Transferability in qualitative research refers only to case-to-case transference because qualitative research cannot be generalized to the general population (Tobin &
Begley, 2004). However, Guba and Lincoln (1981) state that the idea of generalizability should be replaced with the term *fittingness*; that is, does this response fit with someone who comes from a similar background with similar experiences? Furthermore, it allows future researchers an opportunity to evaluate transferability of this research by providing a thorough description of the present participants, including an understanding of what makes them information rich participants. In the present study, the demographic information about the participants is reported earlier in this chapter, and the results provide an information rich description of their experiences with successful African American relationships through extensive use of direct quotes.

Dependability can be achieved through auditing the data and through participant or member checks (Morrow & Smith, 2000; Tobin & Begley, 2004). In this study, member checking was implemented by allowing the researcher to ask the participants if the information they had been given about what they had stated was accurate. This checking process occurred via the second interviews and throughout the interview process to ensure that each participant had said what they consider to be central to the study. An audit trail was maintained to increase credibility of the study and to allow an independent or outside researcher the ability to follow the steps taken to replicate the study if they so choose. This was done by keeping all the tapes, transcripts, and other documents and allowing an auditor to provide feedback on the process (Morrow & Smith, 2000). As noted in the previous description of credibility, both an internal and an external auditor were used to increase the rigor of the present study.

Although in qualitative research the researcher is subjective in the approach to analyzing the data, it is important that he or she grasp the essence of what the
participants in the study have relayed to the researcher. Confirmability is dependent upon achieving credibility, dependability, and transferability (Sandelowski, 1986). Steps are identified in order to help researchers ensure that they have confirmability. These steps include having the researcher understand the type of technique, the purpose, and the type of analysis used in the study (Sandelowski, 1986). In the present study, the researcher continually used self-monitoring and self-reflective techniques to ensure that her bias and judgments did not influence that of the participants. After the participants were given their individual stories, they were given time to reflect upon their story and provide feedback on the researcher's understanding of their experiences. Finally, any concerns of the internal and external auditors were addressed to achieve credibility, dependability, and transferability.
CHAPTER III

RESULTS

This chapter presents the essence of African American women's perspectives of successful male/female relationships. The present study focuses on the present state of African Americans, and how African American women are defining successful relationships. The common core of participants' views concerning successful male/female relationships can be uncovered by exploring the common themes revealed in participants' individual narratives. These themes were established when they appeared throughout each woman's narrative. Throughout the chapter, quotations will be offered as examples to illustrate these common themes. These quotations are intended to give the reader only a flavor for the thoughts the women had about what it meant for them to have a successful relationship. The chapter concludes with a narrative summary of the women's perspectives on relationships. The women's collective story was constructed to highlight the essence of participants' experiences, summarizing the commonalities across each woman's individual story.

The following sections are organized around the themes that emerged in participant's stories. There were four themes that they discussed. These themes are the components of successful relationships, factors and characteristics needed to facilitate and model successful relationships, barriers to having successful relationships, and optimism for successful relationships in the future.
Components of Successful Relationships

The women in the study were asked to describe components of a successful heterosexual relationship. They offered two broad ideas concerning successful relationships. These two broad ideas are commitment and partnership/friendship. At times, separating these two broad ideas of commitment and partnership/friendship became difficult because there is overlap in how the women talked about these ideas; however, it is important to organize the components into two separate sections because of the history of African American relationships. Commitment and partnership are related in that they provide a broad understanding of what successful relationships look like for these women, and thus they are initially discussed together.

The first idea involved being committed to the relationship. For the women in this study, this included several factors. First, each partner would have to demonstrate his or her commitment to the relationship by nurturing the relationship. Nurturing the relationship included spending time together, being faithful and loyal to each other, and having respect and trust with their partner. The women said that one way their partner could show trust is by staying committed to the relationship even though things may get tough for them. The women reported that they recognized that the relationship would have good times and bad times, and stated that they as well as their partner would need to be willing to work on the relationship. They also identified that there would need to be compromise in the relationship.

The second broad idea was concerned with having a partnership/friendship within the relationship. In the past, African American relationships were based on the
commitment that each partner had toward one another. This commitment did not necessarily include having a friendship or partnership with one’s mate. When the women addressed how African American relationships had changed over the years, they often talked about the older generations by saying their relationships had longevity, but the relationship did not always have the friendship or partnership. In this section of the chapter, commitment to the relationship and what it means to have a committed relationship will be addressed. The next section will address having a friendship and partnership with one’s mate. Having a friendship and partnership with a mate includes sharing the responsibilities with the partner, working together, and having common interests, common goals, and similar values.

Commitment to the Relationship

The women talked about having a commitment to the relationship as being important for a successful relationship. Each participant identified commitment to the relationship as being foundational to having a successful relationship. This commitment included having respect, trust, honesty, and loyalty. The women described commitment as knowing that they could trust the person with whom they were in the relationship and believing that they could be themselves without fearing that the person would become less committed. Oprah stated that “you got to have that trust in them, you can’t build nothing without no trust.” She talked about the relationship she has with her husband and said:

he works with a lot of women and I work with a lot of men in my job . . . so you know how the mind thinks at times, that’s why you have to be very honest, that way, you don’t have to worry about nothing . . . sometimes he will say . . . “so
and so tried to talk to me and I said ‘look you know what I’m married, I don’t have time for you,’” or he’ll say “I could have had you and you didn’t want no parts of me then, now that I’m married . . . I don’t have no time for you . . .” and for me, I tell the men, “I don’t have time for all that, I like the relationship I’m in and I respect my husband . . . so you can go on about your business, there are too many single women out here.”

Melinda spoke about her difficulty in finding a man who she could be in a relationship with and knowing that she could trust him. She seemed to be more discouraged about finding a suitable partner because she has found that people are less committed to relationships today than in previous generations such as her parents and grandparents’ generation. She talked about

[not trust[ing] anybody, that’s the whole thing, based on what I’ve seen and what I see right now, and not just African American, across the board, it’s like nobody’s relationship is really successful and [there’s] ups and downs in any relationships, but people [are] just so quick to just [leave] . . . I got a friend that [has] not even been married a month, [and she’s] trying to get an annulment now, and I’m like that’s crazy, that’s just nuts, but, that was her whole attitude, she was like “I can just get out of it, if it doesn’t work” . . . and I’m like “then why bother . . . why bother?”

The participants talked about longevity being a sign that the couple was committed to the relationship. Alyssa also talked about older generations staying together and being committed to their relationships. She said that her grandparents stayed together until death.

My first grandmother died, so the only grandmother I knew was my step-grandmother, but I knew her, I met her when I was nine years old for the first time and she was with my grandfather until the day he died. She was with him all through the cancer and all through . . . that’s a good relationship. I worked in a nursing home for two years and [there] was a guy who came every day to pick up his wife and take her for a ride. I was like, when I get old, I want my husband to do that. It was significant because I got to know the people in the nursing home. They were like a second family to me. My grandfather and grandmother, I looked at their relationship and they were old but they were still in love.
Wendy spoke about what it means to be committed to the relationship. She also noted that longevity in the relationship is a key factor saying that “a few generations ago people stayed married even when keeping the relationship together became difficult.”

She mentioned that people

stayed together because they were supposed to do that, but they were not happy. Like my grandmother, her husband died and I don’t think she was happy. She stayed with him because it was supposed to be like that. You aren’t supposed to get a divorce. No matter what, and he did a lot of things that were wrong, and he asked for forgiveness, but she still, you can tell that she was still holding on to that so . . . but I believe that a marriage could be so much greater than that.

Alexis talked about the factors that she felt were important to have a successful relationship. She happened to be the youngest participant in the study and admitted that in her past she has struggled to find potential suitable partners who meet her qualifications. She shared her relationship background and stated that she hasn’t had many (if any) positive relationships with men. She does admit though, that she has learned and taken a lot from those relationships to form her own ideas about what it takes to have a successful relationship. She stated that for her, being in a committed relationship required that there were three key features: respect, trust, and loyalty. She said:

If he doesn’t have any respect for me, he’s not going to trust me and I’m not going to trust him, and he’s not going to show me any loyalty and I’m not going to show any loyalty towards him . . . so having respect from a person and showing this respect unconditionally, . . . that would make my relationships work, . . . cause if I respect him, I will be able to talk to him better and show him that I care and show him how I feel . . . so I want to make sure the first thing is respect and then like trust and loyalty will come after that and everything else that goes into a relationship.
The women talked about ways commitment could be demonstrated when people are in relationship with each other. Marilyn indicated that people can not only say that they are committed to the relationship, but also have to show their commitment by first [being] true to themselves, each other, and then true to the relationship, the [partners] are friends, they communicate well and that they work at the relationship, because if [they] don’t do anything, the relationship can just go cold, so you constantly . . . it’s a day in, day out nurturing of that relationship.

She goes on to say that nurturing the relationship should include doing little romantic things, you know . . . going out on a date, going out to dinner, going out to a concert, going out . . . doing something that each other like . . . doing those things that really nurture each other.

She states that she did and continues to do these this with her husband of 36 years and reports that she believes this is why their relationship has been so successful. She said:

We spent a lot of time talking about who we were and who we were not . . . and . . . we talked about the things we like, and the things we didn’t like, . . . we also had an opportunity to actually walk the walk.

The women also acknowledged and recognized that part of being committed to the relationship is understanding that relationships require work and that some times there were going to be good times and bad times and ups and downs. Marilyn believes “in order to have a successful relationship there has to be maintenance to the relationship, you have to continue to work on the relationship on a regular basis, it just doesn’t happen without doing anything to it.” Jenna said:

Marriage is like a second or third job and you really have to create time for it and make sure that you do it. I know there are successful relationships, but I think it just takes work and I think people just want it to happen and I think it’s just like a job; you don’t just . . . you got to learn how to do it.

Oprah stated that she knew it wasn’t always going to be a bed of roses, but if you truly love that individual, you will take the bad with the good, and you will also look to see
where you can help to improve that individual, and help that other individual move forward.

Janet mentioned:

I can’t just always be thinking about all the good things he can do and I know there are some things that he does that get on my nerves but I mean I don’t want to say well I don’t want to be with you anymore because you are getting on my nerves now. You know, because I know that there is some good with some bad.

The participants expressed the importance of compromise in the relationship. For them, this was also an element of being committed to the relationship because they understood that two people were in a relationship together and in order to make the relationship work, there needed to be some give and take. Alyssa talked about compromising with her partner because for her having the ability to compromise was an important factor in making the relationship work. She said:

You don’t always get your way in a relationship and now when I have my relationships [people] always [say] oh, you are a pushover and you let people do anything to you. You are too naïve, you are too nice. [My response to them is] No, I’m not nice and I’m not naïve, it’s just that I believe in meeting somebody half way. If [they] want to eat fried chicken for dinner, and you want to eat spaghetti, then why not cook them both?

The women spoke about their relationships having their ups and downs. They talked about how they had idealized relationships when they were younger based on images seen around them such as in the media. As the women have gotten older they have been made aware that relationships do not always happen the way they envisioned them. Marilyn talked about this by saying:

Of course everybody would like to be Cinderella (laughs) or have that wonderful [feeling of being] swept off their feet by a prince, but um . . . we knew because of our environment and in reality that sometimes it doesn’t happen that way.
For some of the women in the study, they have admitted that they entered into their relationships expecting the relationship to be a certain way and realized after they entered into the relationship that they needed to adjust their views about what it meant to have a successful relationship.

Corissa, who married her high school sweetheart, spoke about her expectations when she was younger by stating:

When you are younger, you think relationships are going to be wonderful and we are going to have the fairytale, [then] when you get into a relationship, you say okay, it is still wonderful but it wasn’t this whole idea of what I had about what it was going to look like. I think a lot of people go through it like that. Like for me, I think it was the age factor. I was so young when my husband and I started dating and we got married young.

Janet also spoke about thinking this way in her first marriage. Similar to Marilyn and Corissa’s thoughts about storybook marriages, Janet talked about having a storybook relationship. She said, “I always thought I [would have] that perfect story picture type life. But it just doesn’t happen that way. Sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn’t.” Corissa stated that she has learned that “people are still having ups and downs and they go through a lot of things. That’s kind of my view of it.”

Janet also talked about understanding the idea that relationships have their ups and down when she married her second husband. She said:

Relationships are one way before you say I do and another way after you say I do. So you just have to know that there’s going to be some ups and downs. That’s why before my [current] husband and I got married; we talked about everything from being broke, to being in bed, to how many kids, your grandparents, your parents, how many corns you have on your toes. Just everything, your likes and dislikes and your wants... do you want this, do you want that... do you snore, do you breathe hard? Do you have any ailments or sicknesses? You just don’t want any surprises. It really makes me feel good, that’s something that we talked about... I know there are going to be some good days and some bad days and I appreciate that because in a relationship you
do have good days and bad days and I just know that it is not always the [other] person. It could be [me].

Corissa speaks about her relationship by saying:

My husband and I have been together 13 years. We started dating very young in high school. [I know] relationships grow and they get stronger over the years and that’s the thing about relationships, they grow and it’s successful because we are still together. We went from dating, engaged, to marriage and now we have two children. I . . . look at the whole thing as being successful. You know now we have ups and downs all over the years dealing with issues and problems, relocating and pregnancy, depression and all kinds of issues that we went through over the years. We just worked through the problems and stuck together and had some . . . communication . . . and got to know each other over the years.

Partnership and Friendship

The women in the study also felt that in order for them to have a successful relationship they would need to have a strong partnership and friendship with their mate. They described this as being an important element of being committed to the relationship. The partnership and friendship included working together and sharing the responsibilities in the relationship, such as household duties as well as enjoying doing things together.

Oprah gave an example of how she expressed this to her husband before they got married. She said:

In the beginning of our relationship I told him about the cooking and cleaning and all this other stuff . . . I’d say I’m not that old fashion . . . “[I don’t want to] make you your dinner, bring it to you, whatever . . . cook all these four course meals, [doing what a lot of] older type women do, [because] that isn’t me . . . I’m telling you right now that isn’t me . . . if you want that, you better get somebody else because that isn’t me” . . . so you know if you tell people at the beginning of your relationship, what you want and what you’re looking for and all that other kind of stuff, then you have a better relationship and those are some of the things I told my husband before we even got married, you know I’m not that type, so don’t even ask . . . I’m not goin’ to act like it’s me, cause it isn’t me.

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... so that just basically ... like the older ladies, the older women will say ...
“now honey, you know, you got to do this” ... and I say, you know it isn’t like
that for me ... like it was for you ... the ages are different, people do things
differently and you still can have the same respect and everything else that you
guys had in your relationship, that we got now. That’s just the way that we do
things.

Oprah also stated that she believes “just because you’re a man [doesn’t mean that
you don’t have to share the responsibilities of the household].” She said:

“[Don’t think] you’re just going to work and sit on your butt, sit up in the chair
and drink whatever, you know that’s the typical male model, but if I’m working
and you’re working 40 hours we’re both tired, so we need to compromise as to
who’s going do what and if you’re tired and I’m tired, then we should just order
a pizza and eat it.” A lot of times my husband doesn’t want me to cook because
[he will say] “you look tired, why don’t we call for a pizza.” I might be trying to
cook and he may be like “no ... you know what, that’s okay we can do
something else, lets take time and lay down, you know we’re both tired so let’s
just order pizza, relax, just take time and relax, so for us that’s how we do it.”

She goes on to talk about times when she

will come home and he will surprise me, when he’s cooked for me, when he’s
[home], he’ll do the things that I should be doing ... or if I’m working and he
has the day off, he’ll surprise me and have the food cooking or whatever, or he
[will] have done the yard work, sometime I do the yard work.

The idea of sharing the responsibility extended beyond just household duties. The
women talked about having a partner who could help them out emotionally and
financially when needed. Oprah shared that when she needs extra money to cover a bill,
she always feels like her husband is there to help out which makes the relationship
stronger. Oprah said:

Some ways we [work together] is that we add up all the bills and put our checks
together, and we see how much total we got and we see how much bills we got,
once we pay our bills, we see what we have left, and we put it up as a savings or
whatever. I’m the type that will show him my check stubs ... so that there’s
nothing in the back of his mind that says I know she made more than that ... I
bring the whole thing to him, before I cash it so he can see it and stuff, you
know. I say “this is what I got and this is what we’re working with” ... and he
always calls me and tells me what he's made and that way we can figure out our bills... then I may say "okay I need this amount for this month, this is what I need it for," so I tell my husband ahead of time if I need more than enough or I need to take a trip away, I say "you know I'm getting ready to take a trip in a month so we need to figure out the money, so that there's no confusion going on." My husband's very good at that, he'll pitch in, if I'm not getting... he'll say "don't worry about that I'll take over, I'll make up the difference or whatever," then that makes my mind stress free there, and I don't have to worry... he'll say "go and have a good time," you know and we talk back and forth during the whole thing anyway, so that he knows what I'm doing and where I'm going, stuff like that... so, you need to share the responsibility, you need to sit down and really talk to your partner, about what you mean by sharing the responsibility.

Marilyn also talked about having a partnership and sharing the responsibility with her husband. She expressed the importance of partnership in decision making. She gave an example of how she and her husband would talk about making major and minor decisions about their lives. She said:

Whether it's [making a decision about watching] a football game or [if] we [are] going to buy this house or this car... [we discuss if we both] like this car... [and if one of us does not like the car then] "No... we're not going to buy it because you don't like it and we have to live with this car, for like who knows the next ten years... so we're not buying that car."

The women discussed how working together and being friends with their partners impacted them having a successful relationship. Jenna talked about the importance of friendship by saying:

The friendship, would be the first thing [for me to have] because... most of my relationships didn't start off as friends so that's definitely first... to be able to be friends with this person and not expect anything. You know... just to be happy with that 'cause if you just be happy as friends... you know... it's better if you progress in the relationship [with the] foundation as a friendship.

Their understanding of working together included the idea of having common goals and sharing the same values as their partners. Oprah said:

Before you can get into a successful relationship, you and your partner sit down and really talk about the goals and the values and different things that you have
so you have an understanding that when you go into that relationship, . . . what you expect out of that relationship and where it's going and just be open minded . . . you sit down and say "um . . . these are my dreams, these are my aspirations and this is the goals that I'm trying to reach" and you listen to the other person and see what they're trying to do and say "let's try to work together on trying to reach these things, 'cause I love you as a partner and therefore, these are the goals that I am setting forth and these are the goals that you're setting forth and we can work together, we can put down a year goal, ten year goal . . . five year goal . . . where do we see ourselves?" [My husband and I] sat down together and we talked before we even really got into the relationship. I had already told him what I was looking for in a young man and what I wanted out of the relationship.

Jenna stated how being friends with her partner played an important role in the two of them making their relationship work. She said:

For me to be best friends with the person and for us to really have a connection that can't be compared to nobody else's. Just to feel like you and this person were really supposed to be together and having a lot of interest alike and then also having things that we're not both interested in just to make it so that we can learn other things.

Wendy described how her ideal relationship would look for her. She stated that she and her husband would be best friends and would show affection toward one another. She said:

I would come home from work and my husband would be happy to see me and I'm glad to see him . . . [I would say] "let me think of something I could do that would say I love him more" and then he would say "well let me see if there's something I can do to say I love her more."

Melinda expressed that it was important for her to have somebody that I have a lot of things in common with . . . cause see . . . that comes in to play a lot too . . . like you meet somebody and you know, stuff that I like to do, [they might say] oh you boshie . . . boshie would be more like upper class . . . I would say, not necessarily snooty, but like upper class . . . why cause I like to travel, you know, so somebody that has things that I like to do, in common . . . common interest . . . several common interest . . .

Oprah commented that having common interest and doing things together doesn't have to require money. She said:
You should have a lot of fun... do things together, even if you don't have a whole lot of money... even if it's just walking around. Taking a walk or you know there is all kind of stuff that you can do that's not a whole lot of money. People think that they have to have a whole lot of money. There is lot of free stuff. You know, so people can get out and have fun. Not go wild or anything, but having fun by just spending time together with the individual and doing things together... and not take things for granted. You don't want to have yourself so far out that... you don't know who that other person is no more because you're so tied up in what you're doing, you don't know where your other partner is and that why it is so valuable to have time together... spend time together, put away your job or whatever, and make sure you're spending time, you have to make sure you have time together.

Alyssa also talked about finding time to do things with your partner. She said:

I think that if you are in a relationship at least twice a week you should find time from your busy schedule to actually go out and eat dinner or go to a movie or watch a movie together or play a game together or do something. If you have a busy schedule and living in the same house, you should find time every morning to try to eat breakfast or during the day talk to each other on the phone. Everyday you should find time to be with each other and in that week time you should find quality time to be with each other. I think that will make the relationship work.

Factors and Characteristics Needed to Facilitate and Model Successful Relationships

The women in this study identified factors and characteristics they felt were needed in order for them to have successful relationships. They spoke about communicating with their partners and making sure that they had good communication skills. A characteristic that the women felt was important for them to have is that they be a whole person before they entered into a relationship. This included knowing who they are and what their likes and dislikes were. One participant explicitly gave an example of the problems that this would lead to if a person did enter the relationship without knowing who they were. The participants also talked about being able to take care of themselves in general, and especially financially. The women spoke about where they...
received their messages about taking care of themselves and indicated that it mostly originated from their family histories. The women also spoke about the role that their faith and church played in them having a successful relationship. For many of them, they found that having a strong faith and relationship with God helped them to have a stronger bond and relationship with their partner. They also concluded that church was central in their lives and impacted the relationships that they had with others. Some of the women talked about modeling their relationships after the relationships they observed others have in church, while others wished that they received more guidance from the church for their relationships.

Communication

The women identified communication as being very important because good communication helps them become one with their partner. Melinda said:

Communication is about keeping an open exchange and for me, I always say, you know where you stand with me at all times, just because I believe feedback is always important in the whole communication thing because you can be communicating and still holding back so I guess part of that trust thing too . . . I guess just trying to keep it open, keeping communication open and just trying to put a positive spin on it. I think . . . that’s just, trying to keep it open and being honest.

Janet also talked about having open line(s) of communication with her husband. She indicated that “honesty, being straight-forward [is important] and is where you start with a relationship.”

Oprah talked about her past relationship experiences. She admitted that before she met her husband she found herself in relationships that did not have the best communication and from those relationships she learned how important communication
was for her. Oprah said, “I didn’t want to go backwards.” She stated that she talked to her husband about different topics and made sure they had an understanding about expectations for their relationship. She said that she did not want to establish bad communication patterns by assuming things about her partner or not listening to him. She indicated that

I think that is where it is about that communication thing. You got to have it or else it’s not going to work. You can’t just assume on a person, so you have to make sure you are talking to that individual and don’t just assume anything, but just talk and see in the situation what the other person is saying because sometimes you can go into a bad relationship when you are not listening.

Brandy said:

You don’t have to be 100% compatible, but I think when you don’t have the communication, to express yourself, your needs and your wants, it’s going to be a disaster. I believe that you can have all the other pieces to the relationship, but if you don’t have communication, it’s going to be a disaster. You can have all the money in the world, a big beautiful house, nice car, but if you and your spouse are not on the same page and can’t be open and communicate and trust each other, the relationship is not going to work.

Alyssa expresses her thoughts about communication by saying:

I think communication is the only thing that will make a relationship work, if you don’t have communication skills then you don’t [have a relationship]. A lot of time you hear about people’s relationships, the first thing they will say is oh, we never talk about anything. It’s like that’s an amazing power. They don’t talk or he doesn’t listen or she doesn’t listen."

The participants distinguished between having good communication skills and bad communication skills. For the women, they indicated that communication isn’t always about how well you verbally express yourself to the other person, but communication for them is also about nonverbal cues as well as listening to the other person. They talked about how they knew when communication was going well and
when communication was going poorly. They identified when good communication and bad communication were occurring.

For Wendy, communication is going well

When you can communicate and you can express your[self], for example, you can say something to your mate and they really don’t like it, but they’re not going to hold that against you, and he can say “well I really don’t agree with that,” and I can say “okay, that’s all right,” and we can go on . . . that specific conversation, don’t have to keep coming up [be]cause you don’t agree with it, he doesn’t agree and that’s okay, but we move on, that’s good communication.

Marilyn goes further saying:

You can almost tell that [a person’s] relationship . . . is very successful, that it is compatible, they have good communication going, it doesn’t always have to be verbal, it can be nonverbal so, . . . you know, you can see the eye contact, . . . you can see, some of the nonverbal type things, the attention that they give each other in company all describe good communication.

Oprah also talked about nonverbal communication. She said:

Communication is going well, I think . . . to me, it’s when they’re talking, you know they’re paying attention to you by eye contact, the body posture, you look at all that . . . I look at all that . . . and not only that, if you say, did you hear what I said, they can repeat back what you said, so, . . . to me that tells me that they are listening, and [it is important to] not have distraction, not to have the television, the radio, you know all that distraction . . . in the conversation . . . if I’m having conversation with somebody, especially my husband, things need to be quiet, so that I can really hear him and he can really hear me, and we just focus on one another rather than other distractions that you get, and make sure that, not only is the television and radio is turned off, but turn your cell phone, telephones off, if you say your going to have time with your spouse, or your significant other, make sure you’re really going to do that and don’t let people interfere with your time, with your special person or whatever, so that they feel . . . that breaks the relationship down, they feel that you’re putting other people before them, if you say you’re going to do something, do it, and so for me, I have to remember to do that. I have to limit it too.

Similarly, Alyssa talked about having her partner repeat back to her what she said to him. She gave an example of how a conversation between her partner and her would go. She said:
[I'll] ask him, “did you understand what I was saying” and sometimes [he'll say] “yeah,” and then I [say] “what did I say?” And [he'll] say “well you just said it,” and I say “well tell me what I said,” and then he will say something and I will say “that's not what I meant”... then he'll say “well what did you mean?” He will end up saying “well I know what you said, and I know what you meant”... so then I will say “okay what did I say,” and he will repeat what I said, and then I will say “well is that what I meant?”... and I [think that] enhances the communication.

While she talks about this example, she goes on to say that they have a laugh about the way they communicate with each other.

On the other hand, Wendy stated that

Communication is going poorly when, you have one person’s doing his thang, and you’re doing yours and there’s no communication... if you’re not communicating everyday, something is wrong... everyday, if people haven’t talked for two days, ya’ll aren’t communicating, then something is wrong.

Alyssa said:

You shouldn’t talk to him while you are mad. I learned that from my friends. Don’t talk to anybody while you are still mad. If you are talking to them and its getting escalated, just tell them “I don’t want to talk about it right now, we shouldn’t talk right now because something is going to be said that we will regret.”

Knowing Yourself and Having the Capacity to Take Care of Yourself

It is undeniable that relationships have changed over the years. People have delayed or even forgone having a relationship and starting a family in favor of having a career or pursuing other aspirations they may have for themselves. This in essence has allowed women the opportunity to accomplish goals in other areas of their lives and really develop into their own person before entering into a relationship. For most of the women in this study, this has benefited them, but for some this has been a dilemma because they have had difficulty in finding a suitable partner. The women indicated that it
was important for them to have themselves together before they entered into a relationship.

Janet, Marilyn, and Oprah all talked about different aspects and expectations they have developed for themselves to make their relationship successful. For Janet, it's "knowing what you want in your life and then being able to put your life with someone else's life and that will become a successful relationship." Marilyn said that

You must have some strong values . . . you must know who you are first . . . [and not have] a lack of confidence in who you [are] . . . [because] you bring that into your relationship . . . and that kind of baggage really hinders your relationship . . . know who you are and what your beliefs are before you step into a relationship because getting into a relationship, you expect that other person . . . to help you define yourself.

The women believe that it is important for them to really come into the relationship as a whole person and finding someone who is also a whole person. They also talked about having an egalitarian relationship with their partner. Marilyn indicated that, "there is a leadership, but there is a give and take as well in considering the other person." Oprah stated that she doesn't have a problem with a man telling me what to do, but I mean just being like a robot to a man and always catering to his needs and not him trying to look at your needs. [I am constantly] giving, giving to the individual and never having time for [my] self. Giving, giving to an individual and taking and you never get anything back . . . because you should never lose yourself in an individual because you both are unique individuals rather than . . . I just think that too many times, we as woman want a man, but we um . . . sometimes lose ourselves in a man because we want him so bad, and we want it to be so good that we end up losing ourselves in that person and in that relationship and not having our own selves. I think you have to have a balance.

They speak of this balance in a way that suggests at any given time they don't want to become too dependent upon a man, yet they also do not want to become too independent.
The women in this study really embraced the idea of being able to take care of themselves and knowing who they are before entering a relationship. Wendy even talked about ways that a woman could get herself together while she is waiting for the relationship. She was optimistic about her future as well as the future of other African American women who are currently seeking to have a successful relationship. Wendy stated, "I believe you can have a good relationship... don’t settle for less... wait for the relationship to come and while your waiting make sure you get yourself in order. Keep yourself in check at all times."

Alexis talked about how she went wrong in previous relationships and how she planned to correct for the choices she made in the past. She said:

A lot of guys that I jumped into a relationship with, I couldn’t be myself around them, it was like I had to impress them and I don’t want to have to be in relationships like that anymore where I have to impress you, I should just be able to be myself and not have to do anything outside of being me and you should be able to accept that, and if you can accept the things I do, say, and who I am, then the relationship is successful, now I know there are things that I may not like, it may be a possibility that I don’t do it around you, but I don’t change me.

Oprah speaks about her idea of being a whole person. She shared that

I’m looking at some of my grandmothers, my aunts... they were all strong black women and they would always tell you if you are going to get a man, make sure he can take care of you. Make sure you are not taking care of him, but make sure he can take care of you.

She talks about this in a way that suggests African American women should always be ready, willing, and able to support themselves whether or not they are in a relationship with someone.
Janet talked about this same idea in a different way. She indicated that “you want someone that’s not necessary [going to] take care of you, but [who will] be on the level with you.” Oprah said that her mom would always tell [her] to make sure that wherever you go make sure you had some money and just because someone said they are going to take you somewhere [doesn’t guarantee that they will pay for it so] always make sure you have money so you can get back home.

This idea that Oprah has expressed may be an idea that has been passed down from generation to generation because historically African American men have not always been in the home due to various factors that plague the black community such as the higher rates of incarceration of men. Although I think that many have forgotten the reasons why they held on to such beliefs, many African American women still believe that they must be strong to hold their families together. Brandy talked about this idea by saying that she has learned

you may find a spouse get married, but always make sure you get a good education or if you choose not to go to college have a good job, so that in the event that something happens in the relationship, you can take care of yourself. That was a big thing . . . you can take care of yourself.

Melinda also stated that her immediate family gave her similar messages about taking care of yourself. She said that her family lectured her about relationships with people in general and told her you can’t “trust anybody and if you get into a relationship make sure you always have your own stuff . . . don’t rely on a man for nothing.”

Spirituality and Faith in God

The women in this study indicated that they should have a spiritual foundation or relationship with God. For them, they believed that this was important to assist them in
having a successful relationship with their partner. Many women incorporated spirituality and religious beliefs into what they felt were important for them to have a successful relationship. The women identified spirituality and religious beliefs as being very important to them. Throughout the participants’ interviews, the women often quoted scriptures from the Bible and often looked to the church for guidance in fostering healthy relationships.

Marilyn talked about how being grounded in the Christian belief impacted her views about relationships. She said:

In the church, you know, couples are to be faithful to each other, they are to be committed to each other, they are to stay in marriage until death do them part... there is no such thing as divorce and um... when I was growing up it’s like what’s going on, you should be able to work it out if you have a conflict, if you have a difference, as Christians you should... there’s no... you should be able to work it out... no walking away from the relationship... so that’s what we learned from the church.

Melinda stated that she wanted to be in a relationship with “somebody that goes to church, not just saying that they’re religious, but to me somebody that goes to church on a regular basis.” Janet and Oprah also spoke about their relationship with Christ and the importance of having a partner who also has a relationship with God. Janet talked about her relationship with her husband. She said:

Our basis starts with... because we both are Christians, we both go to church, we know the word, we try to live by the word... and that was one of the things that I asked of him to do to be a part of my life, to participate in church and so he agreed and that made us one accord.

Some of the participants even shared how their relationship with God has helped them when their relationships did not work out. Jenna shared that for her, “God really healed me when I went through my divorce and I had to continuously pray about healing
and being free from the soul ties that [my ex-husband and I] had.” She reported feeling
like the church should have played a more active role in helping her make her marriage
work. She also spoke about how the church could have provided her with support when
she went through the divorce and after their relationship ended. Instead, she said:

I think what they think support is just telling its ok or it’ll be ok and everybody is
praying for you. That’s good but you still need to know what to do and how to
get through it every day, going through changes with your kids even and I think
that’s sad. There’s a lot of churches that do have that, they have great counseling
they counsel for divorce or premarital counseling and all that because they want
to prepare you, but when churches don’t you’re kinda just left alone to see what
to do about it.

Jenna’s ideas about what she needed from the church speak to the importance the
church plays in the role of the African American community. Traditionally in the African
American community problems have been handled by first going to your family and
talking with them about the issue. If the family wasn’t capable of helping the individual
with the problem, the next resource was the church and talking to the pastor and church
community. The church plays a central role in the lives of many African Americans and
for many, given the limited amount of resources available to them, they understood the
importance of involving the church and God.

Wendy and Oprah talked about the importance of involving God in every aspect
of your relationship. Wendy said that it is important to ask yourself:

Is your relationship [right] with God before you get married? If you listen to
what [God] tells you do and do it exactly the way [God] said it, then you’re
ready for your relationship [with a man]. If you’re not spending time with [God]
. . . . if [God] tells you to go do this and you don’t do it, [then] you’re not ready.

Oprah also shared her beliefs about having a relationship with God and making sure that
He is the center of the relationship. She stated that people should
make sure that the Lord is the center of everything . . . if you put God first you will have a better relationship than a normal relationship . . . make sure that we have time with the Lord and make sure we [are] doing, Godly things, and . . . I think with God you can make it, but without him you can do nothing in a relationship. [Relationships] can be a lot better with God in them, but without him, you are just out there.

Making the Relationship Your Own

The women identified many sources that impacted their views about relationships. They often stated the importance of making their relationship their own when they spoke. For many of the women they stated once they got into a relationship, they needed to make the relationship specific to their own needs and desires. Oprah stated that

we have to be careful too because sometimes we base our relationships on other people’s relationships . . . so you have to make your own relationship, you and that individual. You have to be able to talk to the individual rather than trying to be like Mr. and Mrs. Jones because you probably won’t be.

This may be Oprah’s idea that when you look at other people’s relationship, you may only focus on what’s wrong with your relationship. She goes on to say:

I mean you have to make this stuff fun . . . have fun out here. You should have fun and it shouldn’t be a dread to get up and not want to be in a relationship but make the best out of the relationship that you are in right now. You know finding good in that individual and work from there. You have to build it yourself . . . you have to sit down, talk to the individual and you guys decide on what you really want out of life and nobody can tell you about that. I’m glad [the media] has those little structures of what a family should look like, that’s great and all that, but you have to do it . . . that’s just something to help you get started in [your] good relationship.

Melinda continues this idea by saying:

I think it is more of an individual thing, just really based off what you seen and what you consider to be successful. A lot is about how you were brought up.
You may have been brought up seeing that you’re supposed to do everything for man and you think that’s what you’re supposed to do.

Alyssa stated that she “learned that [in] the relationships she had she didn’t let a lot of outside factors as far as friends, family, peers and other people dictate what was going to happen, and those relationships lasted longer.”

*Family Background*

Family background and generational messages played an important role in the women’s lives and their relationship. The women in the study received both positive and negative messages about relationships from their families. They also had the ability to discern what worked for them and their relationships and what would not work for them. When the women were asked about the messages they received from different people, most of them spoke of learning about relationships from a generational perspective and from their friends or peers. Whether they received messages from their parents or their grandparents, most felt like they were given valuable information about relationships. For these women, these messages were not always explicitly given to them, but they did learn about relationships through their observations. Similarly the women indicate that their friends may not have told them much about relationships, but through conversations and watching the relationships their friends had with their partners, the women did learn about what they would want for their own relationship.

Corissa indicated that the older generation stressed the importance of finding someone with good morals and values that are similar to your own. She stated, “[It is important to find] someone who has good values, [and a] good personality. I guess it
goes back to values and morals as far as looking for that person.” Marilyn also talked
about her family emphasizing the importance of surrounding yourself with people who
had good morals and values. She said her family told her to follow

the old tradition [which] is that you must be honest, and truthful and first truthful
to yourself then you can be truthful and honest to other people . . . choose friends
who had strong moral values, meaning that they’re honest, they’re truthful,
they’re moral, they came from solid backgrounds, [so that] you develop
friend[ships] with those kinds of individuals.

Oprah indicated that some of the information she received from the older
generation was valuable for her, but she also remembered that times had changed and she
must determine what would work for her. Oprah commented:

I [have] tried to listen to older folks, but sometimes it makes a difference, so you
have to do what you need to do for you and your family, everybody has good
intentions, but some of that doesn’t work for other people, depending on you and
your situation, but it isn’t ours . . . so people are always trying to help you, trying
to be helpful, but you have to do what’s right for you first, and [the couple] has
to make it . . . you got to remember that, don’t be going to the outside . . .
communicate, so you know what is going on, that way, when you’re out or
whatever, and somebody’s talking about your significant other, you can stand up
for your significant other and don’t let other people pull your other side down. I
learned that the hard way too . . . one time . . . you get drawn into that, so there
is some wisdom that the older ladies give you, such as making sure you’re not
downgrading your significant other.

The participants not only talked about the positive messages that they received
from their families, they also talked about the interactions between partners that they
observed in their family. Brandy talked about her experience growing up in her family.
She said:

I grew up in a very good happy family . . . [my] parents [stayed] married until my
mom passed away 4 years ago. [They] had been married for over 45 years. They
had their ups and downs . . . never once was [there] any physical confrontation.
My father always respected my mom. [He] never [showed] any disrespectful
[toward] her. There are a couple of times where they even split up and lived in
separate houses, but they were devoted to their marriage. They would argue and
she would put him out and he would stay gone for a couple of days . . . but they would work it out and come back and we would be fine for the most part. They learned to work it out. They had their share of problems, but they made it work. I wouldn't trade my mom or dad for any other parents or live in any other house.

Jenna and Melinda also talked about growing up in two-parent homes. Both discussed how they were unaware that there were single parent homes around them.

Reflecting back on her experience as a child, Jenna said:

[My friend and I] were the only ones that had married parents. I was shocked when I started thinking about it; I was like it's really crazy. So, I thought it was a blessing to be able to have parents together now being an adult but I didn't think about that then. I never thought anything about it . . . I just thought that's just how it is. I didn't hear a lot about divorce, I really didn't even talk about divorce.

Oprah talked about how she modeled her relationship after the positive relationships she saw others have. She stated, “If you surround yourself with the people, you want to be like, whatever, then that rubs off.” She spoke about how tight knit her family was when she was growing up. She shared that

we had good times [in my family], we would always go down to my grandmother or aunt’s house and we would always take turns going to each other's houses . . . we would just get along and get together and cook and the kids would go outside and play.

Barriers to Having Successful Intimate Relationships

Barriers to having a successful relationship were also highlighted by the women. The women identified the media as having mostly a negative influence on their views about relationships. They also identified family history and past experiences as impacting their views. There was a consensus from the women that the media does not accurately portray African American relationships or relationships in general. For the women in this study, there seemed to be two ways that the media looked at relationships. The first was
from an unrealistically positive perspective that does not appear to be a reality for them and the second from a negative perspective full of drama and negative messages. The women even spoke about how the media can sometimes lead people to believe that when they have a relationship, the relationship will be similar to a fairy tale. Oprah said:

For me the media and everybody had their perfect ideal family. You see on TV, they are just the . . . you would see the Brady Bunch and different groups of perfect families that was what the ideal family should look like and you know you always look at your family and see if they . . . match[ed] up with the family you would see on TV. Yeah, everybody wants that perfect family that you see on TV. You always say I want that family . . . this is what a perfect relationship should look like.

Corissa spoke about how the media portrays families and relationships. She also stated that [the media] “usually tries to portray the perfect family. Everything is so wonderful and beautiful and nice and it is not necessarily like that even though a lot of people are happy.” Wendy said television shows “look like they have good relationships, but that’s not reality. We know it’s going take a lot of work but it’s still going be good.” Some of the participants talked about the media seeming to suggest that relationships will resemble that of a fairy tale. Alyssa said, “With the media, I think that they look at these sitcoms and [they] try to put themselves in those situations, but that’s not reality.”

Marilyn talked about how the media often dramatizes African American relationships and makes them seem as if they are all bad or negative. She continues on by stating that she feels more positive messages are needed for the younger generation to model successful relationships of their own. Marilyn said:

What is highlighted is the drama in the black family, you see a lot of the drama in a lot of the movies and you know . . . and the child being abused by the dad or by the uncle, or by a close relative, but we need to see more of the positive things that are happening in the black family as well . . . you know those things happen, but that’s not every family and it’s not all that way, there’s some good stories and
... we need to highlight more of those stories so that... so that young kids can see that not everything is all that drama, it's not everything... everybody gets abused and everybody goes to jail. Then there's the bad guy, there's the good guy, you know... you do have some stories that are good ones, and have a balance to it... because now when you show a good story, the kids don't think it's real. They think that doesn't happen that's only in the movies.

Marilyn indicates that she feels that young people are being bombarded with negative messages not only from the movies that they watch, but also from the music video and popular music. She says:

[There are] some songs that are out there [that] doesn't help, you know the rap songs, that don't even show respect to women and so that makes it even worse... so they are not only seeing it they're hearing it in song.

Melinda also spoke about the younger generation needing to receive more positive messages about relationships because she believes exposing them to more positive messages and relationships would help them have successful relationships when they became adults.

Some other barriers to having successful relationship that the women identified were the messages they received from their family because they were not always positive. For example, the women stated that others would tell them that men can't be trusted and that they were irresponsible. Melinda talked about a message she remembers hearing from most of her family. She stated that "my father wasn’t on the trusting piece, but he was always, make sure you can take care of yourself... you know, don't rely on anybody, make sure you do your own thing." Marilyn talked about many of the relationships she observed her extended family have. She said:

[some of] their relationships were broken, and there were relationships that ended because of infidelity... and um... irresponsibility, you saw those kinds of things happening in the environment, relationships that didn’t work because of infidelity or irresponsibility... um... or just not being truthful.
Alexis also talked about the relationships she observed the people in her family have with their partners. She said that “everyone in my family [was] divorced or they didn’t get married; they just had kids out of wedlock.” She also spoke specifically about a relationship her mother had with a man. She stated that

[my mom] was with him and they were going together [and] they had a relationship going on for about 10 years [but] they would go back and forth and I would see him leave, [then] stay with us, leave and probably stay with another female. I think I remember my mom trying to do something to his car. Them getting into arguments and there are things he would say about my mom to me and my sister. He got married and I wondered why he was messing with other women while he was messing with my mom.

The women in the study also talked about the impact that choosing career and education had on their ability to have a successful intimate relationship. The women struggled with whether or not they should or could marry someone who did not have the same goals and values in life about education. Alyssa said:

Once you get your education, it’s like who are you going to date? One thing that I noticed is that I haven’t seen many educated African American couples and it kind of scares me because if I haven’t seen it. I mean I haven’t even seen it in TV. I haven’t seen it [in] the newspaper; I haven’t seen it in public. That scares me because I’m like what if I want to date a black man will I find one and it’s kind of like a scary feeling because will I grow old and rich by myself and that’s just a scary feeling.

Melinda, who has a master’s degree in engineering, stated, “I would like to be with somebody that is even more successful than me.” She seems to understand that as she gets older the likelihood of finding someone who she perceives to be as successful as her drops drastically.

Alyssa indicated that she tries to withhold giving information about her educational background until the man really gets to know her. She said:
I have learned through a lot of relationships, I haven’t told them what I’m going to school for or told them that um ... I’m educated, but I haven’t lied to them, I just didn’t talk to them about it ... those relationships have lasted longer because it seems like when they realize I’m in school, it’s like they get intimidated and I don’t understand that. The relationships [where] I have told people what I’m doing ... the fact that I’m going to school, has turned them off.

Another barrier to successful relationships that the women identified was a general unwillingness of African American men to receive outside help such as counseling. Brandy said, “I have noticed that we will not seek out counseling. African American women, I think are more geared to counseling but African American men will not counsel.”

Corissa stated that

my relationship could have failed but my husband and I took time out to work through our issues of communication [and went] to get outside help. Communication is the key, when you can’t sometimes you need a third party who is neutral to step in to facilitate, get you talking. I think that’s a big key for us when things break down in the relationship, African American women are more apt to reach out and do counseling when men won’t. They just won’t. I don’t know if its pride or they just will not.

She goes on to say:

I think that’s where African Americans run into trouble. I just wish some how or another our African American men would not be so prideful and know that counseling is okay. I mean its okay to sit at a table and talk with a total stranger. I think black men just won’t. I find a lot of black women who will. Our African American men just won’t and I don’t know why.

Jenna agreed; she talked about wanting to receive counseling to help save her marriage and indicated that her ex-husband would not go.
Optimism for Successful Relationships in the Future

In talking about relationships for the future, the women in this study offer suggestions and hope for future generations. They often focused on having a relationship with God, which allowed them to have optimism for successful intimate relationships. Jenna indicated that she tells her daughters “to seek God about all relationships whether it’s boyfriend or friends or marriage.” This message is intertwined into her belief about God.

Oprah talked about believing that God would supply all her desires by saying:

I had a list of what I was looking for in a man, and I had prayed about it too and told the Lord to bring this man to the church. It took a while and I started putting my energies into the church and into the Lord and then you know, once [I] got out of self and helping other people, the Lord open[ed] doors for [me] and I think that’s what it was when I was least expecting that’s when he came. And it was everything I wanted . . . a list of things I wanted in a man . . . and I said “well, thank you Lord.” That’s it; [I know] you have to be specific when you are asking about anything and what you want.

Wendy indicated that she holds out hope that there are good positive relationships. The strength and optimism that she has about the future is similar to what many African American women have had to draw from in many aspects of their lives. She asks, “How do we get . . . how do we feel that, [there are good relationships] but we don’t see it ain’t never seen it, ain’t never experienced it and we trying to reach for it.”

The participants talked about finding outside resources to help them build their relationships with their partners. They spoke about the challenges of getting their partner to agree to receiving outside help. This included seeking out marital counseling and pastoral counseling in the church. Jenna said, “There [are] a lot of churches that do have
great counseling for divorce or premarital counseling and all that because they want to prepare you.”

Oprah stated, “We got too many agencies out here and too much help out here that people are willing to help.” Brandy also talked about African American couples seeking outside help. She said:

[It’s] okay to sit at a table and talk with a total stranger . . . even for those couples that are doing well . . . if you have a third party, you can say you know, this bothers me, but they may be able to do it in a roundabout way where no feelings are hurt. I think it’s real important that . . . we communicate with each other.

Brandy continued by talking about how easy getting a divorce has become and she feels that if it became more difficult to get a divorce people would work at their relationship. She stated:

I think that they would hang in there. If things went bad they would hang in there and try to fix them. [They] can weather the storm if [they] try. It’s easy now they don’t make us do any counseling. You fill out your paperwork for the divorce, if you don’t have any children, you will be done in 30 days. They don’t say did you try counseling? [I think they should say] you need to do at least 3 months of counseling because if you are forced to do something you may start to talk about things that you wouldn’t ordinary talk about. That could save some marriages because we throw in the towel too soon.

Collective Story of African American Women’s Perspectives of Successful Relationships

The collective story of African American women perspectives of successful relationships is given in the paragraphs below. The collective story is shared to give the reader another way to view the common themes of the women’s experiences in African American relationships. A collective story is a narrative summary of the data, written to capture the central aspects of the participants’ experiences.
The women in this study varied in age, marital status, religious background, and education, yet they identified several common factors to having a successful relationship. The participants defined a successful relationship as being committed to the relationship. The women spoke about how this idea of commitment has changed throughout the different generations. Within this idea of commitment, the women described how the relationship would look for them. They stated that commitment to the relationship involved two broad ideas. First, sharing a commitment to the relationship included having longevity in the relationship and knowing that their partner would remain committed even when the relationship posed challenges. The second idea was having a friendship/partnership with their mate. Having a friendship/partnership included spending time with each other, learning to compromise and support each other in the relationship, and also having similar values and goals in the relationship.

The women talked about ways commitment could be demonstrated and the factors that were needed for a committed relationship which included having respect, trust, and loyalty in the relationship. People can show their commitment to each other and the relationship by responding to each other’s needs. The participants thought being able to be true to yourself and to the other person was important. The women stated that commitment to the relationship involved understanding that relationships require work and that they would have ups and down. They also stated that relationships are a work in progress. They commented that compromise and sharing the responsibility of the relationship were also needed.

The women talked about having a friendship/partnership with their mate and sharing common goals and values in the relationship. This included knowing how to
reach the goals they had set for themselves and making sure that the goals were reasonable and obtainable. The women wanted their partner to be their best friend and each person to be able to say how they really felt about different things without fear that they were being judged. The participants also said that they would be comfortable around and could trust the other person. There would also be a connection and each partner would help the other reach their goals in life. They also included having common interests and values with their partner. One participant emphasized the importance of sharing your goals and values before you get married or make a serious commitment to each other. Another participant described this as being in tune with your partner and his wants and needs.

The women in the study also talked about the importance of having communication in the relationship. They indicated that communication occurs in many ways such as verbally and nonverbally and also involves listening to their partner. They explained how they knew communication was going well and when it is going poorly. They stated that communication was going well when the person who is receiving the information could repeat back what was said. They also shared that the person gives eye contact, shows good body posture, and gives nonverbal cues such as nodding to show that they understand what was said.

The women also spoke about the importance of having some type of religious connection with your partner. The participants discussed the impact that religion had on their views of successful relationship. They revealed that religion had a mostly positive impact on their view of relationship. They stressed the importance of having a relationship similar to how the Bible talks about relationships. The participants described
the Bible as a model for them when they were trying to form a relationship. They stressed the importance of each individual following the teachings of the Bible in order to have a good relationship. One participant captured the essence of having a religious connection with your partner by stating that the person should not only say they are Christians but be actively participating and practicing their religion.

There was a range in the participants' dating experiences. Some of the women did not have many dating experiences while others had more casual dating experiences. One participant said that the reason why she had more casual dating experiences was because her focus was on getting herself together before developing something serious with someone else. This idea was echoed by other women as well who stated that it was important to come into a relationship having a sense of who they are and being a complete person. The women who had short-term relationships while dating often felt that their relationships were based on physical needs while their other needs were not being met. The participants emphasized having a friendship with the person before having a relationship with them because the friendship allowed them to really get to know the person and being able to have fun with them which was really important.

Some of the participants married their first loves and two of those relationships have continued at present. These women stated that their relationships have gone through ups and downs, but they have remained committed to making their relationships work and feel that too often people throw in the towel too soon. The women feel people should understand that there is outside support couples can receive to help them have better relationships with their partner before they give up on the relationship. They
suggested utilizing marital and family counseling services in the community as well as seeking assistance from their respective churches or pastor.

The participants also talked about factors that influenced their views on successful relationship. These factors include barriers that prevented African Americans from having successful relationships. They believed that the media had an impact on how they viewed relationship and they stated that the media was either negative or had unrealistic expectations. For some women, they said that the media often showed unrealistic views of relationships and they did not believe the media sent messages that would help them foster successful relationships. These things included cheating on your partner, abuse, and simply not respecting women. One participant cited that she believes most of the media glamorizes all the negatives in relationships which lead the younger generations to believe that it is impossible to have a successful relationship. She goes further and states that most things broadcast in the media are dramatized because people gravitate toward more negative messages than positive and the negative sells.

There were some participants that did not receive information from the literature about relationships, while others indicated that they used the literature to measure how their relationships were or they wanted them to be. Still others admitted that what they would read in the literature is not their reality and often identified it as fantasy. This guided many of the participants to make their relationships their own relationship and not feel pressure to copy the relationships that they observed others having.

The participants indicated that while they were growing up they experienced seeing relationships that were a mixture of positive and negative. The participants indicated that these relationships were modeled by their parents, extended family, friends,
the media, and the church. These relationships taught them how they wanted their relationship to be when they grew up and began to have intimate relationships. The participants stated that their parents and extended family members not only modeled relationships, but also gave them messages about relationships. Some of the messages they received were that they should be able to take care of themselves in the case the relationship did not work. They also expressed the belief that the man should help with the responsibilities of the household such as cooking, cleaning, and possibly taking care of the children.

When asked what they would tell others about relationships, some of the participants said that they would focus on God and have a relationship with God before trying to have a relationship with someone else. They would tell others to wait until God sent them the person they should be with and not to settle for someone because they felt time was running out. The women also discussed being optimistic about the future and helping others know that they can have successful relationships. For their children, they mentioned that they would talk to them about how to have a successful relationship and would point out models to help them see and understand how successful relationships should look. The participants would tell others how important it is to love one another and stress the importance of making their relationships their own and figuring out what works for them not what works for others.
CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to understand successful intimate heterosexual African American relationships from the perspectives of African American women. This includes how the women describe successful relationships and the factors that they believed had an impact on the views of these relationships and the meaning they have given to their experiences in relationships. Furthermore, this study was intentionally strength-based, seeking to understand the positive aspects of African American relationships. The following research questions were explored to gain a deeper understanding of successful relationships.

1. How are African American women defining successful heterosexual relationships?

2. What are African American’s women’s views of the factors or characteristics needed to have a successful and happy relationship?

3. What are the messages that African American women received that influenced their thoughts about successful relationships?

4. What factors are impacting African American women’s perceptions of successful relationships?

The African American women in this study were from various family backgrounds, educational backgrounds, marital status, and socioeconomic status. They
identified themselves as having different dating and relationship experiences. In contrast to the deficit model that is commonly used in viewing African American relationships, this study sought to allow African American women to define successful intimate relationships in their own terms. Adams and Jackson (2000) and Thomas (2004) discuss the resiliency, inner strength, hope, optimism, and spirituality that African American women have and throughout the results chapter, participants’ testimonials supported these researchers’ ideas. Haile and Johnson (1989) further report that African American women have had to adapt healthy models to live their lives in America. In this chapter, a discussion of the key factors that the women felt were needed in order for them to have successful relationships are presented. These factors are examined in light of the literature concerning Eurocentric and Afrocentric perspectives on relationships. The chapter also discusses factors and messages that the women identified as impacting how they view relationships. Finally this chapter presents participants’ perspectives on providing models for facilitating successful relationships in future generations.

Defining Characteristics of Successful African American Relationships

The factors the participants attribute to having a successful relationship were that the couple had a solid commitment to the relationship and had a friendship/partnership with their mate. They understood this commitment as knowing that their partner would remain committed to the relationship during the good times and the bad times. Within this idea of being committed to the relationship, the women identified how commitment could be modeled between their partner and themselves. The women said that there

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would be trust, honesty, good communication, interdependence, respect, loyalty, and compromise.

The women also discussed how the characteristics of successful relationships have changed over time. Longevity did not necessarily equate to “success.” Rather, they emphasized that couples should have a partnership which included being friends and spending quality time doing things with each other and working together to better the relationship they have with each other. They talked about not having outside factors influence how their relationship would be. This included not feeling pressured to make their relationship like others and/or not comparing their relationship to others. Yet, there was also indication that when they saw a relationship that they wanted to model, they believed it was okay for them to model. They also indicated that they experienced observing relationships that they perceived as unsuccessful and took note of these relationships and what not to do.

Asante (1998) developed a model in which he believed all African American relationships should be viewed. He identified this model as Afrocentric. The four major components of this model are: sacrifice, inspiration, vision, and victory. Sacrifice addresses the couple’s focus on the best interest of the relationship and is collective in nature rather than focusing on each individual in the relationship. Inspiration focuses on encouraging and supporting each other in the relationship, while vision focuses on making decisions that better the African American community. Finally, victory includes celebrating the accomplishments and advancements of the African American community. Each of these major components is broken down to determine how well they match the views of the African American women in this study. In the present study, the women
primarily identified two of the major components developed by Asante, which were
sacrifice and inspiration. These two components are closely tied to the nature of
interpersonal interactions in intimate relationships. The other two components, vision
and victory, were not emphasized by the women in this study, although they did address
some aspects of these components. These two components are linked to the broader
context of African American people's lives.

Sacrifice is the first component identified in Asante's model and focuses on what
is most important for the relationship rather than what is important for each individual; it
is concerned with what will make the relationship more collective rather than
individualist. Sacrifice is similar to the factor of compromise that was identified by the
women. The women appreciated that their partner and they would need to consider each
other when making decisions that impact their relationship. Asante also identifies a
spiritual component to sacrifice. He states that each person in the relationship places
importance on spiritual characteristics rather than the physical and/or material features.
The women in the present study discuss the importance of having a spiritual connection
with God as well as their partner. This idea falls in line with the historical and
foundational views that African American people have had since first coming to this
country. African Americans have not always had the luxury of material things, thus often
relying on each other and their families.

The second element identified by Asante, inspiration, highlights supporting and
encouraging each other in the relationship and giving and taking from each other when
needed. The women in the present study seemed to embrace this idea as they discussed
the importance of having similar goals and values in life and in their relationship.
Stephens-Williams (1992) also found this to be true in her study of successful African American couples. In the present study, one woman specifically planned with her husband before they got married to ensure that they would be working toward the same goals. She also mentioned that although she and her husband would sometimes have different goals, they would remain supportive of each other and not discourage the other. Another participant shared that she wished she would have emphasized supporting and encouraging her husband more in their marriage because she believed that encouraging and supporting her husband more would have saved their marriage.

Vision is the third element of the Afrocentric model. This value component emphasizes that the couple makes plans and decisions that advance the Black family and the Black community. The women in the study did not spend much time focusing on the idea of vision except when they talked about messages they wanted to pass along to the younger generations. They did not specifically identify how they were currently using their relationship to help the Black family or the Black community; however, they did identify the areas that they felt had a negative impact on helping people foster successful relationships.

Finally, Asante identified victory as the final element needed to help African American couples have successful relationships. Victory encompasses celebrating the accomplishments and advancements of African American people. Although the women in this study did not directly discuss this idea, many of them spoke about their personal achievements and the achievements of other African Americans.

In contrast, there are three central components to a Eurocentric model of relationships. These are individualism, materialism, and physical gratification. Although
some of the women held onto some ideas that could be perceived as Eurocentric, most
did not. The first characteristic of the Eurocentric model is individualism. The idea
behind individualism is primarily considering self and ways to advance self without
thinking of others. When thinking about this further, this would assume that the
individual would not be concerned with what may be best for the relationship. The
women in this study did not endorse this idea; in fact, most talked about how
individualism would negatively impact their relationship.

Closely related to the Eurocentric model are the connections identified by
Karenga (1979). He identified four connections that he believed African American men
and women use to fall in love with each other. These four connections, the cash
connection, the flesh connection, the force connection, and the dependency connection,
can have a negative impact on African American relationships. African American men
and women often associate materialism and physical gratification to each other due to
the negative stereotypes that they hold about each other and these psychological barriers
still negatively affect couples today. African American men can often be heard stating
that African American women are too materialistic. Some of the women in this study
spoke about wanting to have a relationship with someone who had just as much if not
more material things that they had. Others indicated that they were willing to build their
lives with their partners. These differing perspectives impacted the types of relationships
that the women had with men. For example, the youngest participant spoke about how
she expected men to buy her things when she was in relationship with them. She also
stated that most relationships with men were physical. The women talked about African
American men feeling intimidated by them when they have more material things.
The participants talked about the physical relationships they had with some of their partners in previous relationships. Karenga describes the flesh connection as men and women seeking solely sex from the opposite gender. The participants discussed the outcome of the relationships that were primarily physical in nature. They indicated that getting too physical with their partner before the relationship has a foundation caused problems in their relationships. There seemed to be an underlying tone or expectation that the women held about men and their beliefs about sex. It was almost as if they were saying if African American men wanted sex it was best to give it to them, because if not, they would find it someplace else. Holding these views and stereotypes about each other is having a detrimental impact on how African American men and women are relating to each other.

Comparing the Afrocentric and Eurocentric ideologies does not appear to fully capture the experiences and complexities of African American relationships, although the Afrocentric perspective does appear to better fit the ideas that the women in this study have about relationships. Perhaps African American relationships should be viewed from yet another ideology or a combination of several.

Factors Needed to Have a Successful and Happy Relationship

One of the questions this study sought to answer about successful African American relationships was what factors were identified as being needed in order to have a successful intimate relationship. The women in this study identified several factors that they felt were needed in order for them to have successful relationships. The factors that emerged could potentially be needed across any culture for any successful intimate
relationship. They identified commitment to the relationship, having good communication, faith in and a relationship with God and each other, knowing themselves and having the capacity to take care of oneself, being a whole person, family background, and making the relationship their own. Many of these factors were similar or closely related to the themes found in Stephens-Williams (1992) study of successful African American couples. For example, in the Stephens-Williams study, commitment to the relationship was identified by her participants as being important. Similarly, in the present study, commitment to the relationship was important for the women and included knowing that their partner would remain committed to the relationship when things were not going well.

The couples in Stephens-Williams (1992) study identified having the ability to handle disagreements as being important to the success of their relationships. She defines this as talking through problems that occur and having a flexible attitude and open mind. This idea is similar to the idea that the women in the present study had, which is described as having open communication with their partner. The women in the present study recognize the importance of good communication skills with their partners. They state that if there is no communication, the relationship is sure to fail. The women who had recently gone through a divorce identified communication as being a major factor in why their relationship did not work. Those women identified wanting to seek outside services such as counseling or the church to help them start communicating with each other again.

God is fundamentally interwoven in the lives of the African American community. There is much debate among researchers about the impact that religion has
on African American people and their relationships (Aldridge, 1991; Asante, 1998; Stephens-Williams, 1992). Stephens-Williams identified religion or having a relationship with God or higher power as being important to the couples in her study. The couples in her study believed that God should be first in their lives and that they should seek God in all decisions they make in life. Likewise, having God in their lives also held true for the participants in the present study. They believed that putting God first in their relationship ultimately improved the relationship they had with their partner. One participant in particular stated that she feels that couples go wrong when they do not seek God first when matters in their relationship come up for them. Another participant also spoke about how her marriage was stronger because both she and her husband had a relationship with God, which allowed them to become one with each other. Several of the women spoke about waiting on God to show them who He has selected for them and until that really getting themselves together.

Although the women in the study identified God and religion as being important for them to have successful relationships, at times this was also a source of tension for them. For example, many of the women focused on having an egalitarian relationship with their partners, and worked on reconciling this perspective with their understanding of biblical teachings that the man should be the head of the household. Asante (1998) believes that African American relationships should have more of a collaborative approach to their relationship. This incongruency between religion and Afrocentric beliefs became very evident during this study. While completing the second interview with one participant in particular, she struggled with the idea of the man being the head of the household and indicated that she wanted more of a partnership with her husband.
Clearly her struggle with trying to define whether or not she was in a relationship that was authoritarian or egalitarian was evident. As discussed in the literature review, many researchers debate the impact that Judeo-Christian ethic has on the African American community. Some of the researchers believe that African American couples use religion to help them cope with the stresses of racism and other structural issues in American society. Still other researchers believe that Judeo-Christian ethic has been used to overpower women and position them into more passive, submissive, and subordinate roles. Based on the results of this study, the women did not want to be seen as being submissive or dominant, but rather a partner in their relationship with their significant other. They wanted to have a voice in the decision making within the household while also understanding that they would have to compromise with each other to make the relationship work.

The couples in Stephens-Williams' (1992) study did not identify the next three factors discussed by the women in the present study. Thus, the present study adds to what we had previously known about successful relationships. The women in this study talked about really knowing themselves before they entered into a relationship. They felt this was important because when women or men enter a relationship without knowing who they are, they look to the other person to help define them, which ultimately weakens the relationship. When the women described how they begin to know themselves, they talked about doing things that they enjoyed and made them happy. They also talked about having a career or stable employment and really doing what they needed to do to take care of oneself.
Related to knowing who you are is the idea of being a whole person before entering the relationship. The women talked about not feeling like they needed a man to take care of them, but rather the man would complement who they already were as a person. The participant who has been married the longest talked quite explicitly about entering the relationship as a whole person. She stated that it is very difficult for someone to help you know who you are. However, she does acknowledge that people will continue to grow after they enter the relationship.

Family background also impacted how the women in the present study viewed successful relationships. Stephens-Williams' participants also identified family as being significant for successful relationships. She reported that the couples in her study believed in the importance of family accomplishments and values. In her study, this is understood as knowing each individual's family history, parents, grandparents, and possibly great-grandparents. The women in present study spoke about witnessing negative events that occurred in their family, such as physical abuse and verbal abuse. These women determined that they did not want to have a relationship with someone where their partners would physically or verbally abuse them. Instead they looked for more positive characteristics in their family that they felt they could model their relationships after when they began having their own. Amazingly, the women who did witness unhealthy relationships when they were growing up still believed that they could have healthy relationships and some do have these relationships with their partners. They attributed this to having their own trial and error in relationships. Other women talked about seeing positive relationships and may have had less trial and error to endure.
because they were exposed to more healthy models of relationships. Thus, the dynamics of the family had an impact on the women’s relationships they had with men.

Finally, the women talked about how essential it was for them to make their relationship exclusive to them. They did not want others to define what was good for them. It seemed as if they understood when they allowed others to determine what was good for them, they were not happy and the relationship did not work for them or their partner. Furthermore, they may have understood on a subconscious level that others may view their relationship as negative because of their own ideas about what makes a relationship good.

Messages and Other Factors That Influence African American Women’s Perceptions of Successful Relationships

Many researchers report on the factors that impact African American woman’s perceptions of successful relationships (Aboramphah, 1989; Aldridge, 1991; Bell et al., 1990; Burgest & Goosby, 1985; Zoller & Williams, 1987). The researchers projected that 20-25% of all African American women would not get married due to structural factors in American society such as capitalism, racism, sexism, and Judeo-Christian ethic (Aldridge, 1984; Aldridge, 1991; Davis et al., 1997). This study proposed that there were factors that negatively influenced women’s views, and sought to understand how African American women tackled these negative factors when thinking about their relationships with African American men. Although the interview questions for the present study were designed to explore a broad range of potential influences on their perceptions of successful relationships, the participants emphasized three particular
factors that they felt influenced their perceptions on successful relationships. These were their family, the media, and the church. Sometimes the women in this study needed to adjust their views about African American relationships because there was conflict between what they had learned from family, the media, and church and what they had experienced in their own personal relationships.

The women talked about the messages they received from family and others that impacted their views of successful relationships. One participant talked about her family telling her not to trust anyone. She admits that she continues to embrace the message that she received from her family and acknowledges that she must be capable of trusting the individual she enters into a relationship with. This conflict of whether or not she should trust people seems to impact her relationships with men.

The participants talked about their parents preparing them for their relationships by informing them that they must be capable of supporting themselves in case there was not a man around to support them. This message was given to the women at a very young age and continues to impact how they view relationship with men today. As the women entered into relationships and began making their relationship specific to them, it appeared that they were more willing to compromise on this message a little. One participant said that she felt comfortable going to her husband and asking for help when she needed it. Another participant shared that she felt holding on to such a view negatively impacted her relationship with her husband. At the time of this study, she was in the process of going through a divorce and stated that if she gets married again, she will give up her independent attitude for a more interdependent view.
The women also stated that people shared with them that they should give others a chance and have some flexibility when being in a relationship. Showing flexibility included appreciating that relationships are a give and take and that they should be patient and understanding when dealing with their partner. It also included listening to the other person and not judging the person.

The youngest participant talked about feeling as if she needed to play games with men in order for them to like her. She talked about believing that she was supposed to act a certain way in order for get what she wanted. She assumed that every man had an agenda and that was to get sex from her. In return, she thought that they would buy things for her and treat her like a girlfriend. As time passed, she indicated that she understood she had a distorted way of viewing relationships and changed this thinking. She said that she would often meet guys in clubs, bars, and on the street and they were all the same in the way they approached her and what they wanted from her. In return, she expected the young men to give her money when she asked for it. In some ways she held on to the stereotypes that Kareenga (1979) called the flesh connection and the cash connection. Karenga believes that these connections represent how men and women fall in love with each other. She admitted to playing this game until she decided that she was ready for a serious relationship with someone. At the completion of this study, this participant was trying to make a relationship work with a man with whom she started out playing games. These psychological games that this participant was engaging in have had a negative impact on the relationships she has had with men in the past.

Other participants spoke about how African American men view them when they are capable of taking care of themselves. They indicate that the men feel as though the
women don’t need them and this often breaks down communication between them because both are assuming things that are not true. This seemed especially true for the women who are educated. Bethea (1995) states that highly educated African American women are the least likely group to get married because of their perceived threat to others as well as their inability to find a suitable partner. One participant talked about her struggle with her fiancé when she expressed a desire to get an advanced degree. She indicated that he felt threatened and felt that she would leave him when she completed her degree because he did not have a postsecondary education.

Porter and Bronzaft (1995) identified psychological and sociological factors that sometimes have a negative impact on successful African American relationships. Some of these psychological factors they identified include stereotypes, myths, and assumptions that African American men and women hold about each other. The single African American women in this study shared their frustration with trying to fight against the stereotypes that others have about them. One of the participants who is an engineer and making a great salary talked about men telling her she is snooty because she likes to travel and do things that only people who are financially secure can do. This participant spoke about understanding that her chance of finding a partner who offers as much as she has to offer is dismal. Some of the research talked about the increased number of African American women pursuing advanced education while the number of African American men pursuing advanced education has decreased (Bell, 1989). Another African American woman in the study spoke about African American men viewing her as being “hard” or abrasive and sometimes as having an attitude because of the way she related to them.
The women in the study also identified sociological factors that impacted their relationships. First, the single women discussed their difficulty in finding a suitable African American partner. One participant believed that her difficulty in finding a partner was related to residing in a small Midwestern town. However, she did acknowledge that she may continue to have difficulty in a larger city; she believed that her options would increase in a larger city. Other women believed that the difficulty in finding a suitable African American male partner resided in the fact that there are not many African American men in general who can accommodate the number of African American women in this country.

Jewell (1983) reports in her study about the influence that the mass media has on African American relationships. One participant talked about the negative influence that the media and society are having on the younger generation. She said that in general today’s society and the media have bombarded the youth and specifically African Americans with such negative messages that many are discouraged or disbelieve that people can have successful relationships. Therefore, she believes that society and the media should begin to show more positive realistic views of successful relationships.

Creating Models for the Younger Generation

The women acknowledge that changes needed to be made within African American relationships to help the younger generation. There was a consensus among the women that suggests that relationships are not valued by people as they were in the past. They believe that the attitudes and beliefs that the younger generation holds about intimate relationships need to be refined in order for them to begin having healthy,
happy, and successful relationships. The women identified messages that they would like
to give the younger generation. Stephens-Williams (1992) also reported this in her
findings. She stated that the couples in her study identified being role models for the
younger generation as important for others to have successful relationships in the future.

One of the participants stated that she would show her child models of good
relationships while the child was young. She continued by saying that she would not only
show her older couples, but would also show her younger couples so that her daughter
could possibly relate more easily. Another participant indicated that she would tell the
younger generation to treat people how they would want to be treated. This message
was repeated by other participants as well and goes back to having strong morals and
values. Having good morals and values included being true to yourself and true to the
person with whom you are involved. The women stated that if the younger generation of
girls would seek out a relationship with God before seeking out a relationship with boys,
then God would send them the person they are supposed to be with. One woman in
particular talked about not settling for just anything when selecting a mate because the
relationship will most likely not work.

The women wanted the younger generation to understand that relationships
require work and have their ups and downs. They talked about how society has given the
impression that you can have everything at your fingertips without putting in the
necessary work to make things happen. Some of the participants talked about how easily
people give up on the relationship without an attempt to work on it. They talked about
how easy it has become to get a divorce. One participant stated that if there are no
children involved, then the people could get divorced within 30 days. Another participant
shared that she was talking to a friend who stated to her that if the marriage she just entered did not work out, she would just get an annulment. This participant stated that this mentality was very discouraging and at times prevented her from wanting to get into a serious relationship with someone.

Implications for Working With African American Women and Families

An increased number of African American relationships and families are impacted by the breakup of intimate heterosexual relationships due to several factors such as divorce, death, or lack of commitment by one's partner. This research hopes to help psychologists and other mental health professionals understand how African American women view successful relationships, so that if there are relationship concerns or problems in these women's relationships, mental health professionals will be better equipped to work with this population. Psychologists and other mental health professionals should remember that the African American relationship is not governed by the same values as that of those who are of European descent. Psychologists and other mental health professionals should focus on helping African American men and women become complete individuals before entering into a relationship.

Additionally, when they enter into relationships, they should begin to make their relationship their own rather than trying to make their relationships like others. It is also important for everyone to understand that African American women may assess relationships differently than how the dominant culture might evaluate their relationships. This means that the practitioner should not assume that African American relationships are at a deficit when conceptualizing or working with the client(s). Also, it is important
to understand the cultural and historical factors that may influence these women’s perspectives on successful relationships. This does not imply that therapists from cultural backgrounds that are different from African American people could or should not work with them. It does suggest that culturally sensitive therapists should be aware of the factors that impact these relationships and make them different from other relationships. It is important for therapists to help African American women articulate their own understanding of how commitment can be demonstrated and how partnerships or friendships can be developed. Finally, therapists could help the couple communicate better with each other and help the couple identify whether or not they share the same goals, values, and beliefs to ensure having a healthier, happier, and successful relationship.

According to the findings of this study, neither an Afrocentric perspective nor a Eurocentric perspective fully captures how to help African American couples to model their relationships. However, the Afrocentric perspective and approach may be more appropriate in helping to guide African American couples to have successful relationships. This approach has two important components that the women in this study believe are important for African Americans to have successful relationships. These components are sacrifice and inspiration. Sacrifice encourages the couple to focus on what is best for the relationship and is collectively focused rather than individually focused. There is also emphasis placed on having spiritual features rather than physical or material features, given the history of African American people. Inspiration encourages the couple to focus on supporting each other’s goals and learning that relationships are a give and take.
In the future, researchers could contribute to understanding and promoting positive African American relationships by studying African American men’s perspectives on successful relationships. Researchers could also examine the impact of educational programs that are offered in the church, mental health settings (such as groups for couples), and the community.

Implications for Future Research

The following implications for future research are suggested based on the limitations of this study. As with any research project, there are limitations to this study. The first possible limitation to this study occurs when there is possible error in the raw data or deceit on the part of the participant (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Error is also dependent upon the researcher’s subjectivity. All research methods are imperfect and qualitative research methods are no exception in that this method provides only a partial view of the phenomenon in aiming to look at the individual story from participants’ own perspectives (Morrow & Smith, 2000). This study was qualitative in nature and thus utilized a small sample of 10 participants to capture the essence of African American women’s experiences of successful relationships. Although this study was most concerned with getting at the depth of the women’s experience, it cannot be generalized to the entire African American population. Furthermore, this study focused on African American women and did not include the perspective of African American men or African American couples. Future research could add to this present literature, by using the findings from this study to expand or develop existing or nonexistent measures to assess successful African American relationships.
Another research implication that developed as a result of this study is the need for researchers, psychologists, and other mental health professionals to better understand the impact that Christianity has on African American relationships. The women in this study expressed the tension they felt around the idea of the man being the head of the household. Clearly, the women wanted to follow the teachings of the Bible, but they also expressed a desire for a more egalitarian relationship. Therefore, it may be important to further study how African Americans reconcile the incongruence between their religious beliefs and their personal beliefs.

Researchers can also use the present findings to develop a quantitative study that examines how well the existing measures of relationship satisfaction and marital well-being might work with African American couples. For example, commitment to the relationships is important across many ethnic groups; however, how commitment is demonstrated may look different to African American men and women than to members of the dominant culture. In addition, for some groups, marriage may not be the primary goal of their relationship, thus this should not be imposed upon them. This idea extends beyond research and also needs to be addressed in counseling. Psychologists and other mental health professionals must be aware that they should allow each couple the opportunity to define what is important to them.

Future researchers could also utilize different methods for studying this population. Rather than look at African American relationships from an individual perspective, focus groups could be developed to gain additional understanding of how the themes that were uncovered in the present study might be expanded on and defined further when discussed in a group format. This suggestion could also lead to further
discussion among African American men and women on how they could better their relationships with each other.

**Strengths of the Study**

This study sought to understand how African American women were defining their relationships and the factors they felt were needed for successful relationships. In doing so, many characteristics that the participants identified were similar to the characteristics Stephens-Williams (1992) found in her study of successful African American couples and also provided some additional information about African American relationships. This study also gave a voice to African American women who are often underrepresented in the literature.
REFERENCES


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Appendix A

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board
Letter of Approval
Date: March 27, 2006

To: Mary Anderson, Principal Investigator
   Shamika Hall, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Mary Lagerwey, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 06-03-10

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled “A Phenomenological Study Assessing African American Women’s Perspectives of Successful Heterosexual Relationships” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reappraisal if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination:   March 27, 2007
Appendix B

Subject Recruitment
Subject Recruitment

African American Women Participants

The recruitment and sampling of participants will be conducted in several different stages. First, selecting information rich participants is very important to qualitative research. Potential participants will be African American women ages 21-55 years old. This age range is selected because it is believed that women within this age range have begun to experience the possible changes in relationships that have occurred more recently. Prospective participants must live in the Midwest because the researcher lives in the Midwest and intends to interview each woman in person. Each potential participant will be asked if she has ever had experience in successful heterosexual relationships. If she has not had experience with successful relationships, she will be asked if she has had past personal experience in heterosexual romantic relationships. Phenomenological researchers suggest that you have eight to ten participants to provide enough valuable information about the lived experience (Creswell, 1998).

African American women will be recruited from a few Midwestern cities through community services, churches, and universities. Access will be gained through gatekeepers in the communities such as ministers, community leaders and African American university program leaders. Once access has been gained, potential participants will be verbally invited to participate in the study. (See verbal invitation.) Potential participants can indicate their interest in the study by making contact with the researcher following the verbal invite from the researcher or they may also contact the researcher at a later date by using the contact information provided by the researcher. (See flyer) In order to secure rich information from the participants, each woman who agrees to participate will be given a demographic questionnaire (See demographic questionnaire). The demographic questionnaire will include a question about the preferred method of contacting the participants. Demographic information will be used to select a diverse group of women for participation in the interview phase of the study. Efforts will be made to invite and select women who vary in religious affiliation, marital status (if married, how long), socioeconomic status, and education. Women who have been selected to participate in the interview portion of the study will be contacted by phone using the contact information they provided from the demographic questionnaire. (See oral script.) The phone call will serve as a time to schedule them to complete the in person interview. In addition to setting a scheduled time to interview over the phone, participants will also be sent a postcard reminding them of the time of their scheduled interview. (See postcard.) Participants who completed the demographic questionnaire but were not selected will also be sent a postcard. The postcard will be sent to thank them for the expressed interest, but to inform them that they were not selected.
Appendix C

Informed Consent
Informed Consent
Western Michigan University
Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology

A phenomenological study assessing African American women's perspectives on successful heterosexual relationships
Mary Z. Anderson Ph.D. Principle Investigator
Shamika Y.L. Hall M.A., Student Investigator

You have been invited to participate in a research project entitled: A Phenomenological Study Assessing African American Women's Perspectives on Successful Heterosexual Relationships. This study is designed to assess African American women's views of successful relationships. Shamika Hall from Western Michigan University, Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology is conducting this study as part of her requirements for the doctoral degree in Counseling Psychology. This study is Ms. Hall's dissertation project, which is being supervised by Dr. Mary Anderson.

This study consists of two phases. In the first phase participants will complete a demographic questionnaire, which will take about fifteen minutes to complete. Responses to the demographic questionnaire will be used to select a diverse group of people to participate in phase two. In phase two participants will be asked to complete two interviews with the student researcher. Prior to the second interview participants will be sent a summary of the first interview to ensure accuracy. Both interviews will take place in a private location at a time convenient for you and will last approximately one and a half hours each. During the interviews, you will be asked questions about your perspectives on African American relationships.

Your confidentiality will be strictly maintained and all interview information will be solely used for the purpose of this study. You may choose not to answer any or all of the questions. Interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed by a professional transcriber. Your name will be replaced with a pseudonym; any references to specific places or people will be changed to maintain confidentiality. All data will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the student researcher's home until the completion of the study. Upon completion of the study all data will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the principle investigator's office at WMU for a minimum of three years. If at any time you choose not to participate in this study, the data will not be used in the study. Signing the informed consent indicates your consent for use of the answers you supply as research data.

This research allows the participants an opportunity to share their story about relationships and possibly learn interesting things about themselves as a result of participating. Participants will be asked to share their personal experiences in relationships as part of the study. The expected benefit of this study includes providing
information about how African American women view successful relationships to the counseling community and the community as a whole. As in all research there may be unforeseen risks to the participant. The researcher anticipates minimal risk to the participant, such as mild discomfort when discussing uncomfortable issues about their relationships.

The Human Subjects Institutional Review Board has approved this consent document for the use for one year from the date indicated on the top of the page. Do not complete this study if the stamped date is older than one year. If you have any questions or concerns, you may contact Shamika Hall, M.A. at 269-387-1850, or Mary Z. Anderson, Ph.D. at 269-387-5113. You may also contact the Chair, WMU Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (387-8293) or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions or problems arise during the course of the study.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and/or had explained to you the purpose and requirements of the study and that you agree to participate. You may refuse to participate or quit this study at any time without any negative consequences.

Signature ___________________________ Date ___________________
Demographic Questionnaire

Name: __________________________________________

Mailing Address: __________________________________

______________________________________________

Phone: _______________________________________

E-Mail: _______________________________________

* Please indicate your preferred method of contact.

Please respond to the following questions by checking or marking the best answer as it applies to you.

1. Are you currently in a relationship?  No ____________ Yes__________

If yes please indicate how long you have been in a relationship. ______

2. What is your current relationship status?
   Married_________ Separated _________ Single___________
   Widowed_________ Divorced _________ Living Together___________

3. If married or living together, how long have you been together? ______
   What is your age? _______________
   What is your ethnicity?
   African American/Black__________ African _________________________
   Biracial (Please specify) _________ Multiracial (Please specify)_______
   Caribbean ______________________ Other (Please specify)______________
5. What is your educational status? (Please Check)

Less than high school _______ Some high school __________

High school graduate __________ Some college __________

Two-year degree ___________ (A.A, etc.)

Graduated college ___________ (B.A., B.B.A., B.S., etc.)

Post graduate degree ___________ (M.A., M.S., M.B.S., Specialist Degree, Ed.D., Ph.D., M.D., etc.)

6. What is your current employment status?

Unemployed (not working)___________

Unemployed (currently a student)____

Employed (full-time)________________

Employed (part-time)________________

Retired__________________________

Disabled________________________

7. What is YOUR current income level? (Please note, this question is about your individual income, not the income level of your household overall.)

Less than $10,000 a year _______ $10,001 to $20,000 a year _______

$30,001 to $40,000 a year _______ $40,001 to $50,000 a year _______

$50,001 to $60,000 a year _______ $60,001 to $75,000 a year _______

$75,001 to $100,000 a year_______ $100,000 or more _______

If you have additional sources of income please indicate the source and the amount. (E.G., Child support, spouse) ___________________ How much?
8. Which type of community would you say you grew up in?
   Rural
   Urban
   Suburban
   Other (Please specify)

9. What type of community would you say you live in currently?
   Rural
   Urban
   Suburban
   Other (Please specify)

10. What region of the country would you say you live in?
    Midwest
    North East
    South
    South East
    South West
    West Coast

11. What is your religious affiliation?
    Atheist
    Buddhist
    Christian
    Muslim
    Other (Please Specify)
    None

12. Who did you live with while growing up (check all that apply)?
    Mother
    Father
    Grandmother
    Grandfather
    Aunt
    Uncle
    Other (Please Specify)

13. Do you have any children?
    Yes
    No
14. Who do you currently live with (check all that apply)?

Husband ____________ Boyfriend ______________
Roommate ____________ Alone ________________
Family ______________ (Please Specify) With your Children _________
Other(s) ________________________________ (Please Specify)
Appendix E

Script for Verbal Invitation
Script for Verbal Invitation

Hi, this is Shamika Hall from Western Michigan University and I am contacting you to invite you to participate in my study assessing African American women's view of successful relationships. If you are still interested in participating I would like to schedule our first interview session together. (Determine time that participant can meet for 1-1/2 hours). I will be sending out a post card to remind you of our scheduled interview time. Thank you for agreeing to participate my study. See you on _______ (date).
Appendix F

Oral Script for Researcher
Hello, [name], my name is Shamika Hall, I am here today because you agreed to participate in my study assessing African American women's view of successful relationships. I would first like to go over the informed consent with you and find out if you have any questions about the informed consent or any part of the interview process. By signing the informed consent you have agreed to participate in this study and you will be taped with a tape recorder to help me understand everything you’ve said when I transcribe the information.
Appendix G

Interview Questions
Interview Questions

An African American Women’s Perspectives on successful heterosexual relationships

1. Introduce Myself
2. Have Interviewee Introduce Herself
3. Explain why we are here (to interview an African American woman about her experiences and views on African American heterosexual relationships
4. Go over informed consent (let her know that we will be taped and have her agree to be taped over the tape recorder). Have her sign informed consent
5. Ask if she has any questions

Definition

Some times when we are asked to define a term, we often think of the dictionary for the definition, but I am more interested in understanding your ideas so I’d like to start by understanding how you define a successful relationship.

6. What is your opinion of a successful relationship?
7. How did you experience relationships while growing up?

(Where there people around who had successful relationships?) (Where there people of significance who were in relationships, that may have had an impact on your view of relationships)

Familial Influences

8. What messages (information) did you receive from your immediate family about relationships?
   o Did your mother or father tell you things about relationships and how they should be?
   o Did anyone tell you what to look for while growing up and into adulthood?
   o Did you observe anything about relationships from your immediate family?

9. What messages (information) did you receive from your extended family about relationships?
   o Did your grandparents or aunts and uncles tell you things about relationships and how they should be?
   o Did you observe anything about relationships from your extended family?
10. What messages (information) did you receive from your peers?
   
   - Did or do your friends or cousins tell you anything about relationships?
   - Did you learn anything from the media about relationships?
   - Did you learn anything from literature (research) about relationships?
   - Did you learn anything from the church about relationships?

**Personal experience in dating**

11. I would like for you to envision a successful relationship. Can you tell me what that would look like for you?

12. Now I would like for you to envision an unsuccessful relationship. Can you tell me what that would look like for you?

13. Since first beginning to date, what has your experiences been in relationships? (Have you done a lot of dating, have you had many long-term relationships etc.)

14. Describe how your views of successful relationships changed based on your (dating or marriage) experiences?

**Other factors that influence your opinion**

15. How has time impacted your view of relationships? (As you’ve gotten older have your views changed?)

16. What factors do you feel influence your view of successful relationships? (society, age, religion, media)

17. Is there anything more that you would like to share with me regarding relationships?
Appendix H

Follow-up Interview Script
Follow-up Interview Script

Hello, this is Shamika Hall from Western Michigan University. May I please speak to __________ (name)? Hi __________ (name) I calling to ask you some follow-up questions about your personal experience and perspectives on successful African American relationships. I sent you a copy of your narrative and was wondering if you have received it. (If participant says yes, continue by asking questions. If not, let participant know that she should be receiving her narrative and that I would like her to review it before I continue to ask her any follow-up questions.)

{If yes} Could you tell me if you feel the narrative that I sent you fits your story accurately? Was there anything about your story that you feel was left out? {If yes}, is there anything that you would like to add to your (story) narrative? Now I would like to share with you the themes that I found from other participants in the study to see if their themes are similar to your experiences. One theme that I found is __________ (theme). Does this theme fit your experience? If yes, how does it fit your experience? If no, how is it different from your experience? {Repeat until themes have been discussed}

Well __________ (name) I believe that I have enough information about your story (narrative). I would like to thank you for your time with this follow-up phone call. If you have anything further that you would like to add about your story please give me a call. Thank You.
Appendix I

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study
Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

This is an invitation for you to participate in a research project about “African American women’s perspectives on successful heterosexual relationships.” The purpose of this study is to understand how African American women are defining and identifying successful heterosexual relationships.

♦ Criteria to be eligible for participation

1). Potential participants are those who identify themselves as African American women.

2). Potential participants must have some experience (currently or in the past) in an African American heterosexual relationship.

Your participation would include responding to a background questionnaire and two Interviews. If you might be interested in participating please contact Shamika Hall at shamika.y.hall@wmich.edu or (269) 598-5923. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Shamika Y. L. Hall, M.A.  
Doctoral Student  
shamika.y.hall@wmich.edu

Mary Z. Anderson, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
mary.anderson@wmich.edu
Appendix J

Cover Letter for Mailing Transcribed Information
Date

Dear Participant

Enclosed please find the transcribed interview of our first interview session. Please read and determine whether or not the information is an accurate statement of your views of successful relationships. If you feel that information is inaccurate or missing important information please make note of areas that need to be added or changed to reflect your thoughts around successful African American relationships. I will be calling you in the future to discuss any areas that you feel may need to be further discussed and will schedule time for our second interview.

If you have any questions or concerns about any information you have received, please feel free to contact me otherwise I will be contacting you at a later date.

Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,

Shamika Y. Hall
Doctoral Student
Appendix K

The Women's Individual Stories
A successful African American relationship for you means that you have a religious connection. The religious connection means that you are one with each other and that you are one with God. God is the head of your household and he is the center of relationship. Your belief is that if you can worship together and pray together, then you have a solid foundation for your relationship. Other factors that you felt were important to your relationship are that you can communicate with each other, have trust in each other, and understanding toward the other person.

While you were growing up you didn’t see many positive relationships. Your parents were married, but you never saw them communicate with each other. There were fights, misunderstanding, little affection, no trust and very little love. In your opinion, you feel that the communication is going well in relationships when each person can express themselves and if the other person doesn’t agree, they will still respect what you said and not hold it against you or keep bringing it up, the two of you come to a resolution and move on. This type of communication rarely occurred with parents, and you also saw how other people in your immediate family related to their partners. They did not communicate in a positive way. There were situations in your family where you felt like one of the people in the relationship was being abused or that they were abusing each other.

Your mother and father did not tell you much about relationships and how they should be. No one told you what you should look for in relationships while you were growing up. Most of the information that you received about relationship was negative although you remember the church teaching positive things about male/female relationships.

One of the messages that you received from your extended family is that you should stay together regardless of if you are happy or not. You also were able to know from seeing their relationships that you wanted something so much better. Your extended family meaning aunts, uncles, and grandparents never told you anything about relationships and how they should be.

While you were having relationships with men you didn’t have positive relationships and they weren’t good. You had many short relationships and one longer term relationship that resulted in the birth of your last child. When you were having short-term relationships, your friends would tell you to get out of the relationship if it wasn’t working. Never did your friends encourage you to try and work your relationship out with your partner while you were dating. None of your friends really gave you any advice about what you should look for in a relationship with your partner. This often led you to continue the relationship with your partner, and hoping that the relationship would get better, but knowing that it wouldn’t. Occasionally, they would say the man should do certain things for you while in the relationship and if he isn’t doing those things, then you should leave him alone. This applied not only to dating relationships, but marriage as well. They would say “just leave him.”

In these relationships, it was difficult for you to express yourself and communicate how you were really feeling because you were afraid that they would leave
you and you would be by yourself. It is your opinion, that women in general have a fear of being by themselves and often settle for a relationship even though they may not feel that the relationship is right. You think that women are made to be in relationships, and if they don't find a good relationship, they just find someone in order to be in a relationship. You think that women should stop settling and think that this behavior should be stopped at an early age, by having their fathers tell them they're beautiful, spending time with them, and telling them not to settle. Even if young girls didn't get this message from their father when they were younger, it's not too late; they can still get it as adults if God puts it in their heart.

In the media you would see relationships that were good, but for you they were not reality. You really didn't learn anything from literature about relationships. Most of the information you received was from the church and that wasn't necessarily positive. The messages that you remember were that relationships are difficult and that it is going to be rough, but you should stick with the relationship and know that God will take care of it and provide you with whatever you need. In the back of your mind you have always held on to the idea that you can have a good relationship with someone although you have never really seen anyone have a good relationship. For you the relationship would be like the sun. This means that when you and your husband came home from work, the two of you would be happy to see each other. Your relationship would be selfless and mostly about how each of you could please the other. There would be a lot of affection and each of you tells the other how much you love them. You would complete the chores together and would enjoy cooking together and just spending quality time together. There would be a nice balance between the time that you spend together and the time you spend with others and although you may be spending time with other people, you would always be thinking about how much you love and miss your partner while they are away. In the relationship, you would not feel like you had to be perfect, you would be able to be yourself and if it is the right person, they will love you no matter what. He doesn't care about your shortcomings.

In terms of your relationship with your husband, you feel that your relationship is the farthest from successful. All the things that you feel are important to have in a successful relationship, you don't feel that you have currently with your husband. You don't want to give up on the idea that one day you will have that relationship with him and you often pray that God will intervene in your relationship with your husband to make room for the type of relationship that you feel would be successful. Since the first interview, you have decided to leave the relationship with your husband and feel okay with the decision because there are things that you've learned about relationships. In your relationship with your soon to be ex-husband, you learned not be so independent. Your preference is to find a balance of independence. You can become independent in other ways, but not always feeling like you have to be in charge of everything, and also letting the man have more control than you have given them in the past. When you think about finding a balance, you think that you must have that balance before you enter the relationship. It is important to follow God's plan and read the bible because if you aren't following God's plan, then it is going to be difficult for you to follow the man that you marry.
Your idea of an unsuccessful relationship is one where there is no love. Other ideas of unsuccessful relationships are that there is no communication and that failure occurs when you can’t be open with your partner. If the individuals who are in the relationship aren’t communicating everyday, then there’s something wrong in their relationship because they should be calling to find out what is going on with each other everyday and if this doesn’t happen it is going to lead to the relationship falling apart and not working. This may also lead to infidelity and one person, if not both people looking to an outside person for the things that are missing in their relationship. Given the experiences that you have had from previous relationships and in your current relationship, you believe that successful relationships are rare and you indicate that you haven’t seen very many positive ones. Even though, you don’t consider the relationships that you’ve had in the past as being successful, you feel that you have learned a lot about relationships and how they should be. This includes loving your husband, showing him respect, also supporting him even when what he says or does isn’t right, and accepting people for who they are. In the future if you have a successful relationship you would want to help others figure out how to have one as well.

You feel that your relationship with God and faith have influenced your views of successful relationships. It is your belief that God will give you the desires of your heart and this has allowed you to keep such a positive outlook on relationships. You also said that your age has impacted your views and that time only makes your views of successful relationships stronger. You believe that you can have a good relationship and that you should not have to settle to have it. In order to find the person that you should spend the rest of you life with, you feel that you should wait for the relationship to come to you and while waiting you should really focus on preparing yourself for your soul mate. You believe that people should have a good relationship with God before they get married. Your focus should be on God during that time and you should listen exactly to what God tells you to do and if you don’t then you are not ready for a relationship with someone else.

Although your sons are all adults, if you could tell them anything about relationships and how to make them work, you would tell them that they should communicate with their partner and always put God first. They should also be the head of the household and make the decisions that are best for the relationship. They should also follow through once they make a decision because women don’t like it when their partner makes a decision and doesn’t follow through with it. Finally, if you could share anything with people about relationships, it would be to go back to God because he will show you who you should be with and wait until that time because it will be worth the wait when you find that person. Also don’t settle for just anyone because it won’t be worth it in the end.
In order for you to feel like you have a successful relationship you identified three key factors. First, a successful African American heterosexual relationship for you is one that has a religious connection. You stressed the importance of your partner not only saying that he is a Christian but also showing that he is. This means that he attends church on a regular basis and follows the teachings of the bible. Second, communication is a factor that you feel is important in having a successful relationship. Finally, you feel that trust is important.

In your opinion, you have not seen a lot of successful relationships and feel that they are hard to find. You indicated that you have a handful of friends that you feel have a successful relationship. You feel that many people are only staying married for financial purposes or for their children, but rarely because they love each other and want to be together.

Your parents were married while you were growing up, but you saw a lot of single parent households too. It was great for you to have both your mother and father at home. Their relationship was okay and you would often say to your mother that you didn’t want her to say negative things about your father because you considered yourself a “daddy’s girl” and felt like she should not talk about him to you. It was okay for your father to say things that weren’t positive about your mother, but your mother did not have the same privilege. For you, their relationship was successful, but you did not experience very many people who had successful relationships and this has had an impact on your view of relationships. While growing up, you also said that you believed there were many single parent households around, which was a big deal for you, but since you have become an adult, you realized that single parent households are no big deal. Your parents always told you that you should have your own things such as car, place to stay, and money, and particularly that you could not rely on a man to take care of you. Your mom also stressed the importance of being able to take care of yourself and to remember that you can’t trust anybody. None of your family members really told you what to look for in relationships while you were growing up. Your family was secretive about family matters and you often observed them showing this behavior. It was your belief that they were secretive around you because you would usually tell what the person said to you.

The messages that you received from your extended family while you were growing up was that you should not trust men and that men aren’t any good. In addition to your extended family telling you that you shouldn’t trust men you also observed that their relationships weren’t working and you saw a lot of divorce and some abuse.

As you continued to grow up you attended an all-girl high school, and you felt like there were clear differences between how white girls and black girls viewed relationships. You believed that white girls’ lives revolved around their boyfriend and their relationship, but you did not feel like they had very successful relationships. Specifically in your case and as was the case with some of your friends, you didn’t have much to choose from in terms of dating partners and most of the relationships you had were just for fun. You were mostly interested in getting out of high school and going to college. For the most part you did not see a lot of successful relationships among your
high school friends. Your peers would tell you that men were liars and dogs and could not be trusted. This message was given by your friends throughout your life and did not necessarily reflect male/female intimate relationships but platonic relationships or friendship that you were engaged in. While in college you believed that most people settled in their relationships. The people who had relationships were the ones that just settled. You did not feel like the people in the relationship had much in common except that they went to college together. They were not necessarily physically attracted to each other.

The media always focuses on the negative aspects of relationships and you gathered that all relationships don’t work regardless of the ethnic background of the individuals involved. It is your belief that the media focuses on things like divorce because that’s really big news and only the negative news will get attention so the media focuses on it. In reading popular magazines, you have noticed that they focus on the negatives in relationships too. The church focused mostly on what you should not be doing such as not having sex before you married. You do feel like the church offered one positive message for you and that was that you should communicate and work on the relationship to try to work out your differences.

A successful relationship for you would be one where you were able to communicate with your partner and he would be able to communicate with you. You would be able to have an open exchange and give feedback as well as receive feedback when you talk to your partner. Honesty would be part of providing feedback, but you may put a positive spin on your honest feedback so that it does not appear too harsh. Even though people would tell you that men couldn’t be trusted, it is important for you to be able to trust him and he would need to be financially secure. Although you think that it is highly unlikely to find someone who is more successful than you are, you would like to be with someone who you consider to be more successful. Having common interest and finding someone who has similar Christian values as yourself and who attends church on a regular basis is essential for you to have a successful relationship. You don’t want to get involved with anyone who has kids and you would prefer that they had never been married before, but believe that most men your age have already been married.

An unsuccessful relationship for you would be one where you live with someone because it is convenient for both of you and it’s financially better. If the two of you are living separate lives, never do anything together, and don’t communicate with each other, you feel the relationship is not successful. Being with someone who has goals in life is important for you and if the person doesn’t have goals, the relationship will not be successful because you have goals for yourself.

While you were in college you had two relationships and both of those relationships were short. The relationships that you had were causal. You would go out and have fun with people, but you never had many serious relationships. When you went to graduate school, you had your most serious relationship. This relationship lasted for 11 years and only ended because you moved away. This gentleman wanted to marry you, but you didn’t want to get married because everybody you knew was getting a divorce and you didn’t want to get a divorce.
As time has passed, your views of relationships haven't changed much and you believe that nobody's relationship is really successful. There have been situations where you have seen older couples who are in love and you feel ready to have that and hope to have that one day. You feel that one day you might find that relationship, but that it won't happen anytime soon because of certain locations, particularly in a fairly small Midwest town, such as where you live, and the lack of opportunities to meet African American men. Most of them don't meet up to your expectations or are in relationships with white women. Even though you live in a fairly small Midwestern town, your outlook on relationships still won't change if you moved to a larger city. However, your chances of being in a relationship would probably go up because there would be more opportunities to meet men. You feel that you would also probably see more unsuccessful relationships because you would be exposed to more people.

Finally you think that one way to promote change in African American relationships is to start teaching children when they are young about how to have successful relationships. This would be done by exposing them to positive relationships not just in older people, but more specifically with younger people. You would tell people to make their own successful relationship because their relationship would be based on what they see as being successful not other people's views.
Participant 3 “Marilyn”

A successful relationship for you is a relationship that has friendship. In the friendship one person takes the leadership role, but the other person still has some say in what happens. This includes having good interactions with each other, understanding how to communicate effectively and making sure that your communication patterns are compatible. In your opinion, you have been able to tell if couples have successful relationships based on your experience in your relationship. How you have been able to tell this is through their verbal as well as their non-verbal communications with each other. If the couple has eye contact and gives each other attention while they are in the company of others this is a good sign of them having a successful relationship.

While you were growing up, there were people around you who had successful relationships. In watching how their relationships were you learned that in order to have a successful relationship you had to continue to work on the relationship. The relationship has to be maintained and nurtured. Each person has to come to a common understanding of how your partner relates to you and how you relate to your partner otherwise the relationship will fail.

Your immediate family also told you that you must be honest and truthful with yourself so that you can be truthful with other people. This philosophy is true not just in your intimate relationships, but with relationships that you have in general. People told you that you should be aware of others who are not honest or trustworthy. They also told you to look out for people who cheat, lie, or steal because this behavior is likely to follow in their relationships. Being taught about people who behave like this has also shown you that you should observe people in the beginning to see if they are careless and just lie about different things. Christianity was taught in your family and one of the teachings of this belief is that the man should be the head of the household. This doesn’t mean that the woman is subservient in the relationship, but that there is a partnership and collaboration when it comes to major and minor decision making. In your family, you also observed and learned the importance of taking care of the family.

The message that you received from your extended family was that you should choose friends who have strong moral values. These friends should also be honest and truthful and people who came from solid backgrounds. However, you noticed that some of your extended family had relationships that were broken because of infidelity and irresponsibility. Although there were some extended family members who had the same principles as your parents, you received most of your foundational beliefs from your parents. As far as your friends are concerned, you can not say for sure that you got any messages from your friends because most of your friends had similar values as you when it comes to developing relationships.

Pop culture has a strong influence on young people today. Some of the music that is currently popular doesn’t show respect toward women and makes it difficult for males and female to relate to each other. You didn’t feel like you learned very much from the media. Sometimes the media can make relationships appear like fairytales, but you realized that sometimes things don’t happen that way. You have noticed that there are people who have been married multiple times because one person has changed their
mind about wanting to be in the relationship and in today's society you have found that getting married more than one time has been glamorized by the media. There have been stories in the media that show good relationships and you would like to see more of that. In terms of the black family, you have noticed that drama is often highlighted like children being abused or fathers not being around to take care of the children. When children do see good stories, they often don't believe it is true and you believe that adults need to help young people see that there are good stories out there.

In the literature, you have read novels that ended really well and are very exciting to you. Sometimes reading the novels allow you to fantasize about different relationships and from reading different novels you have learned to check your own environment to see how your relationship compares. If what you were reading didn't seem realistic, then you would just disregard it.

The church taught you a lot about relationships. First is that having a relationship requires you to make a lifetime commitment to one another. Couples should be faithful and committed to each other. The church does not believe in divorce and they believe that you should stay together until death do you part. Also if there are any conflicts that arise in the relationship, the couple should figure out effective ways to work out the conflict. However, in your opinion if things are going bad, then the couple should first seek counseling and if the man isn't willing to go to counseling because he doesn't think there's a problem, then the woman would go by herself. You are unsure about why African American men wouldn't seek counseling, but if it is needed the woman should still go. One reason that you think a relationship should end is if there is domestic violence. In taking this thought a step further, you believe that if the person is being abused in any way whether it is physical, verbal, or emotional, then they should leave the relationship.

For you a successful relationship would be a where the person would be true to themselves, each other, and then true the relationship. The couple has a strong commitment to the relationship and the couple would do little romantic things for each other. This could include spending quality time with each other doing things that both people enjoy doing such as going out to dinner or to the movies. The couple would also make sure they are nurturing the relationship by talking to each other and being friends to each other. An unsuccessful relationship would be one that has bad communication. If there is only one person who is putting into the relationship and nurturing the relationship, then it is unsuccessful because both people must work on the relationship in order for it to be successful. Another example of an unsuccessful relationship would be when one of the people in the relationship is insensitive to the needs of the other in the relationship.

The first guy you dated was the person you married. You talked about things you liked and didn't like. During that time, you also talked about who you are and are not because the two of you had time to really get to know each other. The two of you dated for four years before getting married. You didn't really know that he would be the guy that you spent the rest of your life with, you just said yes when he asked you to marry him.

Time has impacted your views of relationships because of the experience you have gained in your relationship. Also time and education have impacted your views
because as you’ve gotten older you have been able to see things and you have a greater understanding and knowledge of how to communicate. You feel like you don’t understand how young people relate to each other today. You don’t believe that young people today date the same way you dated when you were younger. An example that you gave was when you would go to a party with your boyfriend. You said that you would be there with that person, but today you see the boys on one side of the room and the girls on the other side of the room.

Finally, if you could say anything to young people today it would be that they should be confident and deliberate about what they want in relationships. They should really take the time to get to know who they are because it will cause conflict between them and their partner and become very stressful on a relationship when they don’t know themselves and try to find themselves while in the relationship. You do acknowledge that each individual will continue to grow while they are in the relationship, but you believe that it will be trouble if one person is immature and the other person is mature. You believe that the person they are partnered with who already knows themselves will get frustrated. Also if you don’t come into the relationship as a “whole person,” the person that you are in a relationship with can’t do it for you. In contrast, if both people are immature, and if they grow together, it would be fine.
Participant 4 “Janet”

In order for someone to have a successful relationship, you believe that each partner should be honest and straightforward with each other. For you, it means that you openly communicate with each other and feel comfortable enough to express how you feel. If you care for each other and both people are open-minded in the relationship you will have satisfaction in the relationship. It is also important to know what you want in life and be able to join together with another person. It is also important for the couple to have a foundation to base their relationship off of. For example, if the couple is Christians, they should follow the teachings of the bible and live their lives according to the “word.” Your opinion of a successful relationship is that the material things are not important and that you must be willing to take care of and support each other. As time goes on the caring and support that the couple provides for each other begins to help you understand how the other person feels and helps the couple become one.

You had many positive relationships while you were growing up. You described yourself as being the caring person in the relationship and often found that you and the guy you were dating were able to remain friends after the relationship ended. One person that you have tried to model your relationships after is your best friend. She and her husband got married after high school and have been married for a long time. They also have a great relationship. You observed them having fun and finding time to spend with each other to nurture their relationship.

Your parents divorce when you were young, but their divorce never made you feel like you would never have a successful relationship. After your parents divorced, your mother dated men and she taught you that you must be careful about bringing people around your child or children because she was very careful about who came around you. Your mother has always been very supportive of your decisions to do whatever makes you happy. Both of your parents just wanted you to be honest with yourself and with the other person. Your mother was very particular about not being overly involved in your relationships because she believed that was why her relationship with your father didn’t work. She taught you how to tell when people were being sincere or lying to you. You remember your father saying to you that you should know what you are getting yourself into when thinking about a relationship and not to make a commitment if you didn’t believe you could remain true to it. He also wanted you to understand that your relationships would have good days and bad days so that there were no surprises when you had a bad day. Within your immediate family, you noticed that the women were not staying married and often wondered what was wrong with the women on your mom’s side of the family.

The relationships on your father’s side of the family were different. Individuals in your dad’s family were married for a long time and had a positive influence on your views of successful relationships. They often spent quality time with each other. The messages that your extended family gave you were that you should be family oriented. They really stressed the importance of family and wanted you to be happy and true to yourself when you had your family. You feel that your grandmother may have instilled in you the family oriented nature that you still have today. This quality that you have has
made you want to keep the family together by making sure that the family gets together at least once a year and keep in touch with each other.

After you got a divorce from your first husband, your friends really stepped in and tried to help you with future relationships. They told you that they did not like your first husband and they did not want to see that type of relationship happen to you again. They felt that the relationship you had with your ex-husband was bad, but no one ever told you how they felt until after you got a divorce. The fact that they did not say anything to you really hurt, so the next time you got married they were involved and gave you input about that relationship. Your friends became very involved in your dating experiences. Following the divorce, they made sure that the guys you dated had the potential to be the right person or they said they would not let you marry him.

You feel like you didn’t learn much from the media and one thing that you’ve learned is that regardless of how much money you have it won’t buy you love. Looking at relationships in the media, you have noticed that a lot of people are getting a divorce so there were some negative messages that you received. The church has been very helpful with your views of successful relationship and your own relationship. Before you married your current husband you went to marital classes at your church. These classes were supportive in teaching you how to become one with other person. Learning how to take care of each other and still enjoy each other and life was one message that has stuck with you. You have also learned what not to do and to love one another as you would want to be loved. Your pastor was also a significant influence because he helped you get back on track with your relationship when there were any problems. From the literature, you learned what not to do in a relationship.

For you, a successful relationship would be one where the couple knows how to communicate with each other. The people involved should also be concerned and care enough about how the other person feels and want to resolve the issues between them and their partner. When you were younger, you noticed that you did not express your feelings, but as you’ve gotten older you recognize the importance of letting the other person know how you feel. An unsuccessful relationship would be one that has no communication and where the people are not honest with each other. You feel that you put your all in the relationship and if the other person was deceitful, you would be devastated because of the value you place on having a good relationship.

Since getting married you believe that your views have changed because you would be really lonely if you didn’t have your soul mate. You really enjoy being married and you feel that it makes your life even better. The marriage makes you appreciate the little things in life more. Before you got married, you had not had very many dating experiences and the couple long-term relationships that you did have resulted in friendships after the relationship ended. You also do not feel that time has changed your views of relationships because you have always been a serious devoted person in the relationship. However, as you’ve have gotten older, you’ve had more experiences and have learned from those experiences. Religion has also influenced your view of successful relationships. Finally, you have learned that each individual should make their paths in their relationship and make what they want out of it.
Participant 5 “Oprah”

A successful African American heterosexual relationship for you means that you can communicate with your partner and understand their viewpoint when you are having a discussion. You know that communication is going well when the other person is paying attention to you by giving you eye contact, showing good body posture, and being able to repeat back to you what you’ve said. It is also important for each person to share the responsibilities with the other person and not just think about themselves in the process. Your opinion of having a successful relationship is that you should know what you are getting yourself into before you make the commitment to each other. This includes talking about your goals and values so that there is a clear understanding of expectations.

Goals and values should be shared upfront so that each person is clear about the expectations of the relationship. For you, this means sitting down and talking openly about where you see yourself during a certain time period and where that person sees themselves during that same time period to make sure that you’re going in the same direction. If the two of you have the same vision, it will make the relationship better. You acknowledge that there may be times when the goals will be different and this is a time when compromise on one or both individual’s part will be important.

For the most part, you have experienced relationships that were positive while you were growing up. There were times that you saw things that were not positive such as when people would fight and argue and this also had an impact on you. Your parents had a significant impact on your views of successful relationship. In your opinion things could have been better between your mother and father and you believe that their relationship had an impact on how you related to men when you started dating. You believe that your mother was in an abusive relationship and it always reminded you that you did not want to have that type of relationship, however you found that you sometimes would get into relationships that were abusive and often tried to “break the cycle” of abuse.

Your parents taught you that you should only depend on yourself because you could not depend on anyone else. Your mother said that you should make sure that the man doesn’t physically abuse you. She also stressed the importance of being financially secure, having a job, and also having some money on you at all times. Your parents wanted you to be careful about your relationships and make sure that you were with someone that you could live with. You were taught that you can do “bad by yourself” and when you did find a man he should be able to take care of you so that you are not financially taking care of him. If a man is capable of taking care of himself before he gets into a relationship with you, then he can take care of you when the two of you have a relationship.

The women in your family have always had a job so you learned through observation that you should always keep a job so that you can support yourself. This message was so strong that you began working at age fourteen and have worked since that time. Another message that you received from your extended family was that when
you are ready to settle down for a relationship, you should make sure you find someone who can really take care of you so that you do not have to support them.

It was important for your friends to check out and really get to know the men that you were considering for a serious relationship. They wanted to get as much information about him so that they could help you make a good decision and they felt this was important to make sure that you do not get into an unhealthy bad relationship. Your female friends would stick together and make sure that you would look out for each other especially when a man was involved.

When you looked at relationships in the media you feel that you saw what a perfect relationship should look like and often thought that you would want your family to be like that. Sometimes you would compare your family to see if your family matched up to what you saw on television. You also tried to model your relationships after many different things. This could be anything from books and magazines you read to your pastor’s relationship with his wife. The magazine pictures would show what family structures should look like and this also made you want to compare your family to what you were seeing in these pictures. The church taught you that you can work at your relationship and taught you to take the good parts of the relationship with the bad.

A successful relationship for you would be one where you were able to take time to get to know the person you are with before you marry them. You would not need to rush and would be able to talk about things and do things together without much concern. When the two of you are talking to each other, there would be no distractions and you would not let anyone interfere with your time together. You would make your partner feel like they are special and that no one comes before they do. You would also take notice of how he treats women and more specifically his mother because if he treats women badly, he will likely treat you bad as well. There is also teamwork in the relationship because each person helps the other person out when they need the help.

There are things that you think are important in a successful relationship. These things are that God is the center of the relationship, that the people in the relationship have respect for each other, and that you stand up for your partner if someone is bad mouthing them. You must also surround yourself with people who model the type of relationship you want to have so that it rubs off.

On the other hand, an unsuccessful relationship would be one where you were constantly giving to the other person and had very little time for yourself. The man would be completely controlling toward you to the point where you would feel like a robot. You would be constantly catering to his needs, but rarely would he do the same for you. Physical violence is also a sign of an unsuccessful relationship. You have experienced an abusive relationship and since that time have told yourself that you would not go through that again. If the communication is bad and there is a negative tone to the way the two people talked to each other, the relationship isn’t good. When the two individuals do not have eye contact when they are talking to each other and they snap at each other, this is another sign that relationship isn’t any good. You believe that if a person finds themselves in a negative situation, they should leave the relationship because it’s not worth it.

Your dating experiences have included good relationships and bad relationships. The relationship that you are in now is a good relationship for you because you have
been married to your husband for seven years and you feel that the two of you are well suited for each other. The two of you have been honest with each other even when it was difficult to do. You acknowledge that you are still learning and growing in this relationship, and you have learned to give each other space when it is needed. You feel that if you put God first in your relationships you will have better relationships than if you did not do this.

Your views of successful relationships have changed as you’ve gotten older because as you’ve seen other people’s relationships, you have been able to change yours with the realization that you have to do what works for you and the relationship. When you were younger you felt that you had a lot of time, but as you’ve gotten older you’ve realized that you don’t have as much time as you thought. Knowing that you did not have as much time taught you that you should not take things for granted. You have learned that you should enjoy your partner and really have fun together. While in the relationship with the individual you should find the best in that person and make the best of it and remember to try and remain as positive as you can.

There have been times that you have seen women who jump into relationships without really taking the time to know the person they are in the relationship with. This in your opinion causes women to lose themselves in a man because they want to be with him so badly. It causes the relationship to be unsuccessful because they didn’t ask the questions that should have been asked in the beginning.

The factors that you feel have had an influence on your views of successful relationships are the media, family, friends, magazines, and books. In your experiences the media has painted a picture perfect relationship, but you have realized over the years that you must make your own relationship the way you want it. This can be done by sitting down and talking to the individual and deciding what you really want out of life. You focus mostly on the positives in the media and individualize their experiences to fit with your life. If you could tell people something you would tell them that communication if very important because if you do not communicate with each other, the relationship is not going to work. People must remember that they should be open-minded, take time to talk to the other person, and never assume that they know what the other person is thinking. They should be actively listening. They should not be the center of attention and if they love the person, learn to take the good with the bad. It is also important to tell people that if they are in a bad relationship, they should get out of it because there is too much help for them in the community for them to stay in an unhealthy relationship.
Participant 6 “Brandy”

Communication is the key to having a successful relationship for you. You believe that a couple who are best friends and have solid communication will have a good relationship and that after communication everything else needed in the relationship will come. Your opinion of successful relationships is that African American men and women struggle in their relationships because they do not communicate with each other. It is your belief that “we” need help and couples throw in the towel early without trying to work on the relationship. African American couples do not seek outside help such as counseling. Even though the chances are greater that African American women will receive therapy, African American men will not.

While you were growing up your parents were married until your mother passed away. You experienced relationships that were very positive and your family was very happy so you wouldn’t change your parents for any other family because you grew up in a very loving home. Although there were ups and downs in your parents’ relationships, your father always respected your mother and they were devoted to their relationship. Also you noticed that there were some people at your church who you would have wanted to model your relationship after. For example, you spoke of the men in the church who would dote on their wives.

A message that you received from you mother was to respect your mate and treat them the way you want to be treated. She also told you that you must be able to take care of yourself financially just in case things did not work out the way you had planned in the relationship. This could mean that you go to college to get an education or that you got a good job. Your father wanted you to find a partner who treated you like a lady and was good to you. Other than the information that you received from your parents no one really told you what to look for in relationships.

In your family there were a couple family members who had long term relationships, but never got married. You had one cousin in particular who was in a relationship for over 20 years and never got married even though they had a good relationship and he treated her well. There were a couple aunts and cousins who told you that you should make sure you found a partner who you were compatible with. There were also a couple family members that were negative when it came to relationships and you saw them as being male bashers.

You have some older friends who have been in relationships for a long time and they have told you that relationships are usually a work in progress and often require fine tuning. Some of your friends told you that relationships are a lot of work and take a lot of time and energy. It was important for you to get yourself together before you got into a relationship. This meant that you went to college and graduated before you decided to get married. You decided to get married later in life even though you had friends who were getting married and having children.

For you, the media, religion, society, and age influence your views of successful relationships. The media has portrayed relationships that are not always real. Sometimes they show all love stories without showing how much work relationships really are. The magazines that you have read are very similar to what you have learned in the media.
because they give you models about relationships and talk about how to have a better relationship with your partner. You have noticed that today the church teaches couples and individuals how to have positive relationships although you didn’t have these classes when you were growing up, but as you got older the church did teach you the importance of worshipping and attending church with your partner.

A successful relationship for you would be where the couple communicates with each other. The couple will be educated and he will bring as much to the table as you do, and the two of you will be compatible with each other. Your partner will have a personality of being respectful to you, will put you first, and will meet your needs physically, mentality, and emotionally and you would do the same. He will also adore you and put you first. For you an unsuccessful relationship would look like the one you just got out of. If there is no communication, no trust and the two of you are not on the same page about the relationship the relationship is going to be unsuccessful.

Since you first started dating, you did not date a lot of people, but you did have a lot of male friends. You didn’t start dating until you were a freshman in high school and that relationship was not serious. If you made a commitment to your partner, you did not waiver in your decision. There were some positive long term relationship, but outside of those relationships, you did not date too much.

When you talk about your marriage, you indicated that you now understand some of the mistakes you made in the relationship that possibly could have saved your relationship. Your ex-husband was not a very good communicator in the relationship so when you would ask him what was going on with him, he would often say there was nothing going on. After the relationship ended, you realized that your ex-husband may have needed more ego-stroking. Now that you have received more information about your relationship, you see now that a lot of damage had been done because he did things that betrayed your trust and you don’t know if you can ever forgive him. There is a lot of hurt and anger within you and you feel like you haven’t gotten closure because the two of you never talked. You are unsure about why your ex-husband filed for divorce. He told you he left you because you made him feel bad about himself. He later started dating a white woman who attended your wedding. Although they have both left their spouses, you feel that their families will not accept their relationship because of racial differences as well as his family’s views of the sanctity of his marriage to you.

It is your belief that your husband also left the relationship with you because, you would stand your ground and not let him walk all over you. His new girlfriend, who is white, probably lets him walk all over her. Your ex-husband would be complaining about how he was treated by white people so you don’t understand why he would leave you for a white woman. The fact that you feel your ex-husband left you for a white woman was very painful for you because you also feel that there are too many attractive African American females for African American men to be dating white women.

After your experiences in relationship, your views of successful relationships have changed because you think that the statistics about half of all marriages failing are probably right. It was your experience that your parents’ generation stayed together and learned how to make their relationships work. In today’s society, African American women are getting their master’s and doctoral degrees and are so independent that they don’t try to make it work. You have also noticed that some educated African American
women never get married because they think they can do things by themselves and sometimes when these women do get married, African American men can feel threatened by them so their education can have positive and negative consequences on relationships. It is your opinion, that divorce courts should not grant divorces until the couple has at least three months of counseling to try working on the relationship.
Participant 7 "Alexis"

A successful relationship for you means that the couple gets along with each other. They communicate with each other and are faithful to the relationship. The man and woman love each other, but don’t have to be in love with each other. For you, loving someone means that you accept who they are, but don’t put up with what they do. Saying that you are in love with someone means that you don’t forgive them when they do something wrong. In your opinion there are not very many good examples of relationships out there because if there are problems with people’s relationships, then their relationships are not successful.

While you were growing up, you did not experience very many good relationships with guys because guys always thought that you were mean toward them. You would often try to push guys away, and as you have gotten older your relationships with men have continued to be a little rocky. One thing that you have learned as you gotten older is that you understand men a little better. Now you look at how the guys who have children interact with their children, how they treat other women, and the relationship they have with their family. Specifically you look at their relationship with their mother because if they didn’t have a good relationship with their mother when they were younger; they are not going to have a good one with you. They will not likely have good communication skills.

You did have some family members who had okay relationships. For example two of your male cousins had good relationships. Your aunt and uncle also have a good relationship because they have been together for a long time. You also observed relationships where your aunt would have relationships with men who were already married. A relationship that your mother had with one guy had an impact on your views of successful relationships. They dated off and on for about 10 years and you noticed that she would do different things to him like mess with his car. When they would break up he would move out and maybe move in with another woman. He also got married at some point, but would continue to have a relationship with her mother. In some ways watching these relationships has had a negative impact on your views of male/female relationships.

The messages that you received from your immediate family were often not good. Everyone in your family has either gotten a divorce or decided to date and have children out of wedlock. Your mother did not talk to you about relationships while you were younger, but as you have gotten older she tries to talk to you more about relationships. You feel like she talked to you more as a friend or someone who is on her level, rather than a daughter. You also feel like your mother is primarily the reason why you made most of the decisions about guys and relationships that you did. She rarely explained to you why you could not do certain things, she would just say you couldn’t do it because she said so and she was the mother. Your father never really talked to you about relationships. No one ever really told you what to look for in relationships while you were growing up. For the most part, you can not remember observing anything about successful relationships from your immediate family. As you have become an
adult, you realized that you are very different from your family and the environment that you were raised in because you view relationships differently than they do.

In your extended family, you did not receive any information about relationships yet, they had an impact on how you view relationships. You have one aunt who has been married for a long time and another aunt who has been in a committed relationship for over 20 years. Although you never really spent a lot of time seeing this relationship it still had an impact. The aunt who has been married for almost 30 years has changed a lot since she lost weight. She wants to do things that she missed out on in her 20’s and this has driven a wedge between her husband and her. This makes you feel like you want to be with someone who will be understanding and will sit down and talk to you about changes and other things before they get bad.

Most of the information that you received from friends was not good information. Their relationships would not work for you and you would often wonder why they had boyfriends. You may talk to your friends about how to handle different relationships that you may have and they will give you their input. For you, it is important that the guy has his own home, a working car, and a job. They really have to be doing something with their lives and have something going for them. It is important to really highlight that they do not have children and treat you with respect. In your opinion it is hard to find someone who has all of those things because a lot of the guys you have met have something wrong with them or are missing one of the qualities.

There have been many messages that you have received from the media. Most of the messages that you have gotten have been negative. One of those messages is that people cheat on each other and have children, but don’t want to take care of them. However, the Cosby Show has shown some good examples of relationships. You did not learn anything from the literature about relationships. The thing that you learned from the church was not positive. You looked at the pastor of your mother’s church as a model and you found that he behaved in a manner that is similar to people you see outside of the church.

A successful relationship for you would be one where you could talk to the person about anything and they would listen. You feel that you could trust them and the two of you would be comfortable being around each other. There would be three key factors to having a successful relationship which are having respect, trust, and loyalty toward each other. If you have these three things, then everything else will fall into place such as the communication. On the other hand, an unsuccessful relationship would be one where you and your partner did not talk to one another and where you felt like the relationship wasn’t balanced because you were doing everything. If the person never wanted to do anything and you could not be yourself with them, then the relationship would not be successful.

Since you first began dating, your relationships with guys have been short. You have not done a lot of dating and have found that you don’t really like some relationships because you get bored with them very easily. By this, you mean that your past relationships have been based solely on sex and once you had sex with your partner, you would move on. This is what’s been modeled to you in other people’s relationships that you observed, so you thought that your relationships should be the same way. It has been important to you that the guy does things that keep you interested in having a
relationship with him. Most of the guys that you are attracted to or who are attracted to you often only want to hang out at home and you believe that it may be because of the way you present yourself or where you met the guys. Often times you meet men at the night club. The guys that you have dated have only wanted to sit around the house, watch television, drink, and have sex, but rarely did they ever want to do things that involve getting out of the house. Also you have noticed that with most of the guys you talked to you have been “hard” with them and as soon as you let your guard down, they would take advantage of you which really hurt you.

The most recent relationship that you have had has been the most successful for you. In this relationship, you feel like you love him because the love is unconditional. The two of you have a friendship and although you do not currently have the three foundation factors, you feel like the two of you are building those things now. For you, this has been the first relationship where you feel like you can just be yourself and be accepted. You have been able to let him do the things that he wanted and really be himself, and he lets you speak your mind about what you’re thinking and feeling, which did not really occur in past relationships. You’re really enjoying your time with him.

One thing that you have learned about relationships is that you probably need to listen to your partners more and be more patient with them which you have begun to do. You also talked about the importance of being able to effectively communicate with your partner because you often say something to them with the hopes that they will understand what you need from them without actually asking them for it. This has also changed because you now “say what you mean, and mean what you say.” As you have gotten older, your views of relationships have changed. You feel that you now know how you want your relationships to turn out. You never really wanted a relationship when you were younger, but as you have gotten older, you have realized that you do want a boyfriend. Your age has also made you more patient with relationships because you understand that you need to have trust in others and relax during the process of getting to know the other person.

The factors that you feel have influenced your views of successful relationships are society and your environment because you are now starting to see successful relationships in your environment. You feel that your hometown has shown you both positive and negative relationships because you are from a larger city than the one you currently live in. For you, you would want to have relationships that have a mix between your hometown and the town you are currently living in.
Participant 8 “Jenna”

Your definition of a successful relationship would start with having good communication with your partner. It would also mean that you would have a good friendship where you would try to understand each other. Being there for the person and working toward making each other happy would also be important. In your opinion, it is rare to see a successful relationship in your generation. You believe that successful relationships take a lot of work and that people give up on relationship too early without seeking outside help to teach them how to have successful relationships.

When you were growing up you experienced relationships that were positive. Your parents had a good relationship and you thought that most people had relationships like your parents. Most of your aunts and uncles were married and it wasn’t until you got older that you realized that there were a lot of unsuccessful relationships. It was almost shocking for you to see unsuccessful relationships and how uncommon it was to have successful relationships. No one specifically told you what to look for in a relationship until after you got married and they didn’t like your ex-husband. They would tell you the characteristics that were bad. You do remember someone telling you that the way a guy treats his mother will be the way he will treat you if you were to have a relationship with him.

You observed how successful relationships work from your parents. Your father always treated your mother with respect and really showed you how a man should treat a woman. You also observed that relationships were work on both people’s part because your father was often doing things for your mother, but your mother was also doing things for your father. You saw a lot of respect between your mother and father. They would work together and would really be there for each other which you really expected in your relationships. When they discussed different things they would often discuss them in the bedroom away from the children. While you were growing up your mother and father never really told you anything about relationships. It wasn’t until you became an adult and began having relationships that they would tell you things like how a man should treat a woman. Your parents would try to introduce you to guys that they thought were suitable partners for you, but you often thought those guys were boring. Even though you did not date the guys that they introduced you to, your parents were always supportive of your decisions about relationships and even helped you when your relationship ended with your ex-husband.

Your extended family was also very helpful in talking to you about what to expect in relationships. For example, you had a cousin who would give you feedback about different guys that you dated especially if they found things wrong with that guy. You observed the longevity in their relationships so they were good role models for you to follow in terms of knowing what it takes to have a successful relationship.

In contrast, the messages that you received from your peers were that most men were cheaters and liars. At times you would see guys who were immature and who would often cheat on their girlfriends. Some of them would not be really committed to the relationship and weren’t truthful either. Within your circle of friends, however, you noticed that not all guys were like that because there were some guys that wanted to
have a committed relationship and get married. In the media, you saw relationships that were positive and you also wanted to model your relationships after them because they looked like they were having fun. Although you no longer watch a lot of television, as time has gone on you feel that currently the media portrays more of the negative aspects of relationships than the positive. In the literature you have read a lot of material that tells you how to come together and have a good relationship. You have also read things about how to get your life back together after a break-up or a divorce such as getting out and meeting others. Sometimes you feel like the information that you get from magazines only offer "quick fixes" and do not incorporate really taking the time to heal from the break-up. The literature also stresses the importance of communicating with each other. For the most part the articles that you have read gave good information, but some of the information doesn't really fit for you very well. The literature that you have read not only gave you information about relationships, but also on parenting styles between partners.

You really did not receive much information from the church. You did see a lot of people in the church, who were married but there were no teaching on what to do after the relationship ends nor was there any counseling available. Since there were no classes or counseling available through the church, prayer really helped you get through your divorce, but overall in your church you feel that the church is lacking in the area of helping people have successful relationships. It was your relationship with God and really focusing on Him that helped you stay centered and helped you get through the tough times. Your relationship with God also allowed you to heal, forgive, and move on after your divorce.

In envisioning a successful relationship it would be one where the two of you would be best friends. In your opinion, having a friendship is foundational, and also having the communication between the two of you. The two of you would really have a connection. He would have a lot of characteristics that were similar to your dad. Additionally, the two of you would have a lot of common interest and it would feel like the two of you are really supposed to be together. The person would be a Christian and God would be first in both of your lives and your marriage. He would be humble and have a very gentle spirit. He would also be very good with kids and really like them. The two of you would be successful and financially well off and have a lot of the same goals in life.

An unsuccessful relationship would be one where the two of you have no connection and were not supposed to be together in the first place. One person has a bad attitude and there would be arguing with a lot of negativity. There would also not be any communication, the environment would be bad and there would be no peace when the two of you were together. One of the reasons why you feel your relationship didn't work with your husband was because you did not pray about whom you should marry among the guys that God had selected for you. You feel like you just married your husband because the two of you had a child together. In thinking about successful and unsuccessful relationships, you feel like you have both. The bad with your ex-husband and the good with the man you are currently dating.

Your dating experiences have been limited because you met your husband while you were in high school. After high school you moved away, but kept in touch with him.
while away at college. The two of you started dating and although you didn’t think he was the one you should be with, you married him for several reasons. The first is because you thought he was suicidal and needy and you felt that if you left him, he would do something to harm himself. The second reason was because of your daughter. When the relationship ended with your ex-husband, you were really hurt because you wanted the relationship to work and not to have your daughter split between two homes. Your husband ended the relationship and you thought that it would take you a lot of time to get through the pain, but you have been healing and understand that the relationship was not right for you.

As time has passed, you have begun to have a friendship with someone whom you could see yourself married to in the future. This time around, you have decided to really take your time and wait until both your friend and you feel like it’s the right time to get married. It is important that your friend is more able to let go of past relationship hurts, and more fully trust the relationship he has with you. You understand more fully now that relationships take a lot of work and that you get out of it what you put into it. Even though you’ve gone through a divorce, you have maintained contact with your ex-husband and realize that not much has changed since the divorce was final. Your ex-husband has acknowledged that he made mistakes in the relationship, has apologized, and told you that he wanted to get back together. This has made you feel better, but you don’t feel like getting back together would be a good idea. You feel like he has not changed and is still focused on himself and what he wants or needs rather than seeing what you and your children want or need.

Time has impacted your views of successful relationships because of the relationship that you had with your ex-husband. You now understand why your parents were trying to connect you with the guys that they were and you would be willing to date those guys now. Also your relationship with your ex-husband has shown you what is important to have in a relationship such as communication and friendship. Having fun was most important to you when you were younger and is less important now.

In addition to time, you feel that your religion has had an influence on your views of relationships. You would follow more closely the teachings of the bible and try not to make mistakes. You would also want what God has for you and your children instead of only listening to yourself. Your parents did not tell teach you much about relationships, but you have chosen to actively teach your daughters about relationships. Finally, if you could tell your daughters anything about relationships, you would tell them to seek God about all of their relationships.
Participant 9 “Corissa”

Your definition of a successful relationship is one that is based on trust. It also includes having love for each other and being able to communicate with each other. In your opinion, successful relationships do exist, but they do take a lot of work.

While you were growing up, you saw a mixture of good and bad relationships. You saw a lot of single mothers and broken homes in your family. Even though you saw the negative relationships, you never let it influence your views of relationships. The fact that you saw the bad relationships that your family members had, you always said that you were going to do things differently. This meant that you decided to get married first then have children and work on the relationship to build and have a solid foundation. As far as the good relationships that you saw, they helped you grow and decide that those were the characteristics that you wanted to have when you started your relationship. People would tell you to look for a good person who has good values and a good personality.

The older generation had the greatest influence on how you view relationships today. Couples in your grandparents’ generation, the people stayed together and worked out the issues that they were having, while your parents’ generation was less likely to stay together and work on issues. Your grandparents really wanted you to look for a person who has good morals and values. Your observations of the different relationships made you want to primarily focus on the relationships that you viewed as being good such as the one your grandparents had.

You didn’t receive much information from your parents about relationships. As a teenager, they did stress the importance of not having sex, but most of all they just wanted you to do the right thing. Your parents got divorced when you were young and did not talk to you much about relationships. In contrast the people from the older generation such as your grandparents wanted you to get married before you started having children. You observed some of your aunts and uncles in relationships where they were patient with their partners. They had good communication skills and they loved and trusted each other.

The friends that you had didn’t have a great influence on your views of successful relationships. The messages that you did receive from them were probably more mixed because you often saw people acting out negatively in their relationships and they would “hook up” with different people, or would jump from relationship to relationship without having any communication. Then you would see people who would be with their first love and really focus on staying together and building a relationship.

It is your opinion that most of the time the media does not give you a good view of relationships. A lot of what you have seen in the media has been negative and it seems like it is getting worse because people do not value relationships like they used to. There have been some movies that show positive relationships, but they are unrealistic because they portray the perfect family and that everything is just wonderful when life really doesn’t work that way. You have learned to separate the things that you see in the media because they are dramatized and things don’t usually happen that way in real life. You feel that the media can some times be misleading because when they do portray good
relationships, they often leave out the challenges that the couple faces and for you there are challenges in all relationships.

The literature did not teach you anything about relationships that has stuck with you. The church did have some influence on your views of relationships like having strong morals and values, but not as great of an influence as what you experienced from home. The church taught you the importance of having a strong relationship.

Since first beginning to date your experiences in relationships have generally been good. You did not date very much and you probably only had one long term relationship which lasted for a couple of years before you began dating and eventually married your husband. While you were dating it did not take you long to know whether or not the relationship with that person would work or not.

A successful relationship for you would be one similar to the one that you have with your husband. You married your high school sweetheart and feel that the relationship is good. The relationship is successful because the two of you are still together. The relationship has progressively gotten stronger over time. The two of you are committed to the relationship. Communicating with each other and trying to figure out what and where the problem is has helped you have a good relationship. If you weren't able to figure out the problem between the two of you, you feel that it is okay to talk to someone outside of the relationship to get their opinion. The two of you have really gotten to know each other and although you have your ups and downs, the two of you have learned to just work through those things. Most of the information that you've learned about relationships have come from your own experiences. Sometimes you feel that people stay in relationships because of the children, but you feel that people need to really work on the relationship that they have with each other so that the children and the couple can have something that is healthier.

An unsuccessful relationship would be one where there are differences of opinions and goals. An unsuccessful relationship also includes cheating, lying, not communicating, arguing and fighting. You feel that your marriage could have failed if you and your husband were not committed to making it work and did not seek outside help such as counseling. The two of you had a rough time when you first got married and had your daughter because there were little communication and you were going through postpartum depression.

Your views of relationships haven't changed much since you got married. As you've gotten older, you look at things differently, but your general view has remained the same. Time has impacted your views because now you have broader views of relationships. For you, it would have been unacceptable for someone to cheat on their spouse, but now you look at the problems and what may have caused the individual to cheat. Another example that you gave was that when you were younger, you often believed that relationships were going to be fairytales and wonderful all the time, but now that you have been in a relationship for a long time, you know that there will be both good times and hard times and keeping the relationship strong will take work.

The factors that you feel impacted your views of relationships were family and society. Society placed a lot of pressure on you because they did not really value relationships. You saw mostly negative things, however, you learned to take only the positive and not let the negative influence you and what you wanted to achieve. Finally,
if you could leave any information with your daughters about relationships, it would be to give the person that you are in a relationship with a chance, try to understand them and communicate with them.
Participant 10 "Alyssa"

A successful relationship for you is where you feel financially, physically, mentally, and emotionally in tune with each other. The two of you have to be on the same level and able to balance each other out when it is necessary. You gave an example where you may need money to cover something and you know that you could go to your significant other and they would help you out and vice versa. It is important for you to feel like you can trust your partner and be honest with each other. The person that you are with should come first before any other person. Your opinion of successful relationships is that they can work, but both individuals have to work at the relationship. This involves listening to your partner and believing in their ideas not just your own ideas. Your belief is that a relationship is like a marriage because you have the same level of commitment to the other person whether or not you are legally married or not.

While you were growing up, you experienced relationships that were negative. Your mother would not stay in a relationship long if she felt her partner was at fault for things in the relationship. She would not try to work the problems out by communicating. She felt that her point of view was the correct point of view and if her partner didn’t see it that way she would break up with them. Although you observed your mother’s negative relationships, you were able to come up with your own ideas and definitions of positive relationships by watching other people’s relationships. For example, you watched your teachers’ relationships with their husbands and your friends’ relationships with their partners and came up with characteristics that you wanted for your relationships such as having affection and having fun with each other. In addition to your teachers, your grandparents had an impact on how you viewed successful relationships. Your grandmother was with your grandfather until the day he died; you also noticed that they loved each other. She stayed committed to supporting him even at the end of his life. The relationship that your uncle had with his wife had marital problems but they worked through their problems and are still married today.

Also while you were growing up one of the messages that you remember being told was that you should not date outside of your race. Your sister, who is biracial and your mother both told you this although at some point both of them had an interracial relationship. You were also told not to date anyone who has more material things than you do or someone who has more kids than you do. If the person had been married, your family also warned you not to date them.

Based on the experiences of your mother and siblings, you learned how to compromise with your partner because you did not want to have relationships like their relationships. You observed that most of their relationships didn’t last over a year and you wanted your relationships to last longer than one year. Your sister often listened to your mother and her relationship was similar to your mother’s relationship because she also had to have things her way. She has been married for six years and her husband does everything she tells him to do. The dominant person in their relationship is her and you feel that although they have been married for six years their relationship is not successful because, the number of years you are in a relationship doesn’t necessarily mean that you are in a successful relationship. You have another sister who married a Muslim although
she was Christian and found that their relationship didn’t work because she tried to convert him to Christianity.

Your grandparents had a great influence on how you view relationships today. They told you that you should not listen to your family when it comes to relationships because you were the one who had to be in the relationship not your family. It was your grandmother who told you that you should put God first in your relationship, then your husband, and to remember that your family does not come before your husband. She would often quote scriptures from the bible. Also your grandfather told you that you should not let anyone dictate what happens in your relationship. They had a good relationship and were in love with each other.

While you were going through a divorce, you uncle was supportive because he told you that the divorce wasn’t your fault. You also observed that your uncle had a relationship that involved cheating, and although he cheated, they stayed married. They had marital problems but they were committed to staying in the relationship and working on their issues. They stayed together and over the years it has gotten better and they have a good relationship now.

Your friends gave you some good information and some bad information about relationships. You noticed that when some of your friends were unhappy in their relationship, they would often tell you negative stuff or when they were single, they would want you to be single. This made you decide not to listen to your single friends unless you planned on being single yourself. Similar to your family, they also told you not to date outside of your race. On the positive side, some of your friends would tell you not to talk to your partner while you were mad at him. They would tell you to walk away from him for a few hours then come back after you had cooled down to have a conversation with him. This has been helpful for you in your relationship because you have found that you communicate better after everybody has calmed down.

Through many different people you learned that communication is key to making your relationships work. You know that communication is going well when you receive positive feedback and constructive criticism. You have also learned that if you’re open with people, present what your saying to them in a nice tone, and say it in a way that does not make them feel defensive, then they receive what you’re saying better. For you, communication is going poorly when you feel like you haven’t solved the issues and haven’t let go of what was talked about and are snapping at people who had nothing to do with the conversation.

The rich and famous always have their relationships in the spotlight so when they do negative things in their relationships; the media is going to expose it. In your opinion, the media does not accurately portray relationships correctly. You have found that they never report on good relationships and that there is always drama. The books that you read didn’t really help you in your relationships because you didn’t believe them. One book that you read on African American relationship said that the woman should be controlled in order to have a good relationship. Other books that you have read indicated that someone had to be in control of the relationship in order for it to work. There often was no balance of power between the woman and man.

A successful relationship for you is one that you feel emotionally, mentally, physically, and financially in sync with each other. If you’re not in sync with the person,
you feel like they are more likely to look outside of the relationship and cheat. The person is honest and takes pride in who you are as person. They help you reach your goals and you help them reach theirs even when you don’t feel like working toward your goal, they encourage you and you can encourage them. Also your goals are not clashing with theirs and vice versa so you have to make sure that both of you have the same or similar goals. The communication would be good. You would make sure that your partner and you are communicating by asking them to repeat what they heard you say to make sure that they understand. Your partner would listen to you before he listens to anyone else when you have a problem in your relationship. They don’t try to dominate you and you don’t try to dominate them. The two of you have a good time together and don’t worry about who makes the most money.

Your opinion of an unsuccessful relationship is one where the person doesn’t encourage you. You don’t feel that you can trust them, for example if you tell them something, you expect them to keep it private and if they do not keep it private, then you feel that the trust has been broken. This may also include when they use the information that you have told them to hurt you. If the person isn’t honest with you, then the relationship is unsuccessful. Also if you are not in love with the person, even when you do love them, you feel that the relationship is unsuccessful.

As you have become more educated, you’ve realized that your choices for black men have decreased. It is also important for you not to tell potential partners about your education because you feel like the relationship will end and have found that your relationships last longer when you do not give them this information. With your family and friends, you learned that you should not let them dictate how your relationship will go with your partner. Your views of relationships have changed because when you date someone who is racially different than you are it is important that they do not have a prejudiced family. This attitude comes from the fact that you were married to a white man and the relationship ended because his family did not want him to be with you. You have also learned that it is important for the person to be goal oriented, trustworthy and honest with you because you will give those things in return.

The factors that you feel have influenced your views of successful relationships have been religion, the media and age. You believe that people often misinterpret the bible and find that they are miserable because they have tried to follow the bible according to what they believe it says instead of what it actually says. The media influences your views because it does not portray how real relationships work and, you think that the person’s age doesn’t matter because you can’t put restrictions on their age. If you could share something with people about having a successful relationship it would be that communication is the key to making the relationship work. You would also say that you do not need to rush and get married if the relationship is going well and to remember that the relationship is a give and take exchange. You would tell your children that they should listen to the person they are in a relationship with and not to involve people outside of their relationship unless they were trained professionals.