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### **I'm So Satisfied: A Qualitative Approach to Understanding the Process of Marriage Satisfaction Among African American Couples**

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I'M SO SATISFIED

A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS OF  
MARRIAGE SATISFACTION AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN COUPLES

A dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of  
Antioch University, New England

In partial fulfillment for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By Rashida Spence

November 2021

I'M SO SATISFIED

This dissertation, by Rashida Spence, has  
been approved by the committee members signed below  
who recommend that it be accepted by the faculty of  
Antioch University New England  
in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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**ABSTRACT****I'M SO SATISFIED**

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The current study uses a strengths-based framework to identify the process of marriage satisfaction among 1 same-sex African American married couple and 5 heterosexual African American married couples. Six themes emerged through qualitative analysis demonstrating that marriage satisfaction is a co-constructed experience created between couples through a series of interactions cultivating healthy conditions that strengthen relationship functioning and promote well-being. Based on the results the experience of marriage satisfaction is formed by the organizing concepts of connection, intentionality, purpose, sentiments of peace, authentic communication, and well-being. Results are discussed in association with existing research, as well as, Self-Determination, and Relationship Motivation Theories. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA (<https://aura.antioch.edu>) and OhioLINK ETD Center (<https://etd.ohiolink.edu>).

*Keywords:* African American relationship satisfaction, Black couples, African American marriages, African American satisfaction, couples satisfaction, healthy Black relationships

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At the time of this writing, I am exhausted, grateful. I am grateful for the opportunities that have resulted from this work on marriage satisfaction among African Americans couples. I am deeply humbled and honored to be a part of a movement to elevate African American voices and to orient society towards positive African American experiences that exist although obscure.

My mother along with my village: Lewis III, Erin, Portia, sistafriends in Pennsylvania and Maryland, and to the group of Black Women Ph.D's Inc., you all continue to be the foundation that guides and encourages me everyday to do a little more, and each day a little more. My children, Miya and Lewis, my sunshine and star; you are my inspiration as well as my motivation to live this life with joy and meaning, and to create what I know is possible. I hope that you are as proud of me as I am of you. To my three angels, Grandmom, Lil Charles and Aunt Ann, thank you for having my back, and always pushing me through. I love you. Thank you for everything you sacrificed for me to arrive at this moment. This degree brings the family legacy of education and perseverance full circle. The "1st Cousin's Crew" brought it home grandma and this degree is for you!

This part of the journey is complete. I have really finished a full-time doctoral program! Dr. Denzel Jones, Dr. Walter Lowe, thank you for your kindness, your time, consistency, mentorship, support, as well as the opportunity to observe you in your element as I sat back to listen and learn. This experience as a Ph.D. student helps me see myself in a new dimension, and I am forever grateful. There is nowhere to go but up. Last but not forgotten, my cohort is the absolute best. Thank you all for sharing this moment with me. We did it!

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In today's United States society, scholars have begun to focus on attributes of marriage satisfaction as a way to identify effective solutions for treating marital distress (Barsky, 2014; Karney, 2007; Vaterlaus, et al., 2017). Researchers show that couples report distress in their marriages due to opposing personalities, life transitions, work-related stress, finances, and health issues (Barr & Simmons, 2014; Bradbury et al., 2000; Claxton et al., 2011; Dew et al., 2017; Kluwer et al., 2020; McNeil et al., 2020). When these challenges are present, couples also report low marital satisfaction (Hawkins & Booth, 2005). The concept of marriage satisfaction is defined as the subjective evaluation of how each partner experiences the marriage (Keizer, 2014). This study uses a strengths-based perspective to understand how African American couples cultivate positive experiences that are evaluated and deemed as contributing factors for marriage satisfaction. Vaterlaus et al. (2017) found that positive attributes of marriage satisfaction for African American couples included, open communication, congruent values, spirituality, realistic expectations, and collaboration.

Despite extensive study on marital satisfaction, population samples have been primarily white (Broman, 2005; Dillaway & Broman, 2000; Fye et al., 2020; Hou et al., 2019; Karney & Bradbury, 2020; Sayehmiri et al., 2020). The lack of research on African Americans and marital quality is a barrier to understanding African American marriages. Additionally, this hinders clinical development and questions cultural relevancy of therapy interventions and relationship education programs designed to enhance marriage satisfaction (Broman, 2005). Much of the literature on marriage satisfaction has focused on personality traits (Beck et al., 2014; Claxton et al., 2011; Hogan & Roberts, 2004; Schaffhuser et al., 2014), and specific protective factors associated with

high-quality relationships (Badgett, 2011; Bradbury et al., 2000; Calin et al., 2021; Corra et al., 2009).

However, the literature on contributing factors associated with relationship satisfaction for African American couples is very scant (McGoldrick & Hardy, 2008). Due to the limited literature specifically involving African Americans who report high relationship satisfaction, it is important to consider the context in which satisfaction is achieved.

This research proposes a qualitative method of study on marriage satisfaction among African Americans in high-quality marriages. This study intentionally targets marital satisfaction from a strength-based perspective among African Americans. It is necessary to debunk the pejorative literature that centers values and norms of traditional European American marriage as the standard to achieve, while African American marriages are categorized as dysfunctional. A major focus of this study is to illuminate the reality that African Americans experience high satisfaction in their marriages. A review of the literature includes: (a) an overview of marriage satisfaction, (b) the history of African American marriages, (c) marriage and African American culture, and (d) identifying factors that contribute to the experience of creating marriage satisfaction among African American couples. In addition to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008), the present study also infuses the Relationship Motivation Theory (Deci et al., 2014) to emphasize the proposition that people are active organisms with evolving tendencies towards growth; who seek to achieve mastery over challenges and integrate new experiences into a congruent sense of self-identity (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Each of these theories encompasses a strengths-based perspective that contributes to our understanding of how high-quality African American couples create marriage satisfaction.

The findings from this study will assist scholars, institutions, marriage education programs, couples, and clinicians in recognizing positive factors that cultivate high-quality African American marriages, as well as implications on gender and sexuality. This further provides options for African Americans to minimize the use of traditional European models that have been inappropriately applied to analyze African American families (McGoldrick & Hardy, 2008). To that end, the African American marital experience must be studied exclusively to understand how satisfaction is achieved.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Marital Satisfaction and Lack of Representation**

Marriage satisfaction has been the topic of research for many decades (Keizer, 2014); however, there is no standard on how to define it, causing the concept of marital satisfaction to be addressed in many ways. For instance, earlier research has referenced marriage satisfaction as relationship quality, adjustment, happiness, stability, and fulfillment (Glenn, 1990; Glenn, 1998; Gottman, 1991; Heyman et al., 1994; Hill, 1999; Lee et al., 1991). Definitions are most often subjective evaluations of the relationship and assume that relationships are satisfying if it meets or exceeds internal standards for a good relationship (Vaughn, 1999). Despite the inconsistent use of the term “marriage satisfaction,” researchers and theorists continue to produce studies without it being invariably defined. For the purpose of this study, marriage satisfaction is defined as “the subjective evaluation of one’s relationship” (Keizer, 2014, p. 5437). Keizer (2014) further notes, “Relationship satisfaction is not a property of a relationship; it is a subjective experience and opinion. As such, members of the same couple may differ in how satisfied they are with their marriage” (p. 5437).

Studies pertaining to marriage satisfaction have increased since the 1970s. Researchers have explored the perception couples have of their relationship (Halford et al., 2017), and how couples engage each other to make the relationship work (Gottman & Silver, 1994; Gubbins et al., 2010; Lavner et al., 2016; Marks et al., 2008). At best, the interactional perspective required observational methods, which also required a focus on processes since divorce rates continue to rise. Theorists wanted to answer the question: why do some couples experience satisfaction and others do not? Gottman et al., (1977) was one of the first theorists to observe the process of the

couples' interaction in real-time. He observed couples' interactional patterns and asked couples to describe their behavior and perception. Gottman & Krokoff (1989) observed hundreds of couples' facial expressions, heart rates, and blood pressure, skin conductivity, and the words they used in conversation with their partners. Results revealed that low-risk couples maintained a “*magic ratio*” of five interactions to every one negative interaction during the conflict.

Unlike most studies that rely on the self-report of men and women, Gottman and Krokoff's (1989) innovative work involved observations of couples' interaction. Further, highlighting the importance of dynamic affective processes in marriages and closely examined potential mechanisms of relationship maladjustment (Gottman & Silver, 1994). As a leading theorist in the field of relationship distress and satisfaction, Gottman's research made significant contributions to the field. Although his data is reported to be diverse, results have shown gender diversity and a lack of diversity among races (Kim et al., 2007).

In an effort to predict marriage satisfaction, Karney and Bradbury (2020) conducted a review on determinants of satisfaction and the impact on individual and family well-being when strong marriages are formed and maintained. The study revealed that marital satisfaction increases over time and remains relatively stable for long periods. Second, contrary to behavioral models of marriage, negative communication patterns can be a challenge for the couple's relationship. However, if the pattern changes this does not necessarily lead to increased satisfaction, and it does not automatically mean the couple is distressed. Third, the dyadic processes found to be reliable and adaptive for middle-class, affluent couples may not operate the same for lower-income couples. Thus, the task of understanding and advocating for marital satisfaction is more complex and continues to raise questions about the steady increase in divorce rates. In turn, family theorists

develop empirical interventions for couples with the hope to prevent or absolve relationship distress, breakups, and divorce. As research centered on preventing relationship distress and divorce, studies of marriage satisfaction found the following determinants were involved: (a) Spouse's personality and history of parental divorce, (b) life transitions and stress related to work, extended family, and health, and (c) the couples interactional processes, including communication patterns and display of emotion while adapting to each other (Lavner et al., 2016). It was also determined that personality constructs correlate with relationship satisfaction. For example, Sayehmiri et al., (2020) reports that people with decreased levels of neuroticism, high levels of agreeableness, and high levels of extraversion are most likely to report high satisfaction in their relationships. Moreover, scholars have noted a link between relationship satisfaction and family of origin. Botha & Van den Berg (2009) found a connection between a variation in outcomes to relationship functioning of a spouse's parents, which gives credence to the idea that parental quality of marriage is linked to the quality of marriage displayed by their children more than 5 years later.

Among life transitions and stress surrounding work, health, and parenthood; work, parenthood, and division of household labor are most often studied (Kluwer et al., 2020). A large amount of research is devoted to the impact children have on marriage satisfaction (Pedro et al., 2012). The arrival of a new baby along with the impact of other life events have been well documented when it comes to how marriage satisfaction is affected (O'Reilly et al., 2020). However, studies are more inclined to highlight resiliency and the couple's ability to adapt to challenges when the sample group is non-black (DeFrain & Asay, 2007; Perry, 2013).

Further studies conducted a behavioral analysis of interactions between couples and identified specific exchanges (Fincham et al., 2011; Gottman, 1991). The most commonly



examined interactional processes are positive and negative emotional expression, communication skills, and partner support. Schaffhuser et al. (2014) revealed that personality factors such as agreeableness and negative affectivity predict levels of relationship satisfaction. However, behavioral variables predict the magnitude by which relationship satisfaction deteriorates. These findings suggest that an individual's characteristics and family of origin upbringing have implications for marriage satisfaction by decreasing or increasing the level of satisfaction reported by either spouse. Yet, behaviors and expressions exchanged between couples may also contribute to the degree to which satisfaction changes.

### **Historical Representation of African American Marriage in Literature**

Although African American marriages are recorded in census data, representation of African American marriages in family science research is scarce, outdated, and unbalanced (Leticq, 2019). Since the 1960's African American marriages have been depicted as dysfunctional and less satisfying by non-African American scholars without locating them within their most relevant historical, social, political, and cultural contexts that have strained male-female relationships beyond the strains experienced by majority couples (Brown & Tylka, 2011; Leticq, 2019; McNeil-Smith et al., 2020; Pinderhughes, 2002). The depiction of dysfunctional relationships over time has perpetuated the framework for examining African American marriages from a deficit perspective wherein comparison analyses are frequently used to illustrate African American marriages as difficult to maintain (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 1999; Blackman et al., 2005; Broman, 2005; Hardy & Boyd-Franklin, 1989). In comparison to European Americans, published literature by Moynihan (1965) noted the core of deterioration of African American society is the African American family, while white families are achieving and have done a lot to

maintain their achievements, African Americans of lower class are highly unstable and approaching complete breakdown.

The African American marital narrative continued to be disparaging throughout the 1970s, and similar narratives are expressed today. As social science research focuses more on declining marriage rates, the lack of male presence, female-dominated households, and lower socioeconomic status, African American families have become associated with poor marriage quality and unstable male-female relationships (Barr & Simons, 2012; Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 1999; Broman, 2005; Chambers & Kravitz, 2011; Chaney & Marsh, 2009; Dixon, 2009; Harris, 2011; Hurt et al., 2014). Even when successful marriages are observed, the strengths and family life of African Americans are discounted when their life does not replicate the image of the standard North American family [SNAF] (Smith, 1993). The SNAF is characterized as a white, married, heterosexual, monogamous couple who imbues traditional gender roles as they raise their biological children in a middle-class neighborhood in the home they own (Smith, 1993).

Within the past decade, Letiecq (2019) has critiqued family science research that focuses on deficits within marginalized families with targeted goals of improving family outcomes and well-being. Central to her critique, Letiecq (2019) posits that there is limited attention given to family privilege and the ways in which advantages of privileged families are upheld within white heteronormative hegemonic society at the disadvantage of others. The concept of family privilege is defined by Badgett (2011) as the invisible or unacknowledged benefits one receives by belonging to the upheld lineage of a family system revered in society as superior to all others. The effects of family privilege are reflected throughout family science research when family privilege

intersects with white privilege and heteronormativity to maintain and uphold SNAF supremacy in literature and society (Letiecq, 2019).

Letiecq (2019) argues that the lack of examination of privilege in conjunction with research that highlights disadvantages provides an opportunity for those with more resources and power to enforce their dominance. Furthermore, the disproportion of research geared toward disadvantaged groups causes the privileged to become the functional, normal gold standard by which everyone else is judged and othered. Applying the family privilege framework to marriage satisfaction, research findings by Cutrona et al. (2003) that show evidence of white privilege and existing dominance of power and oppression as one of many studies involving minority groups that often include poverty as a factor to contend with, while issues of poverty are not mentioned when non-couples of color are studied. For example, Cutrona et al. (2003) unexpectedly found that hostile interactions between spouses were not significantly associated with economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, yet there was a significant negative association between observed connections among spouses and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. The results revealed that husbands and wives expressed less warmth, support, and affection toward one another when residing in neighborhoods fraught with high levels of unemployment and large numbers of households below the poverty level. Furthermore, Cutrona et al. (2003) continued with similar adverse findings that further noted sentiments of astonishment; stating they were surprised that greater neighborhood-level economic disadvantage was associated with higher levels of marital quality. Cutrona et al. (2003) went on to suggest that married couples living in impoverished neighborhoods could be better off financially than their neighbors, and consequently, “a downward

comparison with their neighbors may engender positive emotions, which favorably influence people's evaluations of their marriage" (p. 404).

Other studies comprised of white couples (Bradbury et al., 2000; Calin et al., 2021; Campbell et al., 2012; Gubbins et al., 2010; Hou et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2017; Kluwer et al., 2020; Stafford, 2016; Tavakol et al., 2017) found that marital satisfaction is influenced by factors such as age, gender, duration of the marriage, ethnicity, personal characteristics, communication, maturity, emotional intelligence, problem-solving skills, religious beliefs, mutual understanding, intimacy, trust, attachment style, socio-economic status, social support, parenting style, stress, attraction, perception of one's self and others, life experiences, independence, and connection. Several factors were noted, yet a comparison was not made between ethnic background and disadvantaged social statuses, as is frequently the case when African Americans are studied.

### **The History of African American Marriage in America**

Historically our understanding of African American marriages is heavily impacted by disadvantages brought on by discrimination, marginalization, oppressive public policies, and mass incarceration (Perry et al., 2018). Historical data also informs us that prior to the 1990s most African Americans were married and raised their children in traditional two-parent homes (Olson & DeFrain, 2000). However, during the last few decades, the institution of marriage among African American households looks different today than in years past (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). In 2019, 30% of African Americans were married, compared to 48% of European Americans. Further, 50% of African Americans have never been married, compared to 34% of European Americans having never been married. Although the rates of non-married African Americans continue to increase, the desire for marriage also remains high (Hardy & Boyd-Franklin, 1989).

This may be attributed to familial messaging that having a spouse is a way to maintain the family legacy. Harper et al. (2012) found that messages from family members regarding marriage expectations played a role in the beliefs and feelings about marriage.

In addition to the trends that have infringed and influenced marital decisions in stable African American marriages, ethnic identity and cultural values play a significant role in marital conduct (Allen & Olsen, 2001). For example, one of the earliest studies on the significance of marital satisfaction observed how African American wives successfully interact with their husbands by being collaborative partners instead of offering overt compliance (Orbuch et al., 1995). The collaborative style indicates high regard for independence, strength, and the desire for equal partnership, which are notable contributions to African American marriage satisfaction. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the cultural and ethnic undertones that bind these relationships (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 1999; Hardy & Boyd-Franklin, 1989).

Family studies research revealed African Americans, along with Americans in general, are both experiencing a rapid decline in marriages and an uptake in divorce rates between 2010 to 2019 (U.S Census Bureau, 2019). Despite reports of declining marriage rates, Lee et al., (2010) and Marks et al. (2008) emphasized the benefits of marriage and found that the desire to marry actually had not diminished over time. What appears to be a decline in marriage rates, is actually a subculture of African Americans who are exercising their conscious choice not to participate in the entity of marriage and have shifted their values and attitudes about marriage to be contrary to traditional mainstream Eurocentric marital formation and maintenance. This subculture of African American men and women under the age of 35 are less likely to marry due to structural, cultural, individual, and interactive factors (Dixon, 2009). Structural factors include the imbalanced sex

ratios between men and women and unstable employment among African American males (Chambers & Kravitz et al., 2011; Hurt et al., 2014; Marks et al., 2008). Cultural factors are linked to evolving cultural trends such as marriage being no longer a prerequisite for sex, female independence, a shift from ideal familism to an ideal mate, the appeal towards cohabitation, and the influence of popular culture promoting non-traditional views of relationships (Dixon, 2009).

### **Strengths-Based Conceptualization of African American Marriages**

Within the past two decades, theorists have adhered to recommendations by renowned black scholars Boyd-Franklin (2003), Hill (1999), and White (1984) by examining the inherent strengths of the African American family. Hill (1999) specifically identified strong kinship bonds, strong work ethic, flexibility within family roles, personal achievements, and spirituality as notable African American family strengths. In recent decades family theorists began redirecting research away from marital conflict and distress to a focus on identifying positive marital qualities and strengths instead of problems (Chaney & Marsh, 2009; DeFrain & Asay, 2007; Fincham et al., 2011; James, 2020; Marks et al., 2008; Stanik & Bryant, 2012).

Marks et al. (2008) used a strengths-based approach to conceptualize 30 African American couples who had “strong, happy, and enduring marriages” (p. 174). His findings aligned with similar findings from Hill (1999), wherein relational processes that function as strengths in African American marriages included these marriages are often egalitarian in the division of household labor and role sharing, strong presence of kinship bonds, and a strong religious orientation (Marks et al., 2008). Vaterlaus et al. (2017) posit that using a strengths-based framework to conceptualize African American marriages allows for specific strengths unique to African Americans to be identified and used to encourage other African Americans to develop strong marriages.

### ***Self-Determination Theory***

Psychological need-based theories such as the self-determination theory [SDT] (Deci & Ryan, 2000), are used to conceptualize how needs are prioritized and become a significant part of the process to achieve optimal growth and well-being. SDT has identified three essential needs for optimal growth and well-being: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. First, according to SDT, a need for *autonomy* refers to self-organizing and endorsed behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Becoming autonomous is a process where an individual believes they have power over their actions, and autonomous behavior is viewed as intentional and volitional. This concept functions internally and is influenced by a person's external environment. Second, *competence* refers to the feeling of being capable and confident in one's ability to achieve mastery of a skillset or task (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The third essential need is for *relatedness* (i.e., the connection to others, being understood, and feeling a sense of belonging that is vital to wellness and integrity (Deci & Ryan, 2000). A connection to others lends itself to the feeling of being cared for and included by others within the context of actions. When people feel connected, they are more inclined to internalize values and skills.

In relationships, Ryan and Deci, (2006) state that being autonomous means being supportive and attentive to the other person's perspective, fostering choice over control, and relinquishing the notion to impose one's own agenda. In SDT, the desire for self-agency is highly valued. As a reflection of self-governance, a person can choose whether or not to depend on someone else for support and resources (Ryan & Deci, 2006). In a validation study by Deci et al. (2014) it was found that in relationships partners endorsed more emotional reliance when they experienced the satisfaction of their basic needs and autonomy in their relationships. Patrick et al.

(2007) contend that autonomy has a positive association with relational well-being and feeling competent in one's actions to acquire optimal functioning and well-being. Competence is attributed to the belief that one can create desired outcomes is a significant determinant for psychological well-being. Additional research has also demonstrated that believing that one is advancing towards their goals and making progress is psychologically beneficial (Deci et al., 2014).

The final human need established by SDT is the need to connect and to feel understood by others (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This need is also shared by other theorists who have explored the experience of relatedness through a filter of intimacy. Reis et al. (2014) defined intimacy as the feeling of being understood, validated, and cared for. Couples who experience these concepts of intimacy also experience optimal psychological and relationship functioning. Furthermore, it was also revealed that greater intimacy is achieved when one or both partners know themselves accurately (Muisse et al., 2013). When communication is explored within marriages, couples who report feeling validated by their partner also report high relationship satisfaction (Gottman & Silver, 1994), and feeling cared for is associated with increased sentiments of security.

According to Deci and Ryan (2000), SDT suggests that human functioning and need fulfillment both arise out of social contexts that provide nutrients essential for ongoing psychological growth and well-being. Based on this definition it is implied that satisfaction of all three psychological needs will result in optimal functioning and well-being as individuals are motivated to move towards the reality of achieving effectiveness, connectedness, and intrinsic motivation.



### ***Relationship Motivation Theory***

Deriving from SDT and its core tenants and concepts are six off-branch mini theories used to understand and describe more specific and unique experiences. RTM (Deci et al., 2006), a mini theory of SDT, highlights the qualities of intimate relationships and their consequences. RMT posits that the need for relatedness is intrinsic and galvanizes people to be engaged in relationships by their own volition (Deci et al., 2014). Situations, events, and experiences that undermine an internally perceived locus of normality for interactions diminish the ability for relatedness and hinders autonomy for connection (Deci et al., 2006). RTM also proposes that when the need for autonomy, relatedness, and competence are fulfilled it is associated with secure attachment, authenticity, wellness, and emotional reliance. Wellness outcomes have shown that receiving autonomy support initiates the process of need fulfillment, and the mutual exchange of autonomy support is also fulfilling to the giving partner's well-being. Knee et al. (2013) closely examined need fulfillment and the role of self-determined motivation as defined by reasons for being in the relationship, and results suggest that being motivated to maintain a relationship for intrinsic or self-determined reasons are associated with adaptive behaviors and greater happiness between couples. Therefore, most of the research involving SDT and romantic partnerships continues to focus on motivation (Deci et al., 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2006; La Guardia et al., 2000). For example, Knee et al. (2013) conducted a meta-analysis to offer another perspective on need fulfillment and well-being, and results of the analysis suggest that need fulfillment was positively associated with self-esteem, positive affect, and vitality and negatively associated with negative effects. Regarding relationship functioning and well-being variables, it is shown that need fulfillment is positively

associated with relationship satisfaction and commitment, and results also demonstrate an increase in understanding partners' responses to conflict.

Regarding well-being outcomes, SDT focuses on identifying what is functionally motivating behavior, which aligns with the premise of the current study to understand the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that motivate behavior practices between couples that facilitate optimal relationship functioning and well-being. This current study uses a self-determined perspective on relationships to understand how African American couples cultivate satisfaction.

### **Marital Satisfaction among African American Couples**

Generalizations based on comparative analysis of men and women, ethnic diversity, educational levels, and the role of spirituality in creating satisfaction has been used to identify specific traits that lead to marriage satisfaction for African American couples (Broman, 2005; 2008; Chaney & Francis, 2013; Hardy & Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Perry, 2013). A study by Allen and Olsen (2001) identified five types of African American marriages based on 415 couples who completed the Enriching Relationship Issues, Communication, and Happiness (ENRICH; as cited by Olson et al., 1987) marriage assessment inventory. It was found that five types of African American marriages were identified through cluster analysis using scores in 10 domains from the positive couples' agreement. The relationship between marriage satisfaction and marital types described as harmonious, vitalized, traditional, conflictual, and devitalized were analyzed. The results showed that African American couples had similar scores to European Americans who were also satisfied in their marriages.

Within the past decade, scholars have focused on factors associated with high-quality relationships, specifically regarding African American couples. These factors include open

communication, congruent values, positive treatment of the spouse, and autonomy within the marital relationship (Hardy & Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Marks et al. (2008) employed a strengths perspective when studying 30 African American couples who reported happy, strong, and enduring marriages. Outcomes concluded there are specific relationship processes that serve as strengths in African American marriages. These strengths include egalitarian role sharing among couples and division of labor, strong kinship bonds, and strong religious orientation (Marks et al., 2008). Therefore, the standard for marital satisfaction requires further examination to include race and culture to fully understand what factors influence the sustainability of marital satisfaction.

### **Marital Satisfaction, Support, and Culture**

The cultural experience of African Americans plays an essential role in cultivating marital satisfaction (Allen & Olson, 2001). Researchers have suggested that predictors of romantic relationship longevity and satisfaction stem from the family connection (Dixon, 2009), spirituality, and egalitarianism within the relationship (Fincham, 2011; Vaterlaus et al., 2017), and these traits are represented in the lineage of African marriages (Hardy & Boyd-Franklin, 1989). Additionally, the value of friendships and extended family has been shown to have a positive impact on individual well-being among African Americans (Broman, 2005).

Scholars posit that egalitarian relationships are a primary source of support for adults (Blackman, 2000). Egalitarian relationship styles were observed in African American parenting practices and corroborated in clinical findings by Stanik et al., (2012). An egalitarian approach to marriage allows couples to work as a team and to do what is best for everyone without being reliant on gender roles. The division of household chores and the Western concept of gender roles

has a socio-cultural context within African American relationships (Stanik & Bryant, 2012). Gender roles are neutralized by collectivism and equal sharing of responsibility. Moreover, husbands reported decreased feelings of satisfaction when presented with traditional gender roles. These findings contrast the dominant literature that hypothesized the initiation of conflict was a critical issue and marriages would be more successful if women would soften their startup (Gottman et al., 1998). Further, Gottman et al. (1998) also argued that marriage therapists should tailor their interventions to be more gender-specific and suggested that therapists should promote interaction styles where husbands accept influence when the wives raise issues gently. This is of particular concern, as the mere push for gender-specific interventions lacks cultural attunement. Further, religion and spirituality are also noted to have a positive impact on marriage satisfaction (Fincham et al., 2011), adding structure and meaning to support marital relationships. The spiritual practice provides couples with shared values and beliefs that may encourage partners to remain committed and to work towards positive outcomes in the face of trials and tribulations (Chaney, 2008)

### **Summary**

In summary, marital research often uses a multimethod approach that focuses on white, middle-class Americans. Targeted details about the marital process have led to empirical breakthroughs in prediction and theoretical understanding of marriages for white America; however, research has neglected to examine the relational process involved in marital satisfaction among African American couples who have high satisfaction. An overwhelming majority of studies have included non-black Americans and lack the cultural awareness required to understand

the African American relationship experience in order to provide program interventions, support, information, and resources that will replicate and enhance marital satisfaction.

Despite the attention given to the influences of subculture and economic factors that hinder marital formation and subsequent satisfaction, only a part of the shift in marriages can be associated with these factors (Broman, 2005). Therefore, it seems ethical to explore marital satisfaction among African Americans from a strength-based perspective and conduct research with African American communities with the same level of intensity provided in previous studies where scholars sought to understand the context of marital adjustment and optimal satisfaction; with respect given to social, psychological, and cultural factors that influence the couple's interactional pattern and perception of behavior. Further, the standard for marital satisfaction and interactional behavior patterns necessary to sustain healthy marriages is based on the dominant discourse of white hetero-norms and family privilege. Thus, it appears to be important to engage African American couples in qualitative studies and obtain in-depth accounts of their marital experiences. The literature is missing information on African American marriages and the discourse associated with overall marital satisfaction and success. Therefore, little is known about the process couples engage in to cultivate and maintain relationship satisfaction. In recent decades, couples therapy research has extensively identified ways to increase relationship satisfaction for couples in distress. Yet, there is a limited further examination of how relationship satisfaction is created among African American couples. This current study seeks to address this gap.

### **Present Study**

The purpose of this present qualitative study is to understand the relational processes involved in marriage satisfaction among African American couples using a strengths-based

approach. The present study will address current gaps by focusing on the following research question: *what is the process for developing relationship satisfaction among African Americans who demonstrate high marital satisfaction?* The knowledge gained from this study will be used to provide information and recommendations for African American couples, marriage education programs, marriage and family therapists, clergy, and future research involving relationship satisfaction among African American couples.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### **Research Design**

Most of the research on marriage satisfaction is based upon self-report surveys and multivariate analysis. This qualitative study, utilizing a focus group, will fill a gap in the research by describing the relational process employed by African American couples who have high marital satisfaction. A focus group is a qualitative method used to gather the opinions, ideas, and beliefs of others about a specific topic or product (Morgan & Kim, 2018). For the purpose of this study, a focus group will be conducted to understand the African American couple's experience with marriage satisfaction by way of group discussions. This method was used in this study to obtain information that would be less accessible without group interactions.

A narrative inquiry aims to explore and conceptualize human experiences within the context of culture, historical experiences, identity, and lifestyle (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a method of investigation, storytelling is a natural way of recounting experiences, constructing meaning about those experiences, and co-creating ways of being with ourselves and others (Moen, 2006). A narrative approach is suitable when aiming to understand how human beings define and interpret how they make sense of the world (Moen, 2006).

### **Sampling Procedure and Recruitment**

Upon receipt of approval from the Antioch University New England Institutional Review Board (IRB), I began the sampling procedure and recruitment process. Criterion sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018) was used to select African American couples during middle adulthood (35 – 65 years old), who have experienced marriage satisfaction within their long-term marriage of ten years or more. Research suggests that couples married for 10 years or more have reported

relationship stability and longevity (Karimi et al., 2019). Adults in middle adulthood are also at their peak for productivity in love and work, and have begun to examine their personal life decisions, goals, and commitments more seriously (Karimi et al., 2019). Information pertaining to the study criteria and purpose was shared on Facebook and Instagram social media platforms. This study consisted of 6 couples in their first marriages living in the northeast, southern and midwest regions of the United States and met the following study criteria: (a) participants between 35 – 65 years of age, (b) married for 10 years or more years, (c) have a high rate of relationship satisfaction based on a score of 30 or higher on the Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988), and (d) living together were selected to participate.

During the recruitment process, participants were provided with an informed consent document explaining the study and its intended purpose. A \$20 Amazon gift card was sent to participants in exchange for being a part of this study. Participation was completely voluntary, and participants were able to opt-out at any time.

### **Measures**

The Relationship Assessment Scale [RAS] (Hendrick, 1988) was developed to measure one's subjective evaluation of close relationships. The RAS is a seven-item Likert scale measure of relationship satisfaction. The assessment consists of a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (low satisfaction) to 5 (high satisfaction). As a result of high satisfaction participants with a score between 32 – 35 were invited to participate in the study. Sample questions include, "How good is your relationship compared to most," and "how many problems are there in your relationship?" Veroff et al. (1993) conducted a study to examine the validity and reliability of the RAS (Hendrick, 1988) by comparing scores from the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976) to RAS



scores in a clinical population of 53 men and 65 women who attended therapy at a family treatment center. Participants were predominantly caucasian, 44.1% married and 16.9% remarried.

Participants' age ranges were 18 – 54 years old. The length of time for participant marriages ranged from 1 month to 32 years. Two separate *t-tests* were completed to identify any differences between men and women on the RAS and DAS total scores. According to Vaughn et al. (1999), the results revealed internal consistencies for the RAS and DAS subscales were within an acceptable range. The DAS subscales were consistent with coefficient alphas ranging from .35 to .80, and the coefficient alpha for the RAS final score was .91. There were no significant gender differences. The zero-order correlation between the total RAS and DAS scores was .84, which was significant. The high correlation suggests that both instruments measure the same aspect of relationship quality. Multiple regression was also used in this study to predict RAS total scores from DAS. The results of this study support the criterion-related validity of the RAS as a measure of relationship satisfaction. The RAS and DAS are highly correlated, suggesting convergent validity (Vaughn et al., 1999). The RAS has also proven strong predictive validity among married and dating couples leading to increased reliability over time (Heyman et al., 1994).

### **Data Collection Method**

The data consists of verbatim transcriptions of the focus group session as the primary source of data collection for six African American couples. Participants discussed their relationships, specifically how they define marriage satisfaction and what makes their relationship satisfying. An online focus group was facilitated to generate a rich group discussion of the topic where participants would benefit from group synergy (Piercy & Hertlein, 2005). One of the main advantages of online focus groups is participants can be in different locations across the country

and participants are less concerned about mobility (Morgan & Kim, 2018). Once participants introduced themselves and stated where they were from and where they are currently living, participants appeared to become more relaxed as they were able to reminisce about cities and neighborhoods that they had in common. The group was facilitated using a semi-structured interview format and a funnel-based interview guide. Responses to each question were seen and heard by all participants on screen; which appeared to add to the natural flow of communication. Participants used their shared connection to places where they grew up to build a rapport and to enhance comfortability.

### **Interview**

Based on the consensus for availability a time was determined for the online interview. Participants had time to review the study information and to present any questions that they might have. A single semi-structured interview was conducted for 120 minutes online via Zoom video conferencing communication (Banyai, 1995) as the process of collecting data from an online group meeting more than once generally becomes unfocused as a form of interviewing when the goal is to collect data based on a concentrated topic (Morgan & Kim, 2018). The interview was recorded and transcribed by me. The statements from the participants were grouped based on responses to four questions posed to the group as well as the meaning assigned to the emerging themes. Group questions were pulled from the RAS (Hendrick, 1988) to generate discussion about the process of achieving relationship satisfaction. The opening discussion question asked each couple: *what was one thing you noticed about your partner that made you decide she/he was the one?* Next, participants were asked how they define marriage satisfaction. Finally, participants were asked,

*what makes your marriage satisfying, what is the purpose of your marriage, and how often does your partner meet your needs?*

### **Thematic Analysis**

The focus group interview was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Based on the terms used to define marriage satisfaction a specific code was assigned manually to each theme. All data was locked in a secure file that only myself and the second analyst had access to. For the purpose of clarifying information, each participant received a copy of the transcribed interview. This is known as *member checking* (Hays & Wood, 2011). After the transcripts were verified and confirmed to be accurate by the participant, they were analyzed by another analyst who read the transcripts. Preliminary ideas were gathered regarding the themes. The second analyst and I re-read all of the data again and used coding to identify prevalent themes. Initial coding was used to break down the data into sections, and each section was examined for similarities and differences. During this process, I reviewed the content and utilized line-by-line coding to assist with the interpretation of themes using the participants' own language (Gibbs, 2018). Constant comparison and line by line coding was used to analyze themes associated with relationship satisfaction (Gibbs, 2018).

I obtained enough information to document participant experiences and identified how couples cultivate satisfaction in their relationships. I did not ask specific questions pertaining to family background and overall support system.

However, responses with content related to their family of origin were obtained without prompting. The data was transcribed using Zoom recording and transcription technology. The recorded interview was stored on Zoom and password protected. Detailed notes were maintained throughout the course of the study to assure rigor. My notes were kept in a password-protected file

on my computer. Notes also captured reflexivity, personal observations, participant reactions, decisions made, and unexpected additions or changes to the process.

### **Researcher Reflexivity and Bias**

I am the lead African American author and investigator for this study, who is also a Marriage and Family Therapist for an African American majority clientele. I choose to be closely engaged with a non-default study population (Nzinga et al., 2018) of which I share the same ethnic background and cultural values. In years past, engaged research received scrutiny and was sometimes criticized as insider-biased and advocacy research (Nzinga et al., 2018). However, Nzinga et al. (2018) also noted that an engaged research approach can revert attention to the study context and take on the perspective of the study sample. My interest in relationship satisfaction developed from being curious about specific components of interpersonal skills that appeared to be present in couples that I worked with in private practice who were able to reconcile and resolve conflicts within their marriages. The more couples I met, the more my pride grew. Too often, we are inundated with literature, publications, media, and dominant discourse about the lack of relationship satisfaction for married people of color. In an effort to contribute to positive African American narratives, I wanted to highlight their success stories so that my community would be exposed to satisfying African American marriages, just as I am exposed.

### **Credibility and Trustworthiness**

This study employs triangulation to demonstrate trustworthy results. The findings of this research are supported by prior findings that marriage is generally associated with high levels of satisfaction (McNulty et al., 2013). However, research on African American marital satisfaction has taken on a deficit approach that underscores problems and pathology instead of targeting

strengths within interaction patterns among this group (DeFrain & Asay, 2007; Dixon, 2009; Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Although prior research has failed to study and provide an in-depth analysis of the black marriage experience, qualitative studies using interview data have found a few themes African American marriages that foster success (Hurt et al., 2014). Despite unique challenges, African Americans continue to value marriage, and it serves as a protective factor for life satisfaction and psychological well-being (Perry, 2013; Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Therefore, it is important to study marital satisfaction among African Americans from a strength-based perspective. Findings from this study will increase the cultural awareness of marriage and family therapists, as well as provide a deeper understanding of how African Americans specifically maintain marriage satisfaction. In addition to trustworthiness, this study will ensure credibility by demonstrating rigorous methods to preserve and interpret data (Kyngäs et al., 2014), such as extended time for engagement, data triangulation, researcher journal, and member checking.

## CHAPTER 4: Results

The present study was designed to understand the process of marriage satisfaction among African American couples. One focus group was facilitated using a semi-structured interview guided by four research questions:

- 1) What stood out to you the most about your partner that made you decide to say “yes” to marriage or that he/she is “the one?”
- 2) What is satisfaction to you, and how do you define it in your marriage?
- 3) What is the purpose of your marriage?
- 4) How do you express your needs in your marriage?

These questions were designed to grasp a full understanding of how satisfaction is acquired in African American marriages. The study participants included six African American couples with high relationship satisfaction. The processes involved in the participants' marital satisfaction were categorized into three parts, which included conditions, relational functioning, and personal well-being. Each process produced the following themes, connection, intentionality, purpose, peace, authentic communication, and commitment to well-being. To protect the privacy and confidential information of the participants, the participants are referenced using pseudonyms instead of their real names. Couples' demographic information is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1***Participant Demographic Information*

Status	Couple	Age	Length of Marriage	# of Children	Joint Income
1 Heterosexual	Dana and Ronald	65 64	42 yrs	3	\$200k
2 Heterosexual	Christian and Yasmine	56 47	10.5 yrs	0	\$175k
3 Heterosexual	Carl and Tamika	39 42	12 yrs	2	\$200-\$275
4 Lesbian	Sherrida and Robin	40 37	10 yrs	0	Not reported
5 Heterosexual	Desmond and Amina	46 41	16 yrs	3	\$230
6 Heterosexual	Omar and Shanise	65 59	45 yrs	3	Not reported

\* Pseudonyms are used for the real names of the participants to protect their identity and privacy.

**Data Analysis**

I followed the procedural steps outlined by Morgan & Kim (2018) and conducted a thematic analysis of the focus group transcript. The principal operations of this method are coding, writing annotations, and integrating the findings. Coding began by separating the transcript by questions and reading the responses line by line while making notes of categories and themes. I reread the transcript again while viewing the video of the focus group to gain a better sense of the

themes as they were heard in the context of the couple's experience. Then, I read the full transcript again line by line making annotations of key constructs, phrases, and the meaning couples make of their lives together. After annotating the transcript, a second analyst and I re-coded the transcript using the annotations to guide the process of assigning descriptive words to reflect the couple's sentiment. Examples of these annotations are provided in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Response Excerpts and Annotations*

Excerpts from Interview	Annotation	Code
"We just really enjoy spending time with each other, and then we took a little break. We broke up and kind of got back together, but during that break I think it was when we realized that we just really didn't want to be with anybody else. We were pretty miserable. So as we've connected back, we decided we wanted to make this a permanent thing."- Christian	Absence makes the heart grow fonder for the one you truly love	Connection is a precursor for satisfaction
"The thing that really keeps me into her and knowing that she was the one is that, as we got to know each other, we found that we had a lot of common vision about life common desires, and as we looked at our families and our desire for connections with family, we were all in school, both in sync with one another, so I knew that she was someone that I could build a life together. We would have common goals we wouldn't diverge in any way, and that's the way it's worked out."- Ronald	The decision to unite in matrimony, derives from commonalities, shared vision, and the desire to build a life based on the commitment to common goals	Satisfaction is acquired through fulfilled desires, and shared life visions and goals
"She's silly, and she makes me feel at ease would be myself, and I think I just felt most settled with her., I felt at peace with her, and I love her mind allows for family connection and values. Yeah I love her brilliance, I mean she's fine."- Sherrida	It is highly important for each partner to be themselves, be respected, well cared for, and at peace within their relationship.	Satisfaction is nurturing who I am and taking care of my well-being.
"We linked up so that we can push each other forward; redefine generational curses on both	Carl is very proud of himself and his life.	A defined purpose gives



sides. The other thing is you mind as well, link up with someone who has your best interest and dreams at heart ”- Carl	He and his wife have worked hard not to struggle	couples something to strive for, and that is satisfying
”Someone mentioned, we choose it [the marriage], right. I’m here because I want to, so I choose her every day.”- Sherrida	Relationship/marriage is a matter of choice. No one is forced. Individuals are free to live.	Mating is an intentional decision and choice
”He managed to win my heart through laughter; no matter what was going on in my life. 45 years later, he still cracks me up. He still makes me laugh. He still shows up the same way. We work because we remain teachable. We remain open, and I mean truly authentic ”- Shanise	Authenticity is important for connection. Couples feel valued and respected for who they are in their own skin	Authentic communication is a pathway towards satisfaction
”So I tell my wife all the time I prayed for her. Being in the military, I was in combat, so I’m always on high-level stress. She was my peace. When there was no stop and he knew how to stop me she knew how to bring me back down how to you know how to because she could relate, and she would literally put a pause on my life, where I can breathe and not be on go mode all the time.”- Desmond	Desmond has always felt grounded in his marriage	Satisfaction is peaceful, stabilizing, and calm

## Themes

After the process of annotating the transcript and assigning codes that reflect the sentiments expressed in the excerpts, I began to notice patterns between codes. Some codes appeared to represent conditions of the marriage that made it possible for satisfaction to develop. Other codes reflected a pattern of relational functioning between couples and an overarching focus on personal well-being. Codes that show these similarities in relation to conditions, relational functioning, and personal well-being were grouped together into themes. I used the emergent themes to explore how

couples experience satisfaction. The initial codes and themes that emerged are presented in Table 3, and emergent themes within focus group participants are presented in Table 4.

**Table 3**

*Emergent Interview Themes*

Initial Code		Theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Connection is the foundation for satisfaction</li> <li>● Mating is a daily choice and intentional decision</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Conditions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Connection</li> <li>● Intention</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Satisfaction is acquired through fulfilled desires, shared values, and manifested vision</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Relational Functioning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Purpose</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Peace is cultivated. It feels safe, and it is stabilizing and calm</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Peace</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Authentic expression and self-reflection is a pathway towards satisfaction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Well-being</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Authentic Communication</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Satisfaction is being accepted and validated for “all parts” of who I am</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Commitment to well-being</li> </ul>

**Table 4***Emergent Themes within Couples*

Couples	Couples Theme
1 Dana and Ronald	Common life vision Commitment to building a life together. Gravitated towards peace Believes that love is linked to freedom Secure. Knows that support is reliable and unwavering Feels affirmed and encouraged Reciprocity based on individual strengths High value on staying together
2 Christian and Yasmine	Clear desire to be together Pride themselves on the happiness they found with each other Satisfaction is seeing their spouse happy Learned to communicate better Made a definitive choice to be together Strong value for commitment Shared life goals Shared love and emotional connection
3 Carl and Tamika	Common similarities Easy to form trust Fresh, new and genuine Definitive choice to be together Shared life goals Mutual respect and love Calm disposition balances strong will

	<p>In sync with each other          Strong commitment to each other          Support is a core value          Reciprocity is based on individual strengths</p>
4 Sherrida and Robin	<p>Shared understanding and mutual respect          Autonomy and acceptance are core values          Strong energy attraction          Strong sense of awareness          Well differentiated          Shared life vision          Authentic          Invested in each other's well-being          Committed to absolving old patterns          Satisfaction is stabilizing          Free          Values connection and honesty</p>
5 Desmond and Amina	<p>Committed to absolving old generational patterns          Shared life vision          Positive approach to marriage based on teamwork          Satisfaction is peace          Communication evolved          Purpose driven          Intentions          Emotionally available and aware</p>
6 Omar and Shenise	<p>Perseverance          Relates to each other through music          High value placed on intention          Communication is based on listening without judgement          Manifested desires          High value placed on Authenticity and connection          Satisfaction is obtained through peace          Secure, knows that support is available and unwavering          Decisive about getting marriage</p>

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Strong desire to be together

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Themes were submitted and analyzed by a second analyst and then grouped as major categories and subcategories based on shared sentiments and experiences that reflected the conditions, relational functioning, and personal well-being couples employed to have marriages deemed as satisfying. The thematic structure of major categories and subcategories are shown in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Major and Subcategory Themes*

Major Category Themes	Subcategory Themes
1. Connection	1. Committed to building a life Together 2. Strong belief in the power of agreement 3. Reciprocity and respect
2. Intentionality	
3. Purpose	1. Growth
4. Peace	
5. Authentic Communication	
6. Well being	

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**Connection: “*She is Food for My Soul, and I Couldn’t Let Her Get Away*”**

Each of the six couples spoke about feeling connected to their partner and having a mystical attraction to their presence. Although there are physical aspects of their experiences, the deep sense of connection seems to have a profound effect on establishing the right conditions to fertilize quality interactions, which led to a deeper spiritual experience where partners exposed themselves to be seen for who they really are. Robin stated:

I just knew. I just wanted some kind of connection to her, so the thing that drove me to her as my partner or something that drew me to her as a person, in general, was her energy. I just wanted to be around her. I was connected to her presence.

Other couples shared that connection created a pathway for vulnerability and building trust.

Shenise stated:

I felt safe and I trusted him with my life. We understood each other on a very deep level. In turn, connection later became the breeder, and the host for satisfaction to develop and flourish. Each couple continued to highlight a spiritual connection and an overall sense of responsibility to be a positive contributor to their partner's well-being.

Additionally, Desmond stated:

I had a deep connection to my wife from the first time I saw her. I told my wife that I prayed for her. Even when we are not around each other, we think about each other and call at the same time. It’s important to me that she’s good and that’s where I get my satisfaction from.

### ***Intentionality***

Moreover, intentionality was another contributor to the conditions of relationships that lead to satisfaction that was frequently pointed out by all couples. The intention for marriage included their shared beliefs, desires, aspirations, and a conscious decision to build and maintain a life together. Carl and Tamika were deliberate and vocal about their choice to partner with each other. Carl passionately expressed, “There are so many things about my wife and I knew she would be my wife. I can’t limit her to just one thing. We have the same STEM background and family values.”

Tamika shared that she made her intentions known to Carl. At the time he was dating someone else. Tamika upheld her boundary of monogamy, and within six months Carl called her again. He was ready and intentional about his actions to be the best husband for Tamika. Shenise and Omar further exclaimed, “We set our intentions and communication became solid gold.”

Desmond followed up with “we had so many things in common, and we just kind of felt like we’ve been looking for each other unintentionally but intentionally.” We had a group laugh as his wife interrupted, “Don’t act like you weren’t checking for me!”

**Commitment to Building a Life Together.** As I listened to each couple describe their shared values, life vision, and how each partner made a conscious effort to see the relationship as they see themselves reflected their commitment to building a life together. While I listened, I envisioned links in a chain. Each co-constructed link represented an accumulation of small choices made every day to be safe, trustworthy, kind, and authentic. The choice to act in ways that serve each other’s best interest and make positive contributions to the marital relationship demonstrated the subtheme of reciprocity and respect in tandem with affirming each partner’s desire for

connection, understanding, love, commonality, and partnership. When sharing the account of his decision to get married Carl stated, “I had someone who is willing to stay with me till the end.” Yolanda added, “We stand, and we choose each other every day; because of our values, because we want to.” Robin ended by saying, “each day she helps me grow and we pour into each other what’s in us so that we get what we want in our life together.”

**Reciprocity and Respect “I do for you, you do for me”.** This subtheme spontaneously entered the conversation by way of Carl stepping out of view of the video screen so that he could begin to prepare lunch for a group of guests scheduled to arrive at his home during the day of the interview. Tamika informed the group “he can still hear y’all.” Carl chimed in, “Yup, I’m right here. I have to start making this banana pudding. We have a few folks coming over.” Tamika confirmed Carl’s statement, and followed up with, “he does mainly all of the cooking, and I like that.” While out of view, Carl was heard saying, “I love to cook, and I don’t mind at all.” All of the couples began to nod their heads. Dana began to speak about doing what is necessary to contribute to the overall operation of the household, and taking care of the things you are good at. Sharon added the sentiment of trust and respect gives her enough assurance that she does not need to worry about anything when her husband says he’s got it, then he’s got it. Meaning, whatever the task is it will be handled. The will to do things for each other took precedence over the thought process of “he should do it, or that’s her job.”

**We Believe in the Power of Agreement.** This subtheme was intertwined within the couple's narrated interaction. Shenise brought all of her passion to this portion of the discussion as she introduced “*the power of agreement.*” The power of agreement was the underpinning of intention. “What we have is the power of agreement! When we come to an agreement, we are like



Batman and Robin; we are unbeatable.” Desmond followed up by saying “once I say something, I have to do it. If it’s important to my wife, it’s important to me.” Chris had a similar reflection, “once my wife and I talk about something, I know what I have to do. I also know that it’s important for her to feel heard, so I turn off the T.V., and I sit right in front of her.”

**Purpose: “This is the Johnson House”**

The concept of relational functioning was used as a major category to describe the guiding principles for interactions co-constructed by each couple to align with the identified purpose for their marriage. As couples explored their purpose, I noticed several pauses, a few smiles, raised eyebrows, and brief conversations between spouses while muted. What is your purpose? This question appeared to invoke a sense of pride. Each response offered a variance of intonation that conveyed the expressive meaning of passion, love, joy, trust, respect, admiration, serenity, and peace. Four couples, Carl and Tamika, Desmond and Amina, Robin and Sherrida, and Shenise and Omar spoke candidly about their upbringing. Each vowed to do away with past trauma and more poignantly, break generational curses by refusing to repeat the same behavior that led to the demise of other family members. “I wanted something new. I had to create something different,” said Carl. “I wanted a feeling of peace, safety and comfort,” Dana said. Each partner had a familiar story of wanting a partner who shared their values and would be a good mother/father and a good life partner. Once they found each other they committed to creating a better life with purpose. Christian stated, “My purpose is to create a stable relationship and to be a good husband.” Yolanda stated, “Our purpose is to grow, and acknowledge the value of bringing our individuality together.”

There were also strong convictions around morals and values. Desmond stated:

This is Johnson's house. My purpose is not to fail, and not to repeat the same cycle I grew up seeing. In here, we make things better than the way we found them. We do what we say we are going to do, and be who you said you are. My purpose is to make sure they are secure.

Others mentioned their purpose is to be a healthy example of connection: to treat each other with kindness and love, to be a space for peace, to stay married, to show compassion, to manifest their vision for family, to be great and to encourage their partner to be great, and to be authentic, open, and honest at all times. Having a clearly identified purpose became their relational compose, as well as a symbolic marker of their journey towards the vision for their future. Ronald reflected on his vision for marriage and how their constant engagement and commitment to doing the opposite of what was detrimental became the catalyst to solidifying purpose and cultivating satisfaction:

She's everything I ever wanted. When I was a teenager I knew that I wanted to be married. I knew that I wanted to be a family man, and I wanted to have a wife, who would be brilliant would be a great mother who would love me and would love my kids and she's fulfilled every bit of that and as we've walked together. There is that you know and I'll say this early on, you know, we had to find our footing, and you know, we had challenges; but we both had a value of staying together so essentially we had to instead of fighting each other, we had to fight for our marriage and in that fighting, we came to a place of comfort and it's funny I was telling her the other day that she comes from a family, where the females just like to fight. And I told her that one of the things that I did was, as she wanted to fight, my response was to embrace her and to hold her. As we got through that point

where we worked together, we knew that our love for each other was strong, and we just began to enjoy each other.

Like Dana and Ronald, another couple, Carl and Tamika, reflected on their family of origin and wanted to create something new, something better. Carl believes the purpose of their marriage is “to push each other forward, break the mode [let go of old habits], reset, and create something new; especially as a black couple.” As I listened to the process of aligning with their purpose, there was a great deal of focus on securing an income, obtaining new skills and certifications to create stability. Additionally, when talking about the purpose of marriage, Shenise mentioned growth and the purpose is “to learn from each other, to treat each other with kindness, and to live life out loud.” Dana and Yolanda integrated spirituality, the purpose is “to put God first in our marriage” and “to be a positive example and good demonstration of a Christian marriage.” The sentiment of wanting better for themselves and each other resonated deeply.

**Growth.** An additional sub theme emerged from the purpose of marriage. Shenise mentioned growth and the ability to learn from each other. Other couples referred to growth as an ongoing process linked to freedom which granted the fortitude for each partner to shift and evolve as they choose. Robin classified growth as something you aspire to within marriage. Carl spoke of his convictions about growth as a reflection of the desire to move beyond prior conditions, and acquire better ways of being together wherein, each person feels connected, loved, and encouraged. It was further noted that each partner felt it important to have awareness of their individual growth, as well as a shared concept of what growth looks like for their marriage. All couples agreed growth included more expansive communication and frequently checking in with

each other to demonstrate their commitment to being fully invested in each other's well-being and staying attuned to the needs of the marriage.

### ***Peace***

A qualifying indicator for the concept of "better" is illuminated as peace. The need and desire for the marriage to invoke a sense of peace was passionately described by Desmond as he stated:

So I tell my wife all the time I prayed for her. Being in the military, I was in combat, so I'm always on high-level of stress. She was my peace. When I was there, there was no stopping and she knew how to stop me. She knew how to bring me back down. She knew how to because she could relate, and she would literally put a pause on my life, where I can breathe and not be on go mode all the time. She really was at peace.

The sentiment of peace was significant for each couple. Satisfaction was cultivated as a result of being able to experience peace and comfort in their marriage through relational patterns of interaction. Dana expressed her appreciation for peace and how she gravitated towards it. She stated:

We married at 22 and 23 so we've been hanging out for a while. Quite decisive once we realized what we loved about each other, I came from a family that had a degree of chaos, and I was like I gravitated towards peace. And Ronald always struck me among our college friends as a man who knew where he was going, and he was peaceful and he listened well and I love that about him. I still do, he only got better as the years went on, and here we are.

There is also something to be said about settling into the comfort of marriage and the peace it brings. Sherrida shared:

She's silly and she makes me feel at ease to be myself, and I think I just felt most settled with her, I felt at peace with her and I love her mind and our family connection and values. Yeah, I love her brilliance. I mean she's fine [laughter]. Um but I felt like I could be me and she accepted me, and that was the first time I felt that much at peace in a relationship, and you know we've been having fun.

***Authentic Communication: "I Am Nothing If We Can't Keep It 100"***

The level of awareness was remarkable across all participants. Each disclosed how they have used awareness of self to embrace the remaining themes, which centered around authentic communication and personal wellbeing. Shenise began sharing: You're only as intimate and successful as your communication is. That aspect you know is that authentic communication. You learn each other's love language. You learn that your needs and wants are of value to the other person. You really want to know, you know we think we're protecting them or you know we don't want to hurt them or something like that, but they really want to know and I just got where I told my husband I don't even feel like a woman, let alone sexy. I don't know what you're seeing, but what I see is something different, and it's hard for us to perform, to be in the mood and the vibe of all of it, when we're not feeling it ourselves, and he is such a great inspiration. Because again he just shows up for me. Because he allows me to express myself, which is a part of the intimacy I have. I'm a communicator, I have to, I have to get out. It's just let me get it out and talk and, if I can talk it out and talking through is half the battle right here, if I know you are listening, you heard me. Oh, my gosh now, we can make some fireworks go off!

Dana shared:

It's been a journey. You know and just for me learning how to express my needs (I was the number five child of seven; [your needs?]what? No one paid attention to my needs), and what. It's been, it's been a journey. I'm a woman who's continuing to grow, but what I did find in Ronald was someone who was cheering me on, as I was cheering me on! Being able to go into who I am, and to be able to say I need this, I want this. What I found was a partner who allowed that journey of discovery and journey of agency and early in our marriage, we used to have, I would say, well look let's that's a horizontal conversation. You know that meant I needed the lights out and to lie down in the dark and then I could talk about some things, and what happens is intimacy grows. It's that ability to be open and honest naked and unafraid and so unashamed. Being able to grow in that has been awesome to have a partner who is like I'm here and I'm not just here, but I'll actually implement what you tell me you want.

Ronald spoke about his level of insight and awareness of Dana's needs. He added:

Part of the communication that had to take place was, you know, helping her share with me. Like she said coming from seven kids, being a mother, you know being a leader at work. I had to share with her that you know me. You no longer have to put yourself second. You know as a mother you put yourself second to kids as a leader at work you put yourself second to staff. With me you come first, and then get her to really articulate what the need is. Just to really stop and think about, okay, what do I really need. And then we can move towards that.

Communication is authentic and the interactions are purpose-driven based on the conditions established to make it all possible. Yasmine and Christian further elaborated on their process of expressing themselves authentically through communicating their needs and making an easy path for intimacy. Yasmine stated:

So I think we have that understanding, at least, so I think my issue, though sometimes is getting him to reciprocate that so that I can understand what his needs are and what he wants so that we are both receiving what I think is like an equal you know receivership. It's important that I am heard and he listens to me and not just listening, but like really hears me so to me that's like the biggest part of you know, the easiest path of you know all of the intimacy things just starts there basically.

Christian's needs are very simple:

You know that's quality time to her just she and I engaging and good conversation or whatever and I'm the complete opposite of that you know just you know, whatever. Give me a couple of tic tacs, and I'm happy, you know, whatever. So, it's really me trying to make sure that she's good.

Robin and Sherrida talked about the journey to themselves and the process of working through authenticity as a way of showing up for each other and being responsive to each other's needs while providing space for the other to get what they need and to explore those needs. With her relationship with Sherrida, Robin stated:

With my relationship with Sherrida, you know she's made space to be like, what's happening for you let's talk tell me what's going on. Like, it was safe, and for me, that's still hard to come around to that kind of stuff. I'm not used to it, and it's something I'm still learning how to do. But, she's really helped me understand as you know, the hard parts are part of you, right; and it's important to be able to express them and you need to express what you want.

Sherrida, then added:

So things are different right, where are we now? I'm in my third decade of being with you right and you know, like the late 20s is not 40 in terms of my interests. Things have you know shut down and I'm glad for that. Other things have expanded I'm like oh that's who I am so as I am journeying to myself, I'm like oh wait, I have to actually tell her what's up, what's up in here [points to her head], and I can do a lot of talking and still not get to the vulnerability some times. So, as much as she qualified me as a very emotional person, I can still be very guarded as well, and so you know, knowing that you know we can do that, and I think it was Dana, talking about a diner and the horizontal conversation. Knowing that we could do that in bed, in the dark and with the lights on or in the car or you know, in the middle of an argument, right or around other people it's not just about who we are in private as who we are, with our people. I have that safety with her that I know now I don't have to do as much explaining because she does get me and she's not laughing at me or rejecting me, which is probably more the thing I fear. The other thing is, I have a lot of chosen families. Robin and I do well separately and apart. She understands that I need to connect with my chosen family, and there's room for me to do that.



***Well-Being: “Baby Can You Focus On Me”***

Furthermore, the participants shared their sentiments on how satisfaction is created in their marriage through a commitment to personal well-being. Dana presented to be quite smitten by her husband. She smiled at him each time he spoke. She stated, “The truth of it is, I just love this man. If he leaves me, I’m going with him.” Omar shared a song that he plays often. It reminds him of quality time with his wife and being willing to be attentive to who she is as a woman. He recited a few of the lyrics, “Y’all know the song? Baby cannnn, baby can you focus- on meee. Focus. Focus oooon me.” Shenise stated:

Even at this stage in our relationship, we know that we work because we remain teachable and we listen to each other. And quitting is just not an option for us. We know we are better together than ever separate and apart. We believe strongly in the power of agreement, so when we come into agreement, this is a Batman and Robin thing and it’s beautiful!

Tamika emphasized the significance of having your partners back, while also encouraging their independence:

I would like to think that I’m her second-best cheerleader because she’s her number one. And she can tell you right like, whenever we get into some of our heated debates [arguments] it’s like I want you because we can each have low self-esteem, sometimes or you know to go to the negative bias right and I’m like I want you to win, no matter what. Whether I’m here or not, right. I want you to love yourself. I want you to be all the things that maybe people didn’t speak into your life, but you did, um I want you to, you know- just be great, and I want to amplify that right. I want to compliment that but I’m not the one that makes you great you know I’m saying. So, yeah we push each other in those

directions. I am my greatest cheerleader and I have her right alongside me. I'm committed to staying married, to stay a healthy example of connection, um, and to be honest right. Like I'm nothing without keeping it 100, and so I want to always be able to do that in our relationship.

Overall, the findings from this study indicate that satisfaction is an experience achieved in marriage by six main themes, which include connection, intentionality, purpose, peace, authentic communication, and personal well-being. The themes demonstrate that satisfaction is acquired between couples when conditions, relational functioning, and personal well-being are clearly established and nurtured.

## CHAPTER 5: Discussion

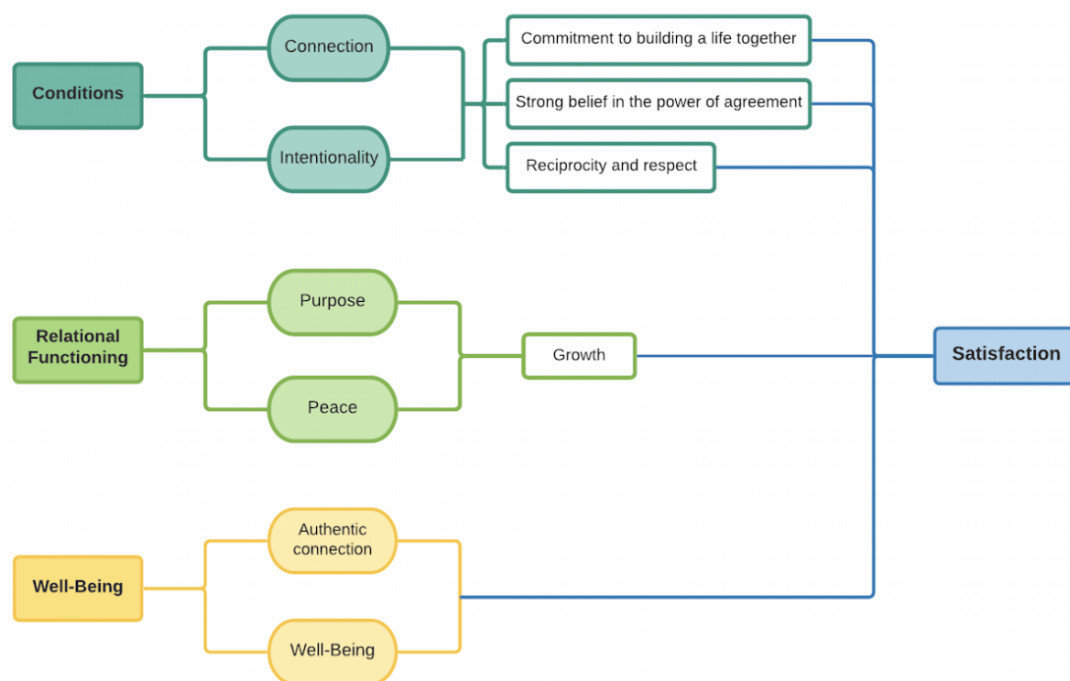
The current study aligns with the principles of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2008). SDT states being Self-determined means individual actions are autonomous, freely chosen, and embraced rather than coerced by external forces or internal expectations. SDT emphasizes the authenticity of choices and behaviors that are congruent with individual needs. Needs are mindfully prioritized based on the awareness of what those needs are and the capacity for a partner or one's social environment to support them. Within romantic relationships, RMT (Deci et al., 2006) further explains how individuals endorse their own involvement in relationships opposed to feeling coerced or unsure why they are involved in the relationship at all (Knee et al., 2013). RMT highlights intrinsic motivation as the main organizing principle aiding autonomy and the need for relatedness in romantic relationships.

The findings of this study suggest that marital satisfaction is acquired through deep connections between partners that influence a series of interactional patterns. These interactional patterns are further reinforced by reciprocal exchanges of loving-kindness, support, and mutual respect. Couples described their orientation towards need fulfillment leading to co-constructed relational functioning governed by purpose while also centering needs for personal growth and well-being. Specifically, the analysis revealed couples believed that six organizing themes: connection, intentionality, purpose, sentiments of peace, authentic communication, and well-being are the main contributors to the process of marital satisfaction. These themes are nurtured through healthy conditions that strengthen relational functioning and promote well-being. All three concepts appear to be regulated by positive experiences in the marital relationship. Overall, relational functioning in particular, displayed a unique approach indicating couples behaviors

within marriages are congruent with desired outcomes, and the formation of satisfaction manifests from this approach. This process is included in figure 1.

**Figure 1.**

*Satisfaction Model*



## Connection

The results of this study indicate that couples operationalized their connection experience by orienting themselves towards feeling safe and forging a strong emotional bond, which as Bickerstaff (2015) suggests are essential components of relationship quality and satisfaction among African American couples. The experiences shared by each partner in this study described the feeling of being connected to their partner as a magnetic pull of energy (i.e., a *vibe*) that exists

whenever they are in the presence of each other. The results show that couples had “a thing” for each other that could not be explained, but it was felt. That energy between them serves as the catalyst for *love, trust, intimacy and mutual respect*. The couple’s narrative also revealed being able to share their perspective about anything, and to feel validated and understood by their partners enhanced their connection with each other. Thus, the findings suggest that couples who are connected to each other created more opportunities to learn about each other’s interests and helped understand each other’s needs and values. As such, prior research by Chaney and Fairfax (2013) also found that the more couples understood about each other, their connection and affinity towards each other increased, which enhanced their intimacy and led to a deeper desire and motivation to support each other. From an SDT perspective, the results demonstrate that when the connection is secure each partner’s need for support is met, which orients partner behaviors towards future engagements (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Couples in this study appear to nurture their emotional connection by maintaining open communication and collaborating with each other regarding the fulfillment of specific needs, which aligns with Perry’s (2013) findings that connection and intimacy are important for African American married men.

### **Intentionality**

Unlike other studies where African American marriage satisfaction is determined by personality factors (Rosowsky, 2012), work-life balance, family conflict (St. Vil, 2014), and spirituality (David & Staffordi, 2015), this is one of the first studies that explore the process of marriage satisfaction among African American couples using a strength-based approach without a comparison variable. The results of the semi-structured interview revealed that early on in their relationships, African American couples were intentional about their communication as they

discussed their hopes and desires for the marital partnership they envisioned being a part of. Perry et al. (2018) conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis that focuses on a diverse group of 33 black men and their attitudes towards behavior in marriage. To provide the full context of the marital experience among black men, Perry et al. (2018) followed the men for four years. The results revealed intentional decision-making and deep conversations about what attracted them to their partner and the past and present experiences that shaped their lives. Research findings align with the findings from this current study which highlights candid conversations about what initially struck them about their partner, intimacy, who they want to be in relation to their partner, and the values they intended to share were authentically expressed.

Further, couples presented with remarkable synergy. At times there were no words, just the intention to function in integrity with desired outcomes. The researcher noted a culmination of self-determined action for a defined cause which generated an experience of satisfaction within marriages that was filtered through sentiments of peace. Moreover, partners articulated autonomy over deciding what to do to provide care and felt competent in their ability to make space for each other with just the right amount of time, attention and support needed. According to RMT, autonomy and competency come with advantages for need fulfillment. As partners rely on their own awareness and have the power to make decisions they are capable of executing provides an opportunity for needs to be fulfilled, and partners become oriented towards specific behavior integration and satisfaction is cultivated (Deci et al., 2006). The current study reflects similar qualitative findings from Mackey et al. (2004), which focuses on the factors that contribute to the satisfaction of 216 partners in long-term marriages. A regression analysis found that White-Americans who engaged in intentional communication and were able to make meaningful

contributions that reflect the spirit of the intention experienced long-term satisfaction. Thus, future studies with African Americans need to highlight the impact of intentional acts on satisfaction.

### ***Committed to Building a Life Together***

From an SDT perspective, couples in this current study demonstrated the role of motivation as an essential component of their commitment to building a life together. In terms of intimate partnerships, SDT follows two main approaches. The first highlights the concurrent desire for fulfillment of psychological needs and how couples either support or undermine the fulfillment of those needs (La Guardia & Patrick, 2008). The second approach focuses on how motivational orientations towards relationships and relational behavior and functioning can be maintained and transform experiences in relationships (La Guardia & Patrick, 2008). When applying these two SDT approaches, the decision to build a life together is the result of both partners' motivation to maintain the relationship, because their needs are being fulfilled, and they value the way they relate to each other and understand each other's needs.

In sharing their experiences, couples in this study provided noteworthy accounts of important factors that shaped their commitment to building a life together. The findings revealed most of the couple's discussions were centered on personal values and the value placed on the relationship. As part of their values, the sentiments of *desire, choice, expectations, mutual respect, and acceptance* were resounding amongst couples, which solidified their decision to personally commit to building a life together. Chaney (2014) investigated how married and cohabiting African American couples define their experience of emotional closeness and their commitment because these processes have been shown to be associated with relationship stability. Thirty married and thirty cohabitating couples in committed relationships between 3 – 15 years participated. Results

revealed that married couples emphasized emotional closeness and commitment as playing a large role in their decision to build a life together. The current research findings concur with previous research as couples who are personally committed see their relationship and their emotional bond as the most important thing in their lives, and they stay married because they choose to not because they feel forced or obligated (Chaney & Fairfax, 2013; Vaterlaus et al., 2017). The process of building a life together is reinforced by an emotional connection, as couples stated their emotional connection regulated how they felt about each other, which kept them engaged in the marriage in a positive way. Chaney and Marsh (2009) posit that commitment is strongest among partners in emotionally close marriages. Furthermore, couples who are highly committed, are also more satisfied with their marriages (Chaney & Marsh, 2009).

### ***The Power of Agreement***

The results of the present study show that couples not only pride themselves on being in alignment with their thoughts, words, and actions—doing what they said they would do as a committed partner; there was also significant credence for the power of agreement. Once an agreement was made each partner took ownership of the decision and was determined to hold themselves accountable to fulfill the said agreement. The commitment to their words were presented as a reflection of their identity. Desmond spoke with passion and sincerity as he stated “this is the Johnson house, in this house we do what we say we’re going to do; I am a great husband, and I will always take care of my family.” Couples who are in relationships for self-determined reasons function with autonomy, which has shown to predict agreements between partners, in turn, predicting relationship satisfaction (Patrick et al., 2007), as well as more understanding, perspective taking, and awareness of needs (Knee et al., 2013).



The use of *power of agreement* and *horizontal conversations* (coined by Dana, and agreed upon by the other couples) to charter authentic communication whereby each person could ask and receive what they needed is in line with RMT. The power of agreement marks the formulation of a decision with the intention to execute according to a larger purpose. The horizontal conversation suggests the need for self-reflection and clarity to parse out interpersonal challenges first before discussing an issue with the other partner. The horizontal conversation also appeared to be used as a method to provide time and space for personal well-being. The willingness for both partners to take an active role in the success of the marriage, to have their voice heard, and to be treated with loving kindness and engage in compassionate acts aligns with research by Reis et al. (2014), who examined the reciprocal exchange of daily acts of love, support and respect—resulting in increased sentiments of high satisfaction.

Moreover, the intentional focus and commitment to upholding agreements demonstrated by each couple can be explained using the framework of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to Deci and Ryan (2000), a key component of SDT is that behaviors can be conceptualized on a continuum. Behaviors can extend from being completely endorsed by the self to being almost entirely determined by the self, this depends on the degree to which the behavior has become integrated into one's sense of identity. Thus, couples in the current study integrated behaviors that resonate with their identities in support of mutual agreements and self-endorsed goals.

### ***Reciprocity and Mutual Respect***

Throughout the study, couples described core aspects of satisfaction as being acquired through acts of reciprocity and mutual respect. In the context of this study, reciprocity refers to the contributions couples make to do what is necessary to create a healthy and equally beneficial

partnership (La Guardia & Patrick, 2008). The findings aligned with similar findings by Vaterlaus et al. (2017) where 39 African Americans in healthy marriages revealed that partners completed tasks and fulfilled role responsibilities based upon strengths and abilities to handle matters efficiently rather than arbitrary expectations (Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Using an SDT lens, reciprocity can be associated with communal and exchange orientations in relationships (Clark et al., 2012). Exchange relationships are described as those in which a benefit is given with the expectation of receiving a comparable benefit in return. On the other hand, communal relationships are defined as relationships where benefits are given in support of the partner's needs without obligation to repay. The findings show that most of the couples were oriented towards communal relationships. Thus, when taking on tasks they took their partner's needs and feelings into account (Clark et al., 2012).

In the current study, mutual respect is also identified by each couple as an aspect needed to acquire satisfaction. Hendrick et al., (2011) defines mutual respect as treating your partner in a thoughtful and courteous manner. It was further mentioned that couples who have mutual respect for one another value the opinion, desires, and feelings expressed by their partner, and they consult with their partner before making decisions that affect them as well as take on an active role in the life and interest of their partner (Hendrick et al., 2011). Findings in this current study align with previous findings from Hendrick et al., (2011). Couples in this current study experienced satisfaction when frequent, yet seamless exchanges of kindness and positive regard towards each other. The ongoing exchanges of kindness and positive regard, lead to partners feeling supported and validated in their life experiences.

## **Purpose**

Experiences of couples with high satisfaction in the present study having a defined purpose for their marriage had a positive impact on relationship functioning. In the present study, couples indicated that being aware of their personal goals and their life goals, as well as contributing to the goals of each other, gave them purpose. Some of the couples specifically defined their purpose to *be a healthy example of connection, to be honest, intentional and to behave with kindness and integrity.*

Couples in this current study presented with strong motivation to be in their marriages because they valued the way they relate to each other and understand each other's needs. Each partner also felt they could express their authentic self without suppressing parts of who they truly are. The autonomy of self-expression was mainly intrinsically motivated. Intrinsic motivation comes from within. There are internal drives that inspire us to behave in certain ways, including our core values, our interests, and our personal sense of morality (Deci et al., 2006).

Within the last two decades research shifted to highlight the transitions in the purpose of marriage (Cherlin, 2004). Cherlin (2004) noted changes in the division of labor, women working full-time outside the home, child-bearing, cohabitation, and same-sex marriages as the results of cultural and material trends that have altered the meaning couples assign to marriage. In terms of African American marriages, Yoo et al., (2014) posits that partners aim for personal growth and deeper intimacy through more open communication and mutually shared life experiences. Thus, the need for personal choice and relatedness as outlined by RMT are centrally located within one's desire to construct a marriage with a defined purpose.

RMT further supports the findings of this study, as it proposes that couples' interactions become more reflective and autonomous as relational activity is valued and accepted as part of one's identity and fulfills the needs of each partner. An example of this is Carl; he is with Tamika because he chooses to be. He values marriage and is intentional in his decision to be a good husband, provide stability for his family to change generational curses, and build wealth. From this premise, Carl and the relationship have become integrated and the function of the relationship is inherently a part of his identity as a husband and provider. Other couples reflected the same process, which led to an enactment of a series of explicit behaviors oriented towards the fulfillment of desired needs, ameliorating unpleasant familial experiences from the past, and showing up for each other in ways that contributed to growth and well-being (Deci et al., 2006).

### ***Growth***

All of the couples in the study acknowledged growth as an evolutionary human experience that is ongoing. Throughout the duration of their marriage, couples had both tangible and psycho-spiritual evidence that growth is taking place individually and as a couple. Their evidence for growth included actively learning from each other and implementing what was taught; checking in with each other to provide support and pouring into each other's dreams; achieving the financial means and moving out of impoverished neighborhoods into a more thriving community; and increasing their spiritual practices, which resulted in a new awareness about themselves as well as their collective outlook on life. Essential to their growth is the importance of keeping God at the center of their marriage and sharing the same spiritual belief, which leads to an increased ability to cope with life stressors and strong values for marriage.

Historically, spirituality appears to be a buffer for life stressors such as, economic deprivation, structural racism, and oppression that are more acute in African American marriages (Fincham et al., 2011). Throughout the literature on strong African American marriages, research shows that spirituality is an important component to building trust and encourages relationship-enhancing behaviors (e.g., love, forgiveness, kindness, treat others the way you want to be treated, etc.) as couples associate being spiritual with being cognizant of personal life principles that reflect the quality of the relationship one has with God or a higher power (Chaney, 2008).

In light of the literature, couples in this study relied on their shared spiritual beliefs and values for marriage when their relationship was in a vulnerable, yet growing, phase as a result of employment transitions, additional caregiver responsibilities, and family planning. Fincham et al. (2011) also posit that spirituality has a positive effect on marriage satisfaction that increases psychological well-being. The positive effects stated by Fincham et al. (2011) are reflected in the findings of this study where the results revealed that each partner's desire for growth was supported by their shared spiritual beliefs and commitment to a productive outlook on life lead to high satisfaction in their marriage. Applying SDT, the couples' need for growth facilitates motivation and drives behavior, which allows them to achieve mastery over challenges and engage in new experiences that create unique opportunities for connection and enable them to direct their own actions. The results indicate that couples have a need to grow and acquire fulfillment which is encouraged and supported within the marriage; thereby contributing to each partner being satisfied.

## Peace

In the study, couples identified the sentiment of peace as the symbolism for satisfaction. The feeling of peace, which resulted from satisfaction, meant *their needs were being met, they felt secure in themselves, marriage was good, and they were enjoying their lives*. Some couples found the feeling of peace to be comforting; it is also an indicator that their home life, their children, and the marriage are going well. Within the presence of peace, each partner felt inclined to exhibit more behaviors and connect more deeply to their partner to maintain the sense of peace.

The shared experiences of all couples indicate that peace governed the household atmosphere and how they treated one another. Couples believed that peace was also a part of their partner's aura. When one was upset the other partner became their peace, and their presence brought comfort providing space to calm down and to restore psychological well-being. From a SDT perspective, the need to maintain peace is associated with pro-relationship behaviors that foster collaboration and wellness (Deci et al., 2014). Research emphasizing pro-relationship behaviors found in American American couples provided convincing evidence for the pivotal role of relationship-oriented behaviors such as open communication, congruent values, positive treatment of the spouse, and autonomy within the marital relationship (Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Outcomes concluded there are specific relationship processes that serve as strengths in African American marriages. One of the most compelling strengths, as it relates to this current study, is egalitarian role sharing and congruent values. Egalitarian role sharing is closely associated with African culture, wherein collectivist values lend themselves to be of service to the marriage focused on family cohesion and oneness (Marks et al, 2008). African American couples who have

egalitarian relationships report higher satisfaction, and feel respected, supported, and cared for by their partners (Vaterlaus et al., 2017).

### **Authentic Communication**

The current study suggests that the development and maintenance of authentic communication facilitates genuine connection, provides space for each partner to show up as the full version of themselves, speak their needs, and be true to their thoughts, feelings, and values. Consistent with findings in previous studies among African Americans (e.g., Marks et al., 2008; Vaterlaus et al., 2017), couples indicated that open communication is important to address each other's needs and facilitate understanding of marital expectations. Additionally, Skipper et al. (2021) completed an in-depth study with 35 African American couples in happy, long-term marriages to capture their experience and convey the hurdles and expectations of marriage. The results concur with the current study findings and noted open communication as a major theme that serves as an important skill for successful couples.

Indication for the present study suggests that the couples' subjective mode of evaluation to determine marital satisfaction is influenced by how they are treated and how well they are able to communicate authentically with their partner (Yoo et al., 2014). Moreover, communication authentically validated the couple's need to feel heard and to be understood by their partners when they shared their thoughts and expressed emotion in their marriages. Given the perspective drawn from RMT (Deci et al., 2014), autonomous motivations promote interest in partners' perspectives and well-being, as well as the energy and desire to empathize with their partner's feelings, and increases supportive behaviors towards romantic partners (Deci et al., 2014), leading to high relationship satisfaction. As a result of each couple's interest in the thoughts and perspective of

their partner, and having access to the space to authentically communicate their needs without judgment or contempt partners learned, they could rely on each other and be vulnerable.

### **Well-being**

The need to experience well-being was a key theme contributing to satisfaction in this study. The content of the results aligns with research findings on subjective well-being (SWB) as it is defined by three components: life satisfaction, positive affect, and a lack of negative affect (Busseri & Quoidback, 2021; Martela & Sheldon, 2019). Although life satisfaction has been widely used as a proxy for experienced well-being, Nikolova and Popova (2020) advocated for examining elements of well-being that go beyond SWB. Arguably SWB was too narrow and excluded important dimensions of positive psychological functioning, such as autonomy, purpose, meaning, or social connectedness (Martela & Sheldon, 2019). To reduce conceptual plurality, the concept of wellness found in this current study is conceptualized through the framework of SDT, which provides a strong empirical case for the existence of three basic psychological needs, the fulfillment of which is essential for human wellness: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci et al., 2014, ). The results from the current study align with SDT as the relational processes between partners are not only about enjoyment and satisfaction, but also include multidimensions of personal fulfillment, psychological functioning, fundamental need, satisfaction, and actualizing one's potential.

In the context of the couples group discussion, Sherrida stated that she has room to grow and to become the best version of herself. Dana referenced reciprocity and the ability to express what she needs, while feeling protected, nurtured, and cared for. Couples revealed in knowing they did not have to compromise themselves in any way there was a sense of wholeness within their



marriages, and that was satisfying. Thus, the findings suggest that experiences of being provided and cared for contributes to the process of cultivating high satisfaction. As such, the experience of each partner attending to their own well-being, in conjunction with attending to the well-being of their partner, aligns with a self-determined orientation towards relationships (Knee et al., 2013); wherein partners behave out of reflection rather than reaction.

### **Implications**

The results of this study have important therapeutic implications for counselors and therapists working with African American same-sex and heterosexual couples. Couples narrated fundamental practical interactions that attributed to their process for cultivating high satisfaction. Couples therapists and relationship educators who provide intervention or prevention services for African Americans could use these findings to develop psycho-educational materials based on the themes identified by African Americans who experience high marital satisfaction. Moreover, researchers could expound upon RMT to make this theory more applicable to understanding African American couples.

### ***Relationship Education Programs***

Based on the findings of the current research, African Americans will benefit from relationship education programs that focus on the conditions of the relationship, relational functioning, and well-being. The program facilitator's goal is to utilize the couple's strengths to align their core values, create a heightened sense of awareness of intentional acts that enhance connection, and remove barriers to authentic communication, while cultivating a shared purpose and understanding of positive well-being within the context of the relationship. When working with African American couples, it is important for facilitators to encourage an atmosphere of

acceptance and mutual respect, and to form personal connections with each participant. The results from the current study reveal that African Americans appreciate sharing their stories and learning from others. Therefore, relationship facilitators must respect the views of the participants, by designating time for participants to talk about their relationships, in addition to sharing about their needs, expectations, and interests. The facilitator must also act as a collaborator and not as the expert when working with African American couples. Utilizing this culturally specific approach, as well as adapted interventions, has been found to absolve the negative experience of problems among African Americans (George et al., 2014). Future relationship programs would benefit from practical strategies and tools that are currently employed by African American couples who have high satisfaction (Gilbert et al., 2009). Based on the components of satisfaction found to be most useful among the current African American study participants, program facilitators will help future couples foster relationship satisfaction by addressing key areas of the relationship: conditions, relational functioning, and well-being.

### ***Marriage and Family Therapist***

According to the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy's [AAMFT] (2015) Code of Ethics, marriage and family therapists have a standard of responsibility to advance the welfare of families and individuals and make reasonable efforts to find an appropriate balance between conflicting goals within the family system; as well as demonstrate cultural competency-based knowledge and skills. The current study reveals six essential themes that contribute to marriage satisfaction among African American couples. Having this information can enhance the therapist's ability to deliver relevant treatment interventions that will address conflicting goals within the family system, as well as help couples deconstruct myths about African

American relationships dynamics and mitigate potential harm resulting from internalized values, beliefs, and norms about African Americans.

Research also shows another way for therapists to demonstrate cultural competency-based knowledge and skills is to shift their framework to include Afrocentric Theory. In their work with African American couples, Perry (2013) integrated cultural values, racial identity, and African American strengths into the therapeutic relationship. These cultural adaptations yielded positive results. African American participants demonstrated high value for marriage satisfaction. Prior to study implementation, Perry (2013) noted that participants embraced commonality among their African American race, and having a strong African-American identity as an essential component for a strong sense of self and their marital bonds. Unlike traditional psychotherapy models that are based on white- hetero norms and family privilege, Parham (2002) reorganized the phases of therapy to focus on connecting with the client instead of pathologizing. McGoldrick and Hardy (2008), noted that therapist trained in traditional European-American models place an overemphasis on diagnosis and treatment of mental illness, without locating said emphasis within the broader context of social, political, cultural and normal developmental concerns that influence the psychosocial existence of African Americans, and by doing so creates an impediment to building trust and hinders the therapeutic relationship. Therapists seeking to engage African American clients should spend time connecting with their clients, nurturing the therapeutic relationship, and assisting clients to increase their awareness of self as a means to achieve balance between one's mental, physical, and spiritual states of being (Asante, 2000; Davis et al., 2010; Dixon, 2014; Parham, 2002, Dixon, 2014). By reorganizing the phases of therapy with African American clients to reflect an Afrocentric worldview, Parham (2002) posits that the therapeutic

process is initiated through connecting with the clients before conducting an assessment or attempting to pathologize a client's behavior. Next the therapist should begin to facilitate awareness so that clients determine what their needs are and set goals. During the latter phases the therapist supports the client as they start to take action towards moral and social responsibility that enhances the well-being of themselves, others and their community. The final phase of therapy is reserved for feedback, accountability and monitoring. Having knowledge of other approaches that are inclusive of African American cultural norms makes marriage and family therapy more appealing and relevant; ultimately increasing the rate of consumption.

### ***Extension of Theory***

The results from the current study fit well within Relationship Motivation Theory (RMT, Deci et al., 2014). RMT states that the need for relatedness is intrinsic and galvanizes people to be engaged in relationships by their own volition (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In addition to the intrinsic nature of relatedness, the present study demonstrates that African American couples operationalize six intersecting concepts to facilitate relationship functioning. Given these findings, African Americans would benefit from an expansion of RMT that includes the concepts of connection, intentionality, purpose, peace, authentic communication and well-being found to increase pro-partner support and propel African American marriages towards satisfaction.

### ***Self of the Therapist***

The use of self is an essential component to working with couples and building a therapeutic relationship (Aponte, 2016). Therefore, it is important for therapists to resolve unfinished family of origin issues, as well as their own relationship issues in order to prepare to be therapeutically congruent (Lum, 2002). Therapists should also be aware of their racial identity,

biases, beliefs, religion, sexual orientation, and cultural assumptions that could impact the work they are doing with African American couples. To manage their biases, therapists need to increase self-awareness to foster empathy for couples by reflecting on how their different identities have influenced their worldview as a therapist. Increased self-awareness will help therapists exercise culturally responsive practice in therapy that is required to fully understand and conceptualize how the identity of African American couples shapes their perception of marriage, in addition to their distress (Davis et al., 2010).

## **Limitations**

### ***Recruitment and Sampling***

There were two immediate limitations to this study. The first was the sample size. There were only six couples in the study. Literature by Young and Casey (2019) posits that qualitative researchers are often challenged by what constitutes a robust sample size. The dilemma is finding a sample that will produce thorough and meaningful results without overburdening the participants in studies with frequent meeting times, locations or multiple questionnaires (Young & Casey, 2019). Although the results of this current study yielded exceptional insight given the current recruitment strategy and use of social media to recruit participants from all of the United States. However, more recruitment time would have generated a larger sample which may have provided broader themes. Additional time to ask follow-up questions and retrieve responses would also enrich the results. Future research examining the topic of marriage satisfaction among African American couples should consider one focus group with all couples together, followed by a separate interview with each couple.

## ***Demographics***

The second limitation was a lack of representation among African American couples of diverse sexual orientation/attractionality. According to research on African Americans, gay, bisexual, and transgendered men in satisfying relationships are understudied, as most literature on the intersectionality of race and sexuality focuses on hidden identities, HIV prevention, and safer sex (Adams et al., 2014; Hurt et al., 2014). Without the voices of people of various sexual orientations, this study lacks an understanding of how, or if, sexual identity/attractionality is a factor in marital satisfaction.

Other studies will need to address additional areas of intersectionality in regards to socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic status, inclusive of income, education and employment status for African American couples has been on a steady incline since 2008 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). To date the median income of African American couples is \$82,000 per year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Couples in the present study reflect 7% of the African American population who earn over \$200,000 per year. Given the high earnings of these couples, one might assume that marital satisfaction is achieved as a result of non-opposing financial stress, and more access to resources that improve the experience of well-being. However, Maisel and Karney (2012) conducted a study of more than 2,000 couples in Florida, and found nonsignificant associations between household income and marital quality. Similar results were also replicated in smaller studies of African American marriages (Dew et al., 2017). Jackson et al., (2017) posit that income contributes to well-being only to the extent that an increase in income helps to meet basic needs. Once basic needs are met, income may not be associated with satisfaction and a greater sense of well-being. Future research should identify the specific needs that are addressed by way of an

increase in socioeconomic status. SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2008), offers some guidance, proposing that the fulfillment of three basic needs is essential for wellness; autonomy, relatedness and competence. Identifying the specific need may help to streamline interventions that will support couples to strengthen their interactions with each other and work towards need fulfillment. Thus, it is important to understand the complex ways in which the socioeconomic status of African Americans influences relationship and family outcomes based on how the additional income is used to satisfy basic needs. (Di Tella & MacCulloch, 2008; Jackson et al., 2017).

### ***Interview Process***

The design of the study necessitated that couples be interviewed together without any follow-ups. The group was energetic and appeared to mesh well together as they shared their experiences of marital satisfaction in the presence of others. Sharing their experiences openly in the presence of others could have influenced their motivation and how they told their stories. Also, given that there was only one focus group with six couples, participants were limited in their responses, which perhaps made couples lean towards the immediacy of relational circumstances that were a part of a more current reality at the time of the interview. The interview lasted two hours. However, more themes or additional information might have been revealed if there was more time allotted for the group.

### ***Significant Advancements***

In spite of these limitations, this study has remarkable value. First and foremost, proving a forum for African American couples to unite and bond over what is working well for them in their marriages proved to be highly impactful. Lenhardt (2016) posits that just because we do not see African American marital success it does not mean that it does not exist; it means it is obscure. This

research found that in African American marriages, couples acquire satisfaction through deep connections that influence interactional patterns. Interactions between couples are further reinforced by reciprocal exchanges of loving-kindness, support, and mutual respect. Thus, orienting couples towards the fulfillment of needs and the co-construction of relational functioning that is governed by purpose and organized by the need for personal growth and well-being.

### **Recommendation for Future Research**

#### ***African American Couples and Families***

Given the findings of this study, a more in-depth qualitative study looking at the impact of familial upbringing and how it contributes to African American mate selection would be of interest. This type of study would offer a unique perspective to increase literature focusing on the strengths and resilience of African Americans. Research should shed light on African American intentional decision-making within African American marriages.

Moreover, couples in this study revealed a strong commitment to building a life together and nurturing their connections. A close examination into how feeling connected to one's partner and being committed to building a life together helps to preserve cultural values and resiliency in African American families. Additional research should explore how African American families sustain cultural values and utilize resiliency to mitigate the pressure to adhere to standard North American norms.

#### ***Strength-Based Research Approaches***

There are several opportunities for future research pertaining to marriage satisfaction among African Americans. Future research has a rich opportunity to utilize strength-based approaches and theories when researching African American communities. Letiecq's (2019) research on family



privilege emphasizes the need to document and describe the strengths within complex family systems as a means to understanding how families respond not only to each other but also to systemic forces that are regulating, disenfranchising, and marginalizing some while concurrently empowering and protecting others. The insights gained from this current study provide an in-depth understanding of the relational processes involved in cultivating marriage satisfaction. Thus, the identified themes provide space for future examination to build upon the strengths within African American marriages.

### ***Analytic Approaches***

The scope of the present study and the use of a single-interview focus group necessitated centralizing the purpose of how couples cultivate marriage satisfaction in African American couples. In an effort to achieve the study objective, this study used a qualitative method with a small sample size. Future research might benefit from using a quantitative approach using a larger sample size that include more diverse couple orientations (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender couples) and couples who are socio-economically diverse. Altering the methodology to include larger sample size, as well as socioeconomic diversity, would advance the findings of the present study and further clarify the variances between how diverse African American couples cultivate high satisfaction.

Furthermore, the scope of the present study required the use of a single focus group interview without follow-ups. There is value in future research hosting a follow-up interview with couples interviewed as a dyad to reduce the potential for couples to withhold information as an attempt to avoid presenting a counternarrative that goes against the purpose of the study. Perceptions obtained from focus group studies would be beneficial in providing additional

information on whether the insights gained from couples about marital satisfaction during the larger group interview would be the same when couples are interviewed as a separate dyad. In larger group settings, participants might also fear upsetting the moderator

### ***Conclusion***

Marital satisfaction is the result of a culmination of experiences that many couples aspire to achieve. There are many relational components that contribute to marriage satisfaction. Decades of research have focused on personality traits and protective factors associated with high-quality relationships (Fincham et al., 2011). Despite extensive study on marital satisfaction, study participants have been primarily white. However, literature on contributing factors associated with relationship satisfaction for African American couples is scant and classified as problematic. The lack of research on African American marital satisfaction has been a barrier to understanding African American marriages. Therefore, this study shed light on the experiences of marriage satisfaction among African American couples within the context of African American values and norms instead of European American marriages as the standard.

This investigation demonstrates essential relational components that cultivate satisfaction among African American couples. To date, process literature on how African American couples cultivate satisfaction indicates various factors that impact satisfaction. However, studies focused on African American marriage satisfaction often used comparative analysis and failed to include concrete evidence in support of marital success. The current study further highlighted that African Americans have inherent strengths contributing to the construct of high satisfaction. Findings indicate that, among African American couples, marital satisfaction is a co-constructed experience created between couples through a series of interactions cultivating healthy conditions that

strengthen relationship functioning and promotes well-being. The experience of marital satisfaction is formed by the organizing concepts of connection, intentionality, purpose, sentiments of peace, authentic communication, and well-being. Although research on African American marital satisfaction is limited, there are other perspectives contributing to the strengths of the African American community by locating the voices of African American couples who demonstrate: “I am so satisfied!”

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## **APPENDIX A: Antioch University consent to be a part of a research study**

**Study title:** A Qualitative Research Approach to Understanding the Process of Relationship Satisfaction Among African American Couples

**Principal Investigator:** Rashida Ingram, M.S., MFT, Antioch University

**Faculty Advisor:** Denzel Jones, Ph.D., LMFT, Antioch University

Dear Potential Research Participant,

You are invited to take part in a research study. This form contains information that will help you decide whether to participate in this research study on African American couples with high relationship satisfaction. My name is Rashida Ingram. I am currently a Doctoral Candidate at Antioch University in the Couple and Family Therapy Program. As a Marriage and Family Therapist, this research is important to the field of psychotherapy as African American relationships are often discussed from a negative perspective. Too often we are bombarded with literature, publications, media and conversations about the lack of relationship satisfaction for married people of color. This study will contribute to relationship success stories, and establish an understanding of how relationship satisfaction develops.

If you choose to participate you and your spouse will be asked to join a 2-hour focus group with 5 other couples. A total of 13 people including the researcher, will be online via zoom video conferencing. The 2-hour meeting will be recorded.

Taking part in this research study is voluntary. You do not have to participate and you can stop at any time. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign a consent form. After you sign the consent form, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Withdrawing from this study will not affect the relationship you have, if any, with the researcher. If you withdraw from the study before data transcription is completed, your information will be excluded from the results. Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

### **STUDY PROCEDURES**

You are invited to participate in a voluntary research study. As a participant you will be given an assessment with 7 questions about your relationship. After you answer all 7 questions a score will be used to identify how satisfied you are in your relationship. An email notification will be sent to

all volunteers to inform you of the next step in the process of the study. The next step involves a focus group discussion between you and other couples. The topic being discussed is “marriage satisfaction.” You will have an opportunity to share your thoughts, feelings and beliefs related to marriage satisfaction in a group setting for 120 minutes. The session will take place online using *zoom video conferencing*. The entire discussion will be recorded. At the end of the discussion you will be given a \$20 Amazon gift card for your participation. After the responses are transcribed you will receive a copy of the transcription for your approval. During this time you can also request that your comments be removed from various segments or omitted from the data completely.

### **RISKS**

While participating in this study you may experience distress from answering questions pertaining to your marriage. You are not required to answer questions you feel uncomfortable with. You may also withdraw from the focus group at any time. If you experience a response that requires immediate assistance, contact 911, the Crisis Text Line (Text CONNECT to 741-741). Additionally you may use therapist locator, [www.therapistlocator.net](http://www.therapistlocator.net).

### **BENEFITS**

Participants may benefit from this study by gaining a new perspective on their relationship.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Your responses to assessments will be confidential. Please do not write any identifying information on the assessment forms. Every effort will be made by the researcher to preserve your identity including the following:

- Assigning code names/numbers for participants that will be used on all research notes and documents
- Keeping notes, interview transcriptions, and any other identifying participant information in a locked file cabinet in the personal possession of the researcher.]

Participant data will be kept confidential except in cases where the researcher is legally obligated to report specific incidents. These incidents include, but may not be limited to, incidents of abuse and suicide risk.

### **COMPENSATION**

As a participant each couple will receive a \$20 gift voucher that can be used for Amazon purchases. The voucher will be emailed to you after the focus group is completed.

### **CONTACT INFORMATION**

All information will be de-identified, so that it cannot be connected back to you. Your real name will be replaced with a pseudonym in the write-up of this project, and only the primary researcher will have access to the list connecting your name to the pseudonym. This list, along with tape recordings of the discussion sessions, will be kept in a secure, locked location.

If you have questions at any time about this study, or you experience adverse effects as the result of participating in this study, you may contact the researcher whose contact information is provided on the first page. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or if problems arise which you do not feel you can discuss with the Primary Investigator, please contact the Institutional Review Board at Antioch University.

### **FUTURE PUBLICATIONS**

The primary researcher, Rashida, Ingram reserves the right to include any results of this study in future scholarly presentations and/or publications. All information will be de-identified prior to publication.

### **WHO TO CONTACT**

If you have any questions, you may ask them now or later. If you have questions later, you may contact **Rashida Ingram**. This proposal has been reviewed and approved by the Antioch International Review Board (IRB), which is a committee whose task it is to make sure that research participants are protected.

### **CONSENT**

I have read and I understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without any penalty. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form.

I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

I voluntarily agree to let the researcher audiotape me for this study. I agree to allow the use of my recordings as described in this form

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Month/Day/Yea