

"Together, We Are Strong": A Qualitative Study of Happy, Enduring African American Marriages*

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Abstract: Thirty African American married couples ($N = 60$ individuals) were interviewed regarding the challenges and benefits of their happy, enduring marriages. Qualitative coding and analysis revealed 4 key themes: (1) Challenges in African American Marriages, (2) Overcoming External Challenges to Marriage, (3) Resolving Intramarital Conflict, and (4) Unity and the Importance of Being “Equally Yoked.” Supporting qualitative data are presented in connection with each theme. Implications for enduring marriages among African Americans specifically are discussed.

Key Words: African American, Black, marriage, religion.

The recent decline of marriage and increase in divorce among African Americans obscures the fact that prior to the 1970s, the majority of Black families were marriage based (McAdoo, 2007). However, Connor and White (2006) noted that scholars typically view Black families from a “deficit perspective” that emphasizes problems and pathology. In truth, many African Americans experience well-functioning marriages, yet “little research exists on (their) positive marital adjustment, happiness, and satisfaction” (Lassiter, 1998, p. 35). In contrast to the “deficit” trend of the past, and in an attempt to fill the gap identified by Lassiter, the present study employs qualitative methods and a salutogenic approach to

examine some of the *strengths* of happy, enduring African American marriages.

Review of Literature

Lewis and Spanier’s (1979) ecological model of marriage identified three different levels of resources (and barriers) that need attention if we are to understand marital well-being and, by extension, the strong, happy, enduring marriages we proposed to study. The three levels included: (a) *individual*, (b) *interpersonal*, and (c) *social and economic*. This framework

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has been profitably used by previous marriage scholars and will be used to frame both our review of literature and our discussion.

Individual Resources and Barriers

Goodwin (2003) has noted that individual resources include attributes and characteristics that indicate a person's ability to sustain a marriage. Broadly speaking, key individual resources might include education, communication skills, and health in a variety of areas (e.g., mental, emotional, physical). The field of positive psychology posits that drives, meanings, and motivations are also important individual-level factors—a consideration that Fincham, Stanley, and Beach (2007) have recently linked with marriage. From this vantage, the meanings and motivations to form (and maintain) a strong, happy, enduring marriage are of vital concern.

A small and mostly ethnographic body of data has offered some insight regarding marital desire among African Americans. First, although the percentage of enduring African American marriages has declined over the last 30 years, Jarrett (1994) reported that nearly all the 82 African American women in her ethnographic study desired marriage. Similarly, Chaney (2006) found that 90% of cohabiting Black couples hoped to one day marry. However, Wilson's (2003, p. 15) ethnographic data from young Black men revealed a common aversion to marriage, because, as one participant put it: "why get married when you got six to seven [women] to one guy, really . . . why get married when you can play the field?" In a very different light, Coles (2006) found that many Black men want "to be the kind of father they [have] not experienced" (p. 83). The data cited here, though scant and not representative, do begin to outline the importance of understanding the individual meanings and motivations behind marriage formation and maintenance (cf. Fincham et al., 2007). Regrettably, "We know very little about the meaning of marriage . . . for Black men and women. [And] we know very little about . . . what specific elements [form and] sustain their commitment" (Hamer, 2007, p. 892).

Interpersonal Resources and Barriers

Interpersonal resources in marriage can be conceptualized as positive emotions, feelings, and attitudes that are created between spouses as they interact across

time (Goodwin, 2003). As with individual-level resources and barriers, however, there is relatively little research that has addressed interpersonal-level issues in African American marriages. A notable exception is the University of Michigan's *Early Years of Marriage* (EYM) project, which has tracked a "reasonably representative sample" of 344 couples—half of which are Black and half of which are White—through their first 7 years of marriage and beyond (Holmberg, Orbuch, & Veroff, 2004). The mixed-method (but predominantly quantitative) project has yielded some interesting insights regarding interaction in stable Black marriages—including the finding that "Black couples who have a stronger role sharing [or egalitarian] orientation . . . are more stable than those who have a weaker role sharing orientation" (Veroff, Douvan, & Hatchett, 1995, p. 158). This does not hold true for Whites.

In terms of spousal sharing of household labor, Rubin (1994, p. 92) has stated that Black husbands' "family work load doesn't always match their wives', . . . [but] compared to their White, Asian, or Latino counterparts, the Black families look like models of egalitarianism" (cf. Landry, 2000). Given that 55% of the EYM project's Black marriages involved a preexisting child (vs. 22% of the White couples), the willingness of Black couples to share family and household tasks may be especially important.

Although the willingness of Black couples to share household labor is a resource that seems to strengthen their marriages, a common interpersonal concern among Black couples is that of insufficient trust (Chapman, 2007; Goodwin, 2003). Extant research has indicated that lack of trust prevents marital formation and contributes to marital dissolution, but there is a paucity of research that offers insight regarding how trust is created and maintained across time. This is a conspicuous need in the knowledge base.

Social and Economic Resources and Barriers

A key social resource noted by the EYM project in stable Black marriages was faith community involvement; namely, enduring Black marriages were predicted by husband's church attendance, as well as by religious compatibility in the marriage (Veroff et al., 1995). Furthermore, the Black couples who remained stable in Year 7 were far more likely than Whites to speak of religion (Holmberg et al., 2004). Recent ethnographic research similarly highlights

the importance of African American faith communities to many individuals, couples, and families (Marks, Nesteruk, Swanson, Garrison, & Davis, 2005).

At the social/economic level, however, research has indicated that there are also myriad barriers to African Americans forming strong, happy, enduring marriages, including lack of educational and employment opportunities, an imbalanced gender ratio, limited mate availability, and children from previous relationships (Chapman, 2007; Tucker, 2000; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995; Veroff et al., 1995; Wilson, 2003). Furthermore, among low-income African Americans, marriage is almost on a pedestal: its symbolic value is great as the highest formal recognition of success (Edin & Reed, 2005). Subsequently, many individuals with limited financial resources often link marriage to financial stability and believe they do not have sufficient resources to engage in or launch a marriage (Edin & Reed).

During our review, two somewhat paradoxical points regarding Black and White race comparisons in marriage emerged. First, as Holmberg et al. (2004) concluded, "By and large, there [are] very few differences between the groups" (p. 148). Yet, some of those "few" differences were *significant*. Significant enough, in fact, that "the race effect cannot simply be dismissed as . . . social status, premarital or personality differences in Blacks and Whites" (Veroff et al., 1995, p. 49). It is vital to neither overstate nor understate the effect of race on marriage. In many respects, race may matter little, but when it does matter, it can matter a great deal.

One area where race mattered profoundly was residential location (Wilson, 2003). Approximately one half of African Americans reside in inner-city neighborhoods "typified by poverty, poor schools, unemployment, periodic street violence, and generally high levels of stress" (Lassiter, 1998, p. 37). The social and economic context of these neighborhoods is one where marriages are less likely to form and where divorce is more likely when marriage does occur (Clayton, Mincy, & Blankenhorn, 2003; Tucker, 2000).

Summary of Review of Literature

To summarize, on an individual level, we know little about the meanings and motivations that Black women and men have for forming and maintaining marriages. On an interpersonal level, we know that role sharing and dividing household labor have

served as strengths for many Black marriages, whereas a lack of trust has been a common barrier. On a social and economic level, faith communities are a resource for many Black married couples, but numerous social/economic barriers to lasting marriage exist. With these issues in mind, we focused on Black urban couples with strong, happy, enduring marriages. Our central research question was: How do some African American couples build strong, happy, enduring marriages in the face of challenges and barriers?

Method

We addressed the above question through qualitatively interviewing 30 couples (no compensation was offered). Although a few of the 30 interviewed couples were from rural (4) or suburban (2) areas, 24 of the couples (80%) resided in inner-city neighborhoods (i.e., Boston, Cleveland, Milwaukee, New Orleans, Portland). For seven participants, their marriage was a remarriage. Our recruitment approach was purposive in that we were referred to couples with "strong, happy, enduring marriages" by well-connected gatekeepers (i.e., civic or church leaders, or both) in Black communities where one or more of the researchers had entrée and trust. Referred couples were contacted to determine their willingness and eligibility to participate, and all but two contacted couples participated (30/32).

Sample

The participants' educational levels varied from GED certification to advanced graduate degrees, with the average couple both having some college—women typically having more education than men. All the 30 couples had been "dual earner" for most of their married life, and the average combined household income was about \$58,000. This is nearly double the Black household median income in 2004 (\$30,134) and exceeds the median income (\$48,977) for White households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). This significant economic advantage is related to the educational and dual-earner status of the participants, but it is also a function of their biological maturity. Participants' ages ranged from 42 years to 75 years old (women's average = 53; men's average = 55). The average length of marriage for the couples was about 26 years, and the couples

had an average of slightly less than three children (ages of children ranged from 7 to 49). Three of the couples reported that they (both spouses) were not religious, whereas the other 27 couples reported that both spouses were religious. This average (27/30 [90%] reporting that they are “religious”) lies between the African American mean of 84% (Jackson, 2004) and the 95% religious affiliation rate reported by married U.S. parents (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001).

Procedures

Handel (1996) has advocated a *whole-family* qualitative methodology in family research to avoid reliance on a single informant of family relationships, so we interviewed 60 individuals in 30 families (30 wives and 30 husbands). This approach also allowed us to generate triangulated perspectives (i.e., wife report, husband report, interviewer’s observations) on marriage and family life, as recommended by Patton (1996). We used a qualitative, narrative-based approach (e.g., Josselson & Lieblich, 1993) to interviewing that urged the participants to respond to questions by *telling stories about their lived experiences*, as opposed to simply offering opinions and thoughts. After the interviewer obtained informed consent and the participants completed a demographic form, interviews were digitally recorded.

Like Lambert and Dollahite (2006), we interviewed married couples *together* in their homes because we believed that approach provided a rich context for learning about marriage, marital interaction, and marital processes. A joint-interview approach also provided the researcher with a front row seat as couples cocreated meaning through narratives (cf. Holmberg et al., 2004). In support of joint interviews, Babbie (2004) has reported that interviewing people together often helps elicit “aspects of the topic that would not have been anticipated by the researcher and would not have emerged from interviews with individuals” (p. 303). Our experience supported this view.

We are aware, however, that many scholars conversely advocate for individual interviews, even when studying marriage. Two central supports for this position include: (a) the notion that individual interviews promote more *candid, accurate, and honest* responses and (b) that a couple interview ignores or minimizes issues of *gender and power* (Seymour, Dix, & Eardley, 1995). We see both these concerns

as valid and address them in the following ways: (a) In the effort to promote candid, accurate, and honest responses, the interviewer encouraged wives and husbands to each respond to every question and to comment on or add to the other’s response; furthermore, the opportunity to respond first alternated with each question. Interviews included frequent addition, deletion, and correction by spouses as narratives were coconstructed. As with Holmberg et al.’s (2004) narrative study with married couples, wives were more likely than husbands to “edit” their spouses’ comments. (b) In connection with concerns regarding gender and power, female interviewers conducted the interviews where possible (27/30 couples), but this imperfect solution is a limitation of this study.

Coding and Analysis

Following verbatim transcription from the digital recordings, interviews were analyzed using open and axial coding approaches recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1990). *Open coding* consisted of analyzing interviews line by line, identifying themes and concepts in the interview data, and then determining which themes were salient and recurring. Open coding was performed independently by three members of our research team on an interview-by-interview basis. Researchers also produced content analyses of their open coding for each interview on a single corresponding notecard. At the conclusion of the coding, the notecard for each interview was collected from each researcher. The content analyses notecards from each of the three coders were then compared, thereby offering multiple “at-a-glance” perspectives regarding the salient and recurring themes expressed within a given interview. This strategy allowed for a qualitative version of interrater reliability as only core themes/concepts that: (a) were identified by all coders, (b) occurred in a majority of the participants’ interviews, and (c) were salient and were included in this paper. This approach promoted overall rigor, reliability, and validity of our qualitative research—and minimized the probability of a single researcher’s biases heavily influencing reported outcomes. Our focus throughout the project was on achieving a high level of *transferability* by ensuring that “a given [researcher] explanation fit a given [participant] description” (Janesick, 1994, p. 216). The 30 transcribed couple interviews comprised roughly 1,000 pages of double-spaced data, and

themes relating to a variety of subject areas were coded. As the open coding progressed and recurring themes were compared both within and across interviews, efforts at *axial coding* commenced as we began looking for interconnections between recurring themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). However, our aim in this exploratory study was not to build a refined theory of strong, happy, enduring marriage but to identify key processes and themes associated with these marriages, as we discuss next.

Findings

The broad, core themes relating to marriage that will be discussed are: (1) Challenges in African American Marriages, (2) Overcoming External Challenges to Marriage, (3) Resolving Intramarital Conflict, and (4) Unity and the Importance of Being “Equally Yoked.” Supporting qualitative data from the participants (all names have been replaced with pseudonyms) will be presented in connection with each theme.

Theme 1: Challenges in African American Marriages

A dilemma reported by all 30 couples in our study was: “How do we make time for family around the demands of work?” Phillip explained:

Everyday, my biggest stress is organizing the things I have to do, trying to make sure that I do those things that are work-related within that timeframe, and letting it interfere with family life as little as possible. . . . Just organizing work activities so that they won't interfere with family functions [is a huge challenge].

Comments from the following wives and husbands echoed this universal struggle:

Cassie: Balancing work with family life, that's the biggest stress.

Kim: [In our family, it's hard] just having time for each other, because there have been times . . . when things have gone on and he's had to go one way and I had to go another way, and the boys had to go another way, and [there] hasn't been time for each other, just to sit down and [be with] each other.

Daniel: [We] don't have much time to spend together because I work two jobs and when I get off at home, I only get home for a certain time and then I go to another [job] and that seems to be a big problem.

Many of the married couples we interviewed seemed to be borrowing from (but rarely repaying) the family time bank in order to put in extra hours at work, and this was a troubling predicament for these parents (cf. Hochschild, 1997). This significant struggle of work-family balance rarely surfaces in research on Black families (Marks, Swanson, Nesteruk, & Hopkins-Williams, 2006).

Another potent challenge reportedly faced by the married couples we interviewed was family-related stress, including stress involving extended family members. First, most of the families lamented the violence or substance abuse of “the street life” in general (cf. Marks et al., 2005), and four families specifically reported losing an extended male family member. Vanessa related:

When our nephew was shot, and my girlfriend, her nephew was shot, we were at a [church] retreat, and they told us, to hold on to [our sisters] . . . because [our] family was coming to get us. . . . Once [my sister] found out what had happened, her first thing was prayer.

A less dramatic but pervasive stressor mentioned by the couples was giving out needed support to family, extended family, fictive kin, or acquaintances. So prevalent were these calls for help that literally and figuratively came to the doors of the married couples that we refer to these calls as *knocks of need* (Marks et al., 2006). Also, the majority of those in our study had provided in-home care for additional, nonbiological children (usually kin or friends who needed housing) at some point during their marriage. This was consistent with previous research that has indicated that Black children are often cared for by other family members without legal adoption (Lassiter, 1998). At least six (20%) of the families in our study provided such housing continually, over years and even decades—with little or no remuneration. Additionally, at least 10 (33%) of our participants fit the description of the “sandwich generation” by providing care for younger generations and aging parents simultaneously. These challenges

are all closely related to collectivist African American culture and the broad but close network of relationships that are prevalent among many African American families.

This opening section on the challenges of Black marriages is not exhaustive but illustrates the weight many of these marriages bear. However, marriages are not merely a sum of the challenges they face. Indeed, in some respects, the ability to overcome challenges defines strong marriages, and it is to this ability to overcome that we now turn.

Theme 2: Overcoming External Challenges to Marriage

It is possible that the challenges and strains outlined in the preceding section contribute to the high divorce rate among African Americans. However, marriage may also create and combine strengths and resources to meet such challenges. Indeed, our participants reported that life's challenges were often met by relying heavily on a committed spouse. LaTrell explained that when a challenge arises:

We turn to each other and take a look at [the challenge] and realize that it's not a life or death situation. You know, it's not like we haven't been here before. We've had similar thing[s], and we dealt with [them].

Camille and Franklin responded in the following way to a question that asked what they hold on to in order to make it through challenging times:

Camille: Each other. [Wife and husband reach out, grab each other, and laugh].

Franklin: That's true, I think we rely on each other . . .

Another husband named Clarence similarly reflected:

I think that's one of the strengths of our marriage right now. We really don't have to go outside of the house [for strength and support]. I mean, you always talk to different people. I have [other] friends. But anything that's [really] bothering me, anything I'm anxious to discuss, the first person I go to is Shantell, [my wife].

Like LaTrell, Camille, Franklin, and Clarence, our other participants mentioned their spouses as a primary source of strength during challenging times. Virtually, all (58/60) mentioned turning to God as well, often through prayer. However, God and spouse were often mentioned in blended responses that seemed to reflect a feeling that these two resources were closely connected. Denise's narrative illustrated this tendency. She related:

I remember getting ready to go into [my Daddy's] funeral, and I remember a voice telling me that my husband was my strength. I remember that because I started walking down the aisle with the family as we were going in, and I kind of lost it, and then, all of a sudden, there Steven [my husband] was right next to me, holding me, and I felt a strength. That reminded me of a scripture that I had read the day before, where God had clearly told me that my husband was my strength at that time. . . . That's been true throughout [our marriage]. We experienced my Mother's death and my two brothers passed away, and the same thing, [Steven was] my strength. Then my daughter Shelly, when she passed away, again, it was rough . . . [but] *together, we're strong* . . . [Steven] reminds me that God is ultimately my strength, but Steven is [also] here, to be my strength beside me.

Denise's narrative of leaning on Steven parallels a Veroff et al. (1995) finding that Black couples who experienced the death of a loved one reported an enhanced marital bond. However, finding strength and support in each other took place in connection with a variety of challenges, not just death. Tanya, a wife of over 25 years, discussed how she and her husband adapted and were flexible in their roles after a serious injury left him unable to continue his previous job. She explained:

[W]e both accepted the change. I think that because we were both willing to accept that things were changing . . . it made it much easier for everybody. . . . [O]ur priority was, we had kids. [He cooked and cleaned and ran the house while I went to work]. . . . We wanted

to make sure that we kept the family together, *strongly* together. So, we made the changes that were necessary to survive.

Tatianna expressed her view of coping together with her husband as follows:

As long as you have family and friends and people loving you and praying with you and sharing with you, you can get through almost anything. . . . I think people who the term “hard times” would [apply to are] people who just truly feel alone and by themselves and have nobody and nothing [to turn to]. . . . [I have] *him*.

For the married couples in our study, challenges (including profound ones) were prevalent and, in some cases, perennial. However, along with the challenges came a partner one could lean on and love. Perhaps no one captured this better than Earl:

[In strong marriages], the troubles will help them grow closer. We had a few crises [but] we just pulled together and we got through it, and it drew us closer together as a unit. As opposed to [a husband and wife] just fighting [with] each other and snapping at each other and blaming each other, “It’s your fault!”—“[No,] It’s *your* fault!” . . .

These experiences of marriage partners uniting in the face of challenge calls to mind the words of the late psychiatrist Frankl (1984) who analogized:

If architects want to strengthen a decrepit arch, they increase the load which is laid upon it, for thereby the parts are joined more firmly together. . . . What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task (p. 127).

The marriages of our participants had “load[s] . . . laid upon” them through a variety of challenges, including constant as well as unpredictable trials. However, these individuals and marriages also seemed to have a “worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task,” including: “to make sure that we kept the

family together, strongly together” (Tanya) and “[to do] whatever it takes for us to make it as a family” (Earl). By joining firmly together while under pressure, these marital arches have endured across time and have collectively borne significant weight without collapsing.

Theme 3: Resolving Intramarital Conflict

Although the 30 married couples weathered several storms that came from the outside, sometimes the greatest threats to a marriage come from within. In this section, we turn to the topic of intramarital conflict. Camille, who (like six other participants) had been divorced prior to settling into her current marriage, said:

[T]here is always some conflict in family. . . . [The strong family is the] family that know[s] how to deal with that . . . and [is able to emerge from the conflict] still loving and caring for each other. That’s the difference . . .

Earl and Tiffany shared this peek into their enduring marriage:

Earl: . . . even though we are married and we’re supposed to be one . . .

Tiffany: We’re just different! [Mutual laughter.]

Earl: We’re individuals. We battle, you know, and a lot of times she don’t like the differences in me, and a lot of times I don’t like the differences in her. But, . . . we both believe that marriage is a sacred vow, it’s a vow we took before the Lord that we’re gonna honor. . . . We said the same vows, “For better, for worse, in sickness and health, for rich, for poor.”

A wife named Alea similarly reported marital differences:

We’ve been married 25 years, [but] I know for sure that if we didn’t follow the rules of [our faith we wouldn’t have stayed married]. [O]ur personalities, we’re like night and day.

The above individuals’ comments are fairly representative of what our participants told us in the sense that all 60 of the marriage partners reported at least some differences and they all experienced some

intramarital conflict. A vital question is: How did these couples successfully negotiate these differences and conflicts en route to a strong, happy, enduring marriage? Alvin, a husband of a couple of decades, stated:

There are a myriad of things that are going to come up that [you] are gonna argue about. [You] are gonna have problems . . . and get on each other's nerves, and everything else. . . . If you can't sit down there and talk it out or compromise about it, you are just not gonna stay together. . . . That's the way I see it.

Sheila, a wife of 21 years (including 10 "hard" years at the outset), reflected:

A good husband to me is somebody who's always there for you no matter what, because I can get on his nerves, and I know I do, but he's still there. He's still willing to be with me. We're able to talk out all our problems. . . . [Some] people might say, "I don't care if [my husband] is mad or not." Or "I don't care if I spend all the money up." But in my mind I'm thinking. . . . I've got to get myself together and give him the honor of what this relationship means. . . . [W]e've been . . . married [twenty-one] years, and it's not all been great, but when they see [me], they want to know where [my husband] is.

Another couple, Deidre and Dave, similarly discussed the importance of communicating with each other but added another key regarding conflict resolution:

Deidre: . . . if we have a problem, [we do] not bring it outside the house, the home. We communicate with one another and [do] not go to friends.

Dave: [We don't] call Mama, and say, "Here's what he did . . . or what she did." You know, a lot of what goes on in here, we keep in here.

Deidre: Right, [it] stays in here.

Dave: And now, that doesn't mean that if there's something major, that we wouldn't share with our family, but minor things that

we disagree about [we resolve here, between us] because we communicate with one another.

Dave and Deidre believed that although communicating within the marital boundaries was vital, it was also important *not* to communicate indiscriminately outside these boundaries about a spouse's faults or minor marital conflicts.

On a related note, Gottman (1994) has reported that strong marriages do not necessarily involve fewer challenges or points of conflict than marriages that are weak or end in divorce. A key difference is the ability of strong marriages to face conflicts that inevitably arise in all relationships in an "emotionally intelligent" way. Marcus seemed to illustrate this as he discussed his marriage:

[The difference between us and many married couples is that] major things that they have to work through . . . wouldn't be a problem for us to work through. It would be like, "OK, we'll talk about it, we'll decide, and we'll just move on."

Fifty-eight of the 60 participants referred to faith in one respect or another as a marital resource—including, but not limited to, times of conflict. The husband illustrated this tendency as follows:

We both feel that a marriage is a bonding thing. As [God] says, "Whatever I join together let no man put asunder." I believe that my faith made me love my wife a lot more. We are very different. If it weren't for faith, I probably would have run a long time ago. "You don't want to do what I want to do. We just don't see eye to eye. I'm gone." But when you believe in God . . . yes, the boat still gets to rockin' but [God] says, "In me you can weather the storm."

Two take-home messages from our participants regarding intramarital conflict were that: (a) marriages (even strong, happy, enduring ones) involve some conflict and differences between spouses and (b) although strong, happy, enduring marriages do not require the elimination of conflict or differences, such marriages do require the effective management of differences through communication and understanding. Having discussed several challenges

facing our participants' marriages and some of the ways they overcame these challenges, we now turn to the final theme.

Theme 4: Unity and the Importance of Being "Equally Yoked"

The importance of unity in marriage was referenced in connection with issues ranging from sacred to prosaic. One husband expressed his opinion that what mattered most in marriage and life was "unity [and] trust." Unity in this context should not be interpreted to mean that partners are similar. Indeed, unity often seemed to refer to a synergy that was appreciated by two different but mutually committed individuals.

Rashaad: God puts opposites together, and one area I might be weak in, she's strong; and one area she's weak in, I'm strong in. So it coincides.

Sheila: We share our role[s], so that whenever I'm not there, or I'm frustrated, he takes over. So we're complementary of each other: one can be stern, the other the comforter. . . . I'm with my kids all the time because I work at home [and] sometimes I get frustrated [with them]. . . . Because Rashaad works at night, he sleeps [during the day, but] sometimes I get [fed] up to the hilt and I have to call for reinforcement . . . and I say, "I'm just leavin'!" and he comes down[stairs]. I[']ve come back thinkin' my house is gonna [still] be a wreck—and my house is clean . . . [and] my kids are calmed down. So we just complement each other.

Sheila mentions contrasts of "frustrated" with calm, "stern" with "comforter," and literal day and night sleeping patterns to underscore how this marriage comprised persons with different characteristics, different schedules, and (occasionally) different emotional states. However, the couple works together in support of each other in a way that seems to meld these differences into a positive, unified interdependence.

Other participants' comments resonated with those above. Alvin explained:

For me, I feel that you're supposed to stay with your strong things, the strong things that you

can do. That's what you contribute to the family. . . . I think that's why we've stayed together so long, because . . . her strong things are not the same as mine, and mine [are] not the same as hers. . . . [T]hat[']s helped us.

Although complementarity was reportedly a strength in some areas of marriage, there were areas where sameness was strongly preferred, both in terms of activities and beliefs. Alvin, who mentioned complementarity above, later reported that in his experience:

[A] dividing part [for many marriages is "the street life"]. But, both me and Lisa, we [don't] run the street. We're not used to going to places or bars or anything [like that]. . . . [I]f you have one person that doesn't like [that stuff], and the other person [is] used to doing it, that becomes a conflict [in a lot of marriages].

The same husband further emphasized that this principle might apply to any activity that takes spouses away from each other too frequently.

[I]f you're doing your thing [and] I'm doing my thing, [then] never the two shall meet. Some people do that, they do their thing, [and the] other one [is] doing their thing [and] they very seldom are doing it together. That just leads to problems.

According to Alvin, too much time apart "leads to problems." Conversely, sharing time together in meaningful activities was repeatedly mentioned as a marriage enhancer. For example, although none of the interview questions addressed family meals, multiple participants did. When responding to a question regarding practices that strengthened their marriage and family, Phil replied, "We almost always eat together." Victoria similarly explained, "[What is meaningful in our family is] when we eat dinner . . . we all get together, that's one of the things that we do."

Many of the practices that were meaningful to the participants in their marriages were religious or spiritual in nature. Camille mentioned several religious practices:

[M]e and my husband, . . . we pray . . . we read Scriptures, and we fast, and we do a lot of that. [For us], fasting means . . . we give up two meals, we don't eat for 24 hours. You fast (for a reason), and during [high] pressure time[s] . . . we [have] needed a lot of fasting and prayer, and [we] got answers to prayer [regarding] what direction that we need to go. We [are] a team, we do team-work together . . . that's how we get through those really tough times.

In Camille's description of religious practices that strengthen her marriage, she mentioned the word "we" a dozen times. Notice that in her case, prayer, scripture study, and fasting are often shared, sacred activities. Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, and Murray-Swank (2003) have found that spouses who view their marriage as "sanctified" or sacred tend to have stronger marriages. However, less is known about how to instill or promote this "sanctification" (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006). It seems that Camille and her husband Franklin have found some sacred practices that work well for their marriage.

Nesha, like Camille, was a remarried wife who offered a comment on the deeper meaning of shared religious practices in a marriage. She reflected:

I've been married before, and my first husband was not saved, and he wasn't interested [in my church]. [It] goes back to what the Lord said about being *equally yoked*. . . . I was at the church, but . . . as a nonbeliever [my ex-husband] thought I was giving too much time. Because of that, we weren't serving together, [and] we weren't going together . . . we would always feel some type of rift. . . . [In my second marriage], to be able to go to church with my husband on Sunday morning, he and I sayin', "We are doin' it together." . . . To me, [that] strengthens the family. . . . It's really beneficial for me to be worshiping in the same church [with my husband]. The benefits are . . . very, very great, because [by doing it together] you are investing in the lives of your children [and in your marriage].

Another wife, Sheila, had experiences within her marriage that allowed her to contrast an unshared religious life in marriage with a shared one. In her case, her husband changed from uninvolved to highly involved in her church. She reported:

[N]ow [that our spiritual life is a shared one], we talk about everything. Before, we couldn't because he was living a life that I didn't agree with. That was a conflict between us. He would have to make me mad enough for me to let him go out with his "boys". . . . There was always a conflict between us. He had his life and I had mine . . . We were married, but not *together*. He was still [livin'] "single." Once [he] got into . . . our religion, [he] understood that God meant for man to [truly invest in marriage] . . . and [now] it influences everything we do.

Rashaad, Sheila's "changed" husband, later commented:

My faith has shown me how to be a better husband to my wife. It's shown me how to be a better father to my kids. . . . My faith walk taught me that she is more than just my companion, she's not only my right hand, but we walk through this life together. The Lord showed me how I should cherish her, my lady, because he's given me the opportunity to walk this faith walk with [her]. . . . What greater thing is there than to go through life with someone who believes the same thing as you do? . . . I tell my wife all the time, she is the diamond of my eye. . . . And my [daughters]. . . . I want to show that I love my kids. No matter what. . . . So that when [I'm] an old man . . . they'll always know, "My Daddy loved me." And then they can pass that on to their kids and to their husband[s].

Space does not permit this couple's unabridged story but their story line was a common one among our participants: (a) boy meets girl, (b) boy loves girl but has difficulty leaving "the single life" behind, and (c) the man is faced with a choice point. In some cases, the husband changed and the marriage

became unified. However, when there are two conflicting visions in a marriage, the marriage literally experiences di-vision and the marriage's endurance is threatened (Marks et al., 2005). Being "equally yoked" appeared to involve the core issue of a unified marital and family vision. An example from Steven regarding his marriage seems to convey this kind of unity. He explained:

I look at it [this way]: God has given me a gift to do what he would want me to do, so I can't say that I sacrifice anything [through my heavy involvement at church and in the community]. That's the same way that I look at my wife. I think that her time [and effort], [the way] that she's able to touch many people outside my family . . . [that] is a call from God. . . . If we have a relationship together [and] we both do know God, then it's my responsibility to hold up her end at home if she's out doing God's work. So I don't look at it as a sacrifice. I think [she has] a gift that a lot of people out there are looking for, and that she has it [and] that she's able to give. I feel that it's my job to understand what God is having her to do, and to be able to cover [for] her [here at home], and vice versa, her covering me, if there's things that I need to do [for our church or community]. I think this allows us to work together, understanding that God is in charge of everything that we have to do in [our] household.

A final example of being united and committed comes from Jay, who works two blue-collar jobs to make ends meet. Three years ago, Jay's wife Betsy (aged 48 years), mother to their four foster children, was struck by a drunk driver and lost her legs and her ability to communicate clearly, but both of them explained that they did not have time to "hate nobody" and that they had forgiven the drunk driver. Near the end of the interview, Jay turned from the interviewer to Betsy, sensitive to a comment she had made that she would not blame him if he "ran away" from her and their difficult family situation. Then Jay told Betsy:

You know, like I told you, I said, "'Til death do us part." I'm going to be here. I want you

to be here for me too. That's what my Mother told me. [She] said before we got married, "You[']ve got to listen to the words." That's what my Mama said, "If you [are] truly, really, ready to get married . . . you got listen to the words." That's what I did, I listened. That's what I want it to be, 'til death do us part. That's where I want the relationship to be. I'm always going to have [your] back and I want you to have mine.

Discussion

Stories like Jay's and Betsy's (and the balance of the 60 African American participants in our project) are rarely heard in the social sciences. They are stories of struggle but often stories of strength—strength that comes from a variety of sources. Using Lewis and Spanier's (1979) aforementioned model of *individual*, *interpersonal*, and *social/economic* resources, we now discuss the struggles and the strengths that correspond with each of these three levels. This discussion should provide additional answers to our central question: How are some African Americans able to build strong, happy, enduring marriages?

Individual-Level Resources and Barriers

Goodwin (2003) cited emotional and mental health as significant individual-level resources that impact marriage. Our sample, men and women, was typically described in interviewers' field notes in words like "positive," "upbeat," "quick to laugh," "great smile," "joyous," and so forth. Our screening for those who self-reported their marriage as "happy" undoubtedly contributed to this. Even so, it seems that a resulting truism was that two happy individuals may often make a happy marriage.

Educational level is another individual-level resource frequently addressed in marriage research. A couple of points in this regard are: (a) everyone of the 60 persons in our sample completed high school or earned a GED and a majority had attended at least some college and (b) furthermore, wives typically had as much or more education than their husbands (a predictor of marital *instability* among Whites; Veroff et al., 1995).

At the individual level, our sample comprised persons who generally appeared to be physically,

mentally, and emotionally *strong*. Even so, by their own unsolicited confessions, many of these persons (especially the husbands) had “come a *long way*” since their early days of marriage. The retrospective nature of the study makes it difficult to ascertain whether these individuals succeeded in marriage primarily because of personal strengths that pre-dated the marriage or because they developed after marriage in ways that molded them into strong persons. We suspect a mutual and transactional effect between original and later developing individual-level strengths.

Interpersonal Resources and Barriers

Interpersonal resources, with specific reference to marriage, are defined as “the positive feelings and attitudes developed as a result of spousal interactions” (Goodwin, 2003, p. 552). Trust is an important, perhaps essential, interpersonal resource in a strong, happy, enduring marriage (Chaney, 2006). By contrast, mistrust is problematic for many African American couples (Chapman, 2007). It is important to note that the healthy ways in which the couples in our study faced *external challenges* (Theme 2) and dealt with *intramarital conflict* together (Theme 3) were explicitly and repeatedly discussed in these interviews. As the reader may recall, a key resource mentioned by virtually all the couples in dealing with challenges was “each other”—as further elaborated in Theme 4’s discussion of marital *unity*. In this respect, our study’s couples differ from those in the frequently referenced EYM project in two key ways: First, our couples were not nascent but seasoned (married an average of 26 years); second, our couples were not just “stable” (i.e., still married at Year 7 of the EYM project) but mutually gave marital self-reports of “strong” and “happy.” Correspondingly, it is not surprising that these couples who had jointly weathered two or more decades of life’s challenges described in Theme 1 (e.g., work struggles, illness, death of loved ones, etc.) would exhibit high levels of trust. It seems fitting that in these strong, happy, enduring marriages, the greatest interpersonal resource was, therefore, “each other.”

Social and Economic Resources and Barriers

In her study of the marital well-being of Blacks and Whites, Goodwin (2003) has noted, “Marital

relationships do not exist in a vacuum; they are imbedded within social contexts that have the ability to influence them” (p. 552). Previous research on marriage and divorce among Blacks and Whites has indicated that the “most crucial” aspect of family of origin structure is “whether the marriages of the respondents’ fathers and mothers were themselves stable” (Veroff et al., 1995, p. 31). In our sample, more than half of the couples included at least one partner from a single-parent family. There were two noteworthy tendencies in these cases. The first was for the spouse from a single-parent family to spontaneously refer to a strong marriage they had seen (often in their extended family), which had served as a model for them. The second tendency was—consistent with Coles’ (2006) work—for some men who had grown up without a positively involved father to express their determination from a young age that *they* would “be *there* for their child” when they had one and “do it [fatherhood] the right way.”

For the couples in our study, their broader social (typically urban) context was both costly and beneficial. In American inner cities, dual-earner married couples are the *wealthy poor*, meaning that they are resource rich by comparison to most of their neighbors (Marks et al., 2006). As a result, these couples are often the first to receive *knocks of need* (calls for financial or other temporal assistance; Marks et al.) as needs frequently arise. Many couples paid significant financial and temporal costs as they struggled to help meet the needs of extended family, their neighbors, and persons from their civic and faith communities. They did this not only through financial giving but also by raising children (not only their own but also often those of others), by caring for aging parents and kin, and by serving in a united fashion as weight-bearing arches of their broader communities, all while working full-time jobs.

Except in one case of severe injury and a few cases of retirement, every wife and husband was currently employed (cf. Landry, 2000). Over half of the husbands’ jobs were industrial “blue-collar” jobs with decent pay—jobs that are disappearing rapidly from urban America (Green, 2001). This portends problems for the next generation because a “major reason African-Americans do not rush to get married is economics” (Chapman, 2007, p. 285). If there are no jobs for men, discussing marriage may be nearly moot. As African American leaders have argued in the past, education seems to be a critical key to

opening the doors of opportunity in the future—not just financial or employment opportunity but marital opportunity as well.

With the social and economic influences of family of origin, neighborhood, community, and employment noted, we turn briefly to a final resource: religion. Of the 30 couples, 27 were actively “religious,” and in the remaining 3 couples, neither spouse was religious. Although our data are not representative, there are two noteworthy points: First, for many of the couples who were religious, their faith involved not only congregational involvement but also frequent personal and relational references to God—so much so that it could be argued that in Lewis and Spanier’s (1979) model, religion functioned as an *individual* and *interpersonal* resource, as well as a *social* one. Second, every couple in our study was “on the same page” when it came to religious involvement—they participated together or they stayed home together. Furthermore, nearly all the individuals who had terminated a previous marriage attributed the dissolution, at least in part, to spousal differences in core religious/moral values and practices. These two latter points seem to underscore Theme 4’s messages regarding the importance of marital unity, being “equally yoked,” and sharing a family vision.

Implications

Our findings have several implications for research, family life education, and policy, respectively.

First, as noted by Stinnett (1983) 25 years ago, we continue to assert the need for strengths-focused family research that would complement and supplement the prevailing medical (i.e., problem and pathology centered) model. Connor and White (2006) have identified a particularly intense need for such research on African American families. In sum, we need to know more about why things go right to ground intervention and educational efforts. Indeed, the stimulus for this research project came in a 2003 family life educational setting where Black college students asked the first author “why there seemed to be no studies on strong, marriage-based Black families.” These students were familiar with the deficit perspective of Black families addressed at the outset of this paper, but they found little hope or direction in such research and came away “discouraged” and with no alternate template. Five years later, the

present project—with its rich qualitative narratives and quotations—offers highly accessible material that we have integrated into undergraduate, graduate, and community-level Family Life Education settings. The participants’ narratives (see also Marks, Nesteruk, Swanson, Garrison, & Davis, 2005; Marks, Swanson, Nesteruk, & Hopkins-Williams, 2006) seem to implicitly invite and elicit “real” discussion from students. We strongly encourage this application of our research in family life education.

In addition to the potential of strengths-based research to inform family life education, our findings confirm that policymakers and nonprofit agents cannot assume a “one size fits all” approach to programs that promote marriage formation. For many African Americans, marriage appears to be the highest indicator of success and is inextricably linked with financial stability (Edin & Reed, 2005). These are reasonable values and should be honored and promoted in culturally sensitive public policy while at the same time designing policy that helps families achieve the economic self-sufficiency they desire. Policies that promote faith-based initiatives also are likely to resonate in African American families and communities. Finally, our respondents reported stressors around their lack of time for each other, particularly because of caregiving responsibilities. Policies that promote respite for caregivers likely will be a significant boon to couples like the ones in our study.

Conclusion

To come full circle, our initial research question had a different point of origin than most extant research on African American families. Instead of looking at Black families from a “deficit” or problem-focused perspective, we decided to work from a strengths-based or salutogenic approach and to examine strong, happy, enduring marriages. Many Black women and men who desire marriage are faced with the experienced reality that marriage—especially a strong, happy, enduring marriage—is not probable. Even so, it is a testament to the strength of the marital “pull” that even in contexts (e.g., inner-city areas) where living examples of strong, happy, enduring marriage are not common, many African Americans still value and desire to wed (Chaney, 2006; Jarrett, 1994). The participants in this study offer examples of persons who have made this desire

their reality. Our sample offered a combined total of over a millennium and a half of marital experience (60 persons \times 26 year average = 1,560 years), and these years encompassed many challenges. The marriages of our participants were relationships between two different and (at least occasionally) conflicting individuals. However, despite flaws and differences, these are couples who built happy, enduring marriages. In their own words, "Together, we are strong." There is likely much left to learn from seasoned, firsthand marriage experts like these if we as researchers are willing to listen.

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