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by

Felicia D. Fisher, M.Ed., M.S.

May 2017

EXTERNAL STRESS ON AFRICAN AMERICAN HETEROSEXUAL MARRIED COUPLES

A Dissertation Presented to the  
Faculty of the College of Education  
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy in Counseling Psychology

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## Abstract

There is a body of literature that consistently finds that African Americans have higher rates of perceived stress than their White counterparts; therefore, stress may be a compelling factor to consider among African American married couples. This study focused on identifying external stressors experienced by African American married couples. Furthermore, this study sought to understand if these stressors were perceived as taxing to African American married couples', and how, if at all, the stress experienced impacted the couples' relational functioning and perception. Ten self-identified African American heterosexual married couples aged 26 and older participated in the study. With the use of semi-structured interviews, couples participated in an individual and couple interview. Using the qualitative framework of Constructivist Grounded Theory, initial coding, constant comparative, and focused coding methods were used to obtain analytic categories synthesized to represent African American couples' perception of the effect of external stress on their romantic relationships. To attend to rigor, an independent qualitative researcher was recruited to audit the codes, themes, and transcriptions, and a methodological journal was utilized throughout the data collection process. Results: The couples identified the external stressors of finances, work/career, grief, environment, extended family and parenting/co-parenting. Ten themes surfaced from the data, which revealed that stress often initially has negative implications for interpersonal interaction for African American couples; however, couples use cognitive (i.e., Divorce is not an option; Stress is inevitable) and behavioral strategies (i.e., Date night) to prevent stress from having long-term consequences on their relationship. African American married couples encounter external stressors that impact functioning. While couples develop



positive strategies to safeguard their relationship, African American couples may benefit from continued social support and education on how to cope with stressors, as well as resources that assist in alleviating external stressors experienced.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

While the rate of marriage has declined across racial and ethnic groups in the United States over the last 50 years (Pew Research Center, 2010), African Americans have been significantly impacted. Between the years of 2006 and 2010, Black women held the position as highest percentage of women never married (55%) and group of women least likely to be married by the ages of 25 to 35 years old. Black men held a similar position as their female counterparts, but fell slightly above Hispanic men as the least likely group of men to be married (Black men 55%; Hispanic men 56%) and group of men least likely to be married by the age of 35 (Black men 61%; Hispanic men 60%) (Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2012). The gravity of these statistics is amplified when juxtaposed with marriage statistics from the 1940s and 1950s. During this time period, African Americans had both a lower age of first marriage and lower percentage of persons never married compared to their White counterparts (Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2012). This seems curious given that this was a time period in which African Americans were embedded in a segregated, Jim Crow society, which was a time in which African Americans interfaced high levels of societal racial discrimination. Despite the fact that compared to the 1940s and 1950s African Americans now have more opportunities for upward mobility and education, their marriage rates are suffering. Furthermore, African Americans have continually been found to have lower levels of relationship satisfaction than their White and Black Caribbean counterparts (Broman, 2005; Lincoln, Taylor, & Jackson, 2008). This finding seems to indicate that there is something going on specifically within the African American ethnic group that may

differentially influence their relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth estimated that there was a significantly higher probability that Blacks' first marriage would end in divorce or separation within the first 15 years compared to all other racial groups (Amato, 2012). Actual statistics of divorce collected by race seem to support this hypothesis, as Black married couples have been found to be more likely to divorce and less likely to remarry after divorce compared to other racial groups (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). These statistics seem to provide merit for exploring variables that may be placing a strain on African American heterosexual couples.

For this study, African Americans are the population of interest. Therefore, the term African American, as opposed to Black will be used. "Black" is a label used to demarcate the racial category, whereas "African American" is a term for a specific ethnic group within the broader category of "Black". However, within Chapters 1 and 2, the term "Black" will be used if the psychocultural statistics cited were collected by race instead of ethnicity, or if empirical studies cited did not specify the ethnic makeup of their sample, but rather chose the inclusive term "Black". African Americans were chosen as the population of interest because even though Blacks have common cultural components, African Americans' history as a group subjected to 400+ years of chattel enslavement and exploitative sharecropping practices causes them to have a distinctive relationship with American society. This relationship may influence the way African Americans operate in society and make sense of their experiences; these factors coupled with African Americans' socioeconomic position, as a result of their minority status, may cause them to be exposed to unique chronic external stressors.

## **Stress among African Americans**

Stress is a widely researched topic within a number of disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, and health. Although stress has been conceptualized in various ways, when working to better understand the experiences of African Americans, the minority stress model may be an appropriate framework to consider. An extension of social stress theory, minority stress model is not a specific theory, but rather inferred by several social psychological theories. The minority stress model takes into consideration the negative social conditions at the systemic level, which are encountered specifically as a result of one's marginal status (Meyer, 2013). The model acknowledges that one's identity dictates their stress experiences; therefore, the model is aligned with the assumption that stress is contextual and is impacted by cultural, economic, and social factors (Aldwin, 2007; Meyer, Schwartz, & Frost, 2008). Taking this framework into consideration, even though stress is a universal experience, there are discrepancies among persons in the frequency and intensity of stressors, appraisal of situations, and availability of resources used to cope. Given that culture shapes the stress process, the ramifications of culture must be considered.

African Americans experience significant disparities in the areas of education, health, and wealth (Williams & Collins, 2004). Compared to other racial groups Blacks have consistently had the highest rates of poverty (Dalaker, 2001). The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that Blacks have the highest rate of unemployment compared to their White, Asian, and Hispanic counterparts (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). In addition, Black men have the highest rate of mortality compared to all other racial groups (Kochanek, Murphy, Xu, & Arias, 2014), and Blacks also have the highest rate of



incarceration compared to their Latino and White counterparts (Wagner, 2012), which seems to have implications for the functioning and wellbeing of the larger family unity. A study found that African American women who are pregnant encounter a greater number of stressful life events than their White counterparts (Dominguez, Dunkel-Schetter, Glynn, Hobel, & Sandman, 2008). High levels of race-related stress have been posited to be one contributor to the high rates of premature cardiovascular disease experienced by African American women (Dimsdale, 2008). African American women also experienced stress related to role conflict, in attempting to balance work and family life (Burlew & Johnson, 1992). Furthermore, in a national study, it was found that about half (49%) of African Americans in the sample experienced discrimination and 90% of these persons identified their race/ethnicity as the source of their discrimination (Kessler, Michelson, & Williams, 1999). Therefore, it can be assumed that African Americans not only have to contend with common, everyday stressors, but are also faced with unique stressors as a result of their minority status, along with the socioeconomic and environmental circumstances that this group membership often places them. Given the interaction and accumulation of these circumstances and experiences, it is not surprising that African Americans have higher rates of exposure to incidences of stressful events than Whites across all socioeconomic levels (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2009; US Census Bureau, 2008). Therefore, it can be assumed that African American men and women encounter multiple stressors across various domains. While being exposed to high levels of stress has ramifications at the individual level, it may also have relational consequences as well.

## **African American Heterosexual Couples**

Although ethnicity has been found to account for a large amount of variance in romantic relationship outcomes, there is a dearth of literature that investigates the way in which ethnicities may differ in relationship processes and dissolution (Karney, Kreitz, & Sweeney, 2004). Nevertheless, research on African American male-female relationships is not new. Historically, it was assumed that African Americans held the same values, beliefs and lifestyles within their romantic relationships as Whites (Bell, Bouie, & Baldwin, 1990). Despite this assumption, studies continually found that African American romantic relationships were qualitatively different than their White counterparts (Mosley-Howard & Evans, 2000). This deviation from White romantic relationships caused African American relationships to be conceptualized from a pathology-centered perspective (Bell, Bouie, & Baldwin, 1990; Staples, 1971). Research was often a tool used to perpetuate this idea. For example, the classic Moynihan Report (1965) was a study used to inform both policy and popular culture about the dismantling of the Black family (Burton & Tucker, 2009). The study identified Black women's dominance within the household as a contributing factor to the destruction of the Black family. The study postulated that set against the backdrop of a patriarchal society, Black women's authority within the home emasculated Black men and, thus, led to broken families (Burton & Tucker, 2009; Moynihan, 1965). This assertion of cultural deprivation indirectly placed the ownership of male-female distress back on the family unit; thereby, creating an assumption that the families were to blame for the familial disturbances.

Pressures experienced from the outside world and interpersonal conflicts are something that all couples across racial and ethnicity boundaries have to contend with. However, each racial/ethnic group contends with these variables in unique ways given their cultural, historical and structural background; African Americans are a group particularly vulnerable to these threats negatively impacting these relationships (Allen & Helm, 2013). Yet, not only is there a dearth of empirical literature that has been conducted on African American heterosexual relationships, but when studied, it is often done so in a decontextualized manner (Allen & Helm, 2013), with little consideration to how external sources may be influencing the way in which these relationships function.

### **Stress Divorce Model**

Whereas the minority stress model provides justification for the high levels of stress experienced by African Americans, as a result of their minority status, the Stress-Divorce Model provides an appropriate framework for outlining the pathway by which external stress may have negative implications for couples. While the literature has sufficiently explored stress at the individual level, stress at the couple or family level was ignored for a period of time, largely because many researchers believed that while stress had larger implications, it was an individual process (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, & Mullan, 1981). However, over the last decade, researchers and theorists have begun to expand their understanding of stress and have considered it from a multi-person perspective. In conceptualizing the influence of stress on systems, historically the ABC-X theory dominated the literature in explaining the influence of stress on families and couples. In this theory, “A” represents the event and related hardships. “B” represents the family’s crisis resources, which interacts with “C”, what the

family makes of the event. Finally, “X” represents the crisis itself. A limitation of this model is that it only takes into consideration major life stressors (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009) and does not allow room for understanding more fully how minor, or daily, stressors may impact systems.

Modern literature on the role of stress in relationships has shifted to consider the effect of both major and minor stressors on couples (Bodenmann, Charvos, Bradbury, et al. 2007; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). The Stress-Divorce Model proposed by Bodenmann (1995, 2000; Bodenmann et. al, 2007) focuses on minor stressors, both acute and chronic, experienced by couples. Minor stressors, also referred to as “daily hassles” are stressors that one may encounter frequently on a daily basis. In contrast, major stressors are critical life events, such as unemployment, death of a family member, etc. Minor life stressors within romantic relationships have consistently been found to have a positive relationship with stress. In contrast, studies that have examined the impact of major life stressors have found some inconsistency, with some couples being negatively influenced and others not (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). While this may be a function of the samples used for these studies, it may also suggest that daily stressors, particularly those that are chronic, may be detrimental to couples because they are taxing and prevent the couples an opportunity to recover. In regards to studies that have focused on African American samples specifically, the limited amount of empirical studies has found a negative influence of both major and minor stressors on African American couples. However, since there has been a dearth of literature in this domain further investigation is warranted.

The Stress-Divorce Model demonstrates the way in which minor stressors can have negative implications for a couple. Chronic everyday stressors that originate outside of the relationship can spill over and influence the way in which couples interact with one another. The model makes no distinction regarding who experiences the stressor. Therefore, the model leaves room for the stressor to be experienced by one or both parties. Within the model, communication, coping, and self-disclosure decline as a result of the stressors; in contrast, problematic personality characteristics and physical and psychological problems increase. A decrease in positive relational functioning creates isolation or distance, either physical and/or emotional, between the partners. Ultimately, couples become dissatisfied in their relationship, and evaluate their relationship negatively (Bodenmann et al., 2007; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009).

**Dyadic stress and stress spillover.** While dyadic stress is not explicitly discussed in the Stress-Divorce Model, it is a major component of the model. Dyadic stress takes into consideration that one specific stressor may serve as a source of stress for two people, and specific to the purposes of this research, couples. Within the Stress-Divorce Model, dyadic stress is the gateway which makes room for all the other problematic functioning and interactions to take place.

The model also implicitly discusses the *stress spillover* process. Within the literature, two definitions are provided. One definition conceptualizes stress spillover as the process by which negative stressors in one domain are associated with changes in another domain (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). The second definition is more specific to relationships, as it describes stress spillover as a process by which stressful circumstances lower one's relationship

evaluation (Tesser & Beach, 1998). However, within the Stress-Divorce Model these two definitions are not mutually exclusively, but rather are both represented. The model focuses primarily on the impact of external minor stressors. Given that external stressors, by definition, originate outside of the relationship, the requirement of the first definition is satisfied within the model. Furthermore, the basis of the Stress-Divorce Model depicts the negative influence of external stress on couples' cognitive and behavioral functioning, which may ultimately lead to negative evaluation of one's relationship. Therefore, although multiple definitions of stress spillover have been provided, both definitions can be found within the Stress-Divorce Model.

### **Statement of the Problem**

African Americans' heterosexual relationships are suffering. While there is some understanding of the state of these relationships, largely there is no consideration of context when exploring and discussing these relationships. However, given the marginalization of African Americans, including context within the conversation appears crucial, as culture influences stress, and stress can have negative implications on the quality, functioning, and dynamics within the relationship. This proposed research study will focus on filling this gap in the literature through qualitative methods. Although African Americans' involved in same-sex or interracial relationships also face external stressors, their relationship choice often causes them to experience an additional layer of stigmatization (LeBlanc, Frost, & Wright, 2015; Mays, Cochran, & Rhue, 1993; Rosenthal & Starks, 2015); as such heterosexual romantic relationships will be the focus of the current study. The proceeding chapters are organized to provide a literature review on the stressors experienced by African Americans and the impact of stress on couples.

The third chapter outlines the methodology and analysis used to accomplish the study's research questions. The fourth chapter provides the results of the study, and the last chapter includes the discussion, limitations and implications of the study.

## **Chapter II**

### **Literature Review**

#### **African American Heterosexual Couples**

There is a vast amount of literature that examines various aspects of heterosexual romantic relationships. However, typically these studies use a majority or all-white sample (Karney, Kreitz, & Sweeney, 2004). This limits our understanding of romantic relationships of other racial and ethnic groups. The history of empirical literature on African American heterosexual romantic relationships has followed a unique trajectory. For over 30 years, research on African American relationships was conducted in reaction to the Moynihan Report (1965), a report that asserted African American families were falling apart because of specific characteristics related to their family structure. Therefore, it is of no surprise that much of the literature on African American heterosexual relationships and families conducted after the Moynihan Report pathologized these relationships. The use of pathology was often achieved by comparing African American families and relationships to that of their White counterparts from a culturally-deficient framework (Bell, Bouie, & Baldwin, 1990; Dickson, 1993).

Fortunately, there has been a shift in the way in which African American families are conceptualized. Researchers have moved away from the cultural deficit model and are focusing more specifically on the cultural strengths of the African American family, such as extended family support and family role flexibility (Mosely-Howard & Evans, 2000). Although this shift is essential in recognizing African American families assets and gathering a full picture of these relationships, in order to have an accurate image, socio-cultural and historical circumstances, which may have implications for how



African American men and women interact with one another, should also be taken into consideration and explored.

For example, slavery, often argued as the single most significant event to shape the mentality of African Americans, could also be regarded as greatly influencing African American heterosexual romantic relationships (Clark, 1972). During this time in history, not only were manhood and womanhood defined differently for African American men and women in comparison to Whites, but also African Americans were unable to form and maintain a legal family of their own (Bethea, 1995). Furthermore, these families were often separated due to members being sold to other plantations. Willis (1990) explicitly describes some of the residual effects, such as mistrust, lack of respect, and self-hatred, that slavery has left on African American heterosexual romantic relationships.

In addition to the influence of historical factors, African American heterosexual romantic relationships are also impacted by variables at the micro-level. For example, African Americans receive direct and indirect messages from multiple members within their family regarding appropriate gender roles and desirable partner qualities. These messages often conflict with one another or endorse a negative perception of the opposite sex (Grange, Brubaker, & Corneille, 2011; Peters et al., 2010); thereby, gravely influencing African Americans' perception of the opposite sex and helping to mold one's relationship expectations.

In addition, factors such as the gender-ratio imbalance found within the African American community are essential to consider when examining African American heterosexual couples. The gender-ratio imbalance refers to the discrepancy between the

number of African American men versus the number of African American women. This gender imbalance, specifically there being more women than men, has been found to be largely rooted in higher mortality rates, disproportionate rates of incarceration, and higher percentage of interracial relationships among African American men, and it may be causing African American women to remain single or marry later in life (Dixon, 2009). In the same vein, economics is also a pertinent component to these relationships. Although African Americans maintain more egalitarian roles in relationships compared to their White counterparts, particularly in household chores and rearing of children (Mosley-Howard & Evans, 2000), a previous study found that both African American women and men want the man to assume the “provider” role in the relationship (Haynes, 2000). This is problematic when considering the marginalization that African American men tend to face in the labor force; thus, often making it a challenge for African American men to achieve this role and ultimately causes them to be considered “unmarriageable” (Dixon, 2009). This disconnect between desirable qualities in a partner and what a potential partner actually possesses has been regarded as an important component in the decline of African American marriage rates (Banks, 2011; Bethea, 1995; Bowman, 1993; King & Allen, 2009).

Even factors that are often considered “strengths” for African American couples and families may actually create strain within these relationships. For example, while the strong ties that African Americans have with their extended family has been cited as strength and protective factor (Mosely-Howard & Evans, 2000), support and dependence on the extended family may actually serve as a risk factor for African American couples. Individuals may come to depend on their extended family through hardships and less on

their partner making it difficult for African Americans to form and maintain stable relationships (Dixon, 2009).

It is evident that there are many different factors working together, often negatively, to influence and impact the way in which African American women and men interact with one another, and ultimately contributions to the quality and functioning of these relationships. While African American heterosexual romantic relationships are exposed to circumstances and experiences similar to couples of other ethnic groups, there are distinctive historical, cultural, economic and social experiences and situations that African Americans encounter. Of note, is that these variables are taking place outside of the relationship, largely at the meso- and macro- level. Unlike factors at the individual level, such as problematic personality traits or interpersonal conflict, which can be negotiated and altered between partners, African American couples have little to no control over the systemic and cultural issues they are subjected to; thereby, presumably causing couples to find ways to operate within this inflexible structure. It is plausible that this felt lack of power impacts their functioning and further compounds the stressors that African Americans have to contend with in their romantic relationships.

### **Stress among African Americans**

Although stress is a universal experience, African Americans have higher levels of stress than their White counterparts (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2009; US Census Bureau, 2008). African Americans' sociocultural position and historical relationship within American society causes them to be subjugated to distinctive circumstances, which may increase their chances of being exposed to situations that may be perceived as stressors. Racism, police contact, neighborhood disorder, and getting accustomed to

workplace culture (Goldmann et al. 2011; Landers, Rollock, Rolfes, & Moore, 2011; Reid, Romans, & Koch, 2014) are some examples of situations that African Americans may experience at a higher level of frequency or with more intensity and may be perceived as stressful. Therefore, African Americans not only have to face common, everyday situations that may be stressful (i.e., traffic, financial instability, job demands), but they are also placed in more situations simply as a result of their race and position within American society that may ultimately result in stress.

**Gender and stress.** Previous literature has found that women continually report higher levels of stress than men. In addition, women are more likely than men to admit that they are struggling to manage their stress and that their health is being adversely affected by stress (APA, 2011). While these differences between men and women may be a symptom of gender role socialization, it may also speak to the opposing ways in which men and women conceptualize and handle stressors and stress. However, when focusing specifically on stress among African American men and women, the frequency with which they experience stressors may make both genders more cognizant of stressors. For example, in a sample of pregnant African American women between the ages of 20 and 49, 35% of the participants reported high levels of contextualized stress and 40% reported high levels of experiencing global stress (Jackson, Rowley & Curry, 2012). However, in a sample of African American men, 93.2% of the participants reported experiencing stress (Chung et al., 2014). A qualitative study by Griffith, Ellis, and Allen (2013) found that both African American men and women were able to identify the unique stressors of African American men. These studies appear to indicate that both African American men and women are able to acknowledge their experiences of stress.

*African American men and stress.* The recent increased coverage of the murders of African American men as a result of police brutality has created public outcry. The frequency with which police kill African American men has caused some to believe that such acts are not accidental, but rather speak to racial discrimination and a lack of concern for black bodies (Embrick, 2015). Previous literature has found that African American men are hypervigilant about their body as it relates to police interaction and treatment. Najdowski, Bottoms, and Goff (2015), in a sample of undergraduate students, found that Black men were more likely than Whites to be concerned that police would stereotype them as criminals. This stereotype threat may be a source of stress for African American men. In fact, a recent study found that African American men had higher levels of stress related to police contact than African American women (Landers et al., 2011). Dittolo and Stewart's (2008) qualitative study with a sample of "middle-aged" Black and White men and women further articulates African American men's experiences and concerns about the police. Nearly all of the Black participants in the study mentioned discrimination faced by police as a result of race and gender, and some expressed distress related to the wellbeing of their sons or younger black men as it related to their interactions with police. The underlying discourse expressed was that being a black man in America carries with it police victimization. Therefore, police stress or the threat of being viewed as a criminal is likely an additional stressor for African American men. While this threat is something that African American men contend with, it could be assumed that the women in these men's lives also experience some level of stress associated with what may happen to their sons, fathers, husbands, boyfriends as a result of police interaction.

*African American women and stress.* While the stereotypic view that African American men are criminals creates external stress for African American men, for African American women, the internalization of certain stereotypes may be a source of stress. The “Strong Black Woman” or “Superwoman” stereotype depicts African American women as strong and resilient. African American women are thought to continually overcome and survive the burdens placed on them by their families, friends and larger society. Many African American women have come to adopt and even to some degree embrace this stereotype because of the assumed positive quality of “overcoming”. While researchers have hypothesized that the internalization of this stereotype may contribute to depression among African American women (Beauboeuf-Lefontant, 2009), research has also found that a belief in this stereotype may expose women to multiple stressors. In a qualitative study that explored the impact of the “Superwoman” schema on African American women, the focus group revealed that they felt the need to suppress their feelings and maintain an appearance of strength. This assumed strength often caused them to take on and deal with other people’s problems (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Therefore, not only does the “Strong Black Woman” stereotype require African American women to bear the burden of their family and friends, but it also causes them to believe that they should not or cannot ask for help. It seems plausible that adopting such an identity may create isolation.

*Gender and race-related stress.* Although African Americans encounter racism, the type of racism that one experiences is often determined by gender (Collins, 2000). Gendered-racism takes into consideration that the intersection of one’s race and sex, in combination, play a role in the encounter and one may not have the same experience if

the identities were independent of one another (Essed, 1990). A widely publicized example of how racism is gendered can be found in the controversial comment made by radio personnel, Don Imus. His reference to the women's Rutgers basketball team as "nappy headed hoes," (Faber, 2007) displays the interplay of how often times racism incorporates both racial and gender components.

A qualitative study conducted by Nuru-Jeter et al. (2009) found that African American women acknowledged encountering interpersonal, institutional, and internalized racism throughout their entire lives, and they expressed believing that such experiences had a lasting effect. Similarly, in a study conducted by Pieterse and Carter (2007), 53% to 67% of the men indicated that they believed their life would have been different if they had not experienced racist events over the past month or year. Therefore, both men and women acknowledge racist experiences and the influence that such experiences may have had on their life. Given that one cannot change their race, one is unable to escape the negative experiences that this identity can potentially bring. Living in this reality may bring up feelings of powerlessness and anger (Pittman, 2011; Thomas, 2009), which has individual and relational implications.

While both African American men and women may recognize racism and the repercussions it may have had or will have on their life, men and women appear to differ in their conceptualization of race-related stress. In a study of African American woman ages 21 to 78, neither generic stress, race-related stress nor gender-related stress uniquely contributed to distress. Therefore, all three types of stress were intertwined, contributing to the distress experienced, as opposed to race-related stress having an individual contribution (Woods-Giscombé & Lobel, 2008). In contrast, Pieterse and Carter (2007)

found that after controlling for general life stress, race-related stress was a unique predictor of psychological distress and well-being for middle-class African American men; however, for working class African American men, race-related stress was only a distinctive predictor of psychological distress, but not psychological well-being. Therefore, there gender and socioeconomic factors appear to dictate the way in which African Americans make sense of the racist events experienced and the implications it may have on their psychological health.

**Socio-cultural stress and African Americans.** One's socioeconomic status brings with it a host of potential stressors. A study with a sample of African American men from the Los Angeles area found that 60% of the participants cited finances or money as a source of stress (Chung, Meldrum, Jones, Brown & Jones, 2014). In 2014, the national median household income was \$53,657. The median household income for Whites was \$56, 866 compared to \$35, 398 for Blacks. In fact, 26.2% of Blacks were found to be living below the poverty line compared to a 14.8% for the national average (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015). Financial difficulty not only has the potential to serve as a direct stressor, but one's finances can open the door to one experiencing other types of situations/experiences which may be a source of stress, such as expectations to financially assist extended family, etc.

One's social capital has a grave influence on the types of experiences that are encountered and overall quality of life. For example, it has been found that persons with lower socioeconomic positions are more likely to experience traumatic events (Alim et al., 2006; Williams, 1999), with these traumatic events often taking place within their neighborhoods. Previous research has found that the stress associated with neighborhood



disorder is related to psychological problems, such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptoms, as well as substance abuse (Gapen et al., 2011; Goldmann et al., 2011; Siming, Wijngaarden & Conwell, 2012). Therefore, for African Americans who live within the lower strata of socioeconomic status, neighborhood disorder may serve as an additional source of stress. Risky environments have negative implications for families and children and can spark other types of stressors (Lamis et al., 2014; Latkin & Curry, 2003). In a study of low-income African American mothers, researchers found that when neighborhood disorder was in the medium or high range, existential well-being and religiosity, potential coping strategies, were still associated with high levels of parenting stress (Lamis et al., 2014). Therefore, it seems that neighborhood disorder, if too high, may render coping strategies ineffective.

In the same vein, socioeconomic status is directly linked to employment. The sociologist W.E.B DuBois described African Americans possessing a “double consciousness” (DuBois, 1994). This label describes the way in which African Americans are forced to live in a manner that is both congruent and true to their own culture, while also transforming themselves, in language, dress, mannerism, etc., in settings that require them to be more Eurocentric in nature. While every work place carries with it its own culture, it is usually aligned more with European values, beliefs, and work ethic. The burden on adjusting to the culture is placed on African Americans (Reid, Romans, & Koch, 2014), and such an adjustment may result in stress. Previous research has found that from a sample of African American professionals those who choose assimilation, or adopted White culture and society, as an acculturation strategy reported higher levels of work related stress and felt they lacked more organizational

support (Reid, Romans, & Koch, 2014). Other work related characteristics are related to stress among African Americans. In a sample of professional African American men and women, stress was negatively associated with locus of control at work and work-related support. In addition, 44% of the sample in this study held a doctorate degree (Holder & Vaux, 1998). This might suggest that even educational level does not eliminate the influence that work characteristics have on stress experienced by African Americans. Similarly, in a study of married African American women, participants with supervisory roles, those with less positive work-place culture, and in a high demand job had more work-family stress (Cole & Secret, 2012). Taken together, work dynamics and trying to effectively handle both responsibilities of work and family may be stressful for African Americans.

While each of the aforementioned studies focus on stressors from the individual perspective, those same stressors have implications for couples. The stressors that African Americans face appear to be dictated by both gender and race, and to some degree both identities. The Stress-Divorce Model takes into consideration that stressors outside of the relationship may spill over impacting the relationship (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). Therefore, the race-related, gendered, and socio-cultural stress that African Americans experience on the individual level may ultimately have implications for their romantic relationship. This seems especially salient given that African Americans experience higher rates of stress; therefore, when an African American enters into a relationship with one another, there are potentially two persons uniting who are experiencing a high level of stress.

## **Stress and African American Heterosexual Romantic Relationships**

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (1989) outlines the dynamic, multi-layered systems in which individuals live and operate inside. Although people experience these systems on an individual level, the interaction between person and environment, or systems, has dyadic implications. Although the Stress-Divorce Model is composed of several components there are two critical assertions relevant to the current study: 1) chronic everyday stress spills over into the relationship and; 2) stress negatively impacts the relational functioning and couple's evaluation of the relationship. Few studies have used the Stress-Divorce Model explicitly to guide their research; however, many studies have provided support for the model. Research has documented the effects of stress on romantic relationships and its influence in increasing the internal stress of couples (Merz, Meuwly, Randall, & Bodenmann, 2014). Previous research has found that minor stressors, as opposed to major stressors, are particularly impactful. Furthermore, empirical literature have found support for the negative influence of a variety of stressors, such as economic stress, work-related stress, severe chronic illnesses, etc., on romantic relationships (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009).

While stress on romantic relationships has gained exposure within empirical literature, there are only a handful of studies that examine the impact of external stress on African American heterosexual romantic relationships (i.e., Taylor, 1990, Wickerana, & Bryant, 2015). However, the information that can be extracted from these studies and other studies that have explored external stress and romantic relationships with other samples provide more support for the importance of investigating external stress on African American heterosexual romantic relationships.

**Stress spillover and African American heterosexual romantic relationships.**

A couple's dissatisfaction with and dissolution of romantic relationships are tied to their social and economic context (Story & Bradbury, 2004). Pressures experienced from the outside world and interpersonal conflicts are something with which couples across racial and ethnic boundaries have to contend; however, it has been discussed that African Americans are a group particularly vulnerable to threats negatively impacting their relationships (Allen & Helm, 2013). While race-related stress has been associated with both psychological and physical distress at the individual level (Clark, 1999), external stress can spill over into intimate relationships and adversely impact daily relationship experiences (Neff & Karney, 2009). Consistent exposure to racism and prejudice may influence African American couples, as previous research has found that in a sample of married African American couples, husbands who have higher levels of internalized racism reported lower self-rated marital satisfaction (Broman, 2001; Taylor, 1990). Similarly, in a sample of highly educated African American men and women, the higher endorsement of stereotypic roles of African American women predicted lower levels of self-rated relationship satisfaction (Fisher & Coleman, 2013). Therefore, the racism that African Americans experience from society can infiltrate their relationship, through the transmission of a partner's belief in or internalization of these concepts.

While studies have shifted in their conceptualization of African American relationships from a pathology base to a strength base, even those components within African American heterosexual couples that are considered strength can be a source of stress and detrimental to their relationship. For example, extended families are considered a source of strength for African American families. The reliance and the

close tie found among African Americans have been found to cause them to share and spread both resources (McAdoo, 1982). Therefore, in essence, a family member's burden may become one's own. While the tie of the close family, may allow for more support, it can also create of a strain for African American couples. In a qualitative study with a sample of divorced African American men, researchers wanted to gain an understanding of factors that contributed to divorce from African American men's perspective. One theme that emerged was the responsibility of taking care of the extended family. Some of the men discussed the strain placed upon them when trying to tend to both their extended and immediate family. Attempting to take care of the extended family created resentment and distance from their partner, which eventually led to divorce (Lawson & Thompson, 1995). These studies appear to suggest that attempting to provide support to both extended and immediate family can potentially create relational issues.

Previous studies have also provided support for the spillover of financial difficulty and work related problems on marital satisfaction among mixed-sampled and African American sampled studies. Using data taken from the America's Changing Lives survey, Broman (2001) found that decision latitude was positively related to marital harmony. For this study, decision latitude was defined as one's ability to have a say in what happens at their job and decide their duties in their job. Therefore, it appears that a lack of control at work may be detrimental to African American couples. Taken together, there appears to be empirical evidence that external stress does spillover into the romantic relationships of African American couples, which is congruent with the first portion of the Stress-Divorce-Model.

### **Stress, relational functioning and African American heterosexual**

**relationships.** Stress not only negatively influences relationship satisfaction, but also impacts relational functioning (Harper, Schaalje, & Sandberg, 2000; Schulz, Cowan, Cowan, & Brennan, 2004). For example, higher stress levels have been found to be associated with less sexual activity, more negative communication patterns, less closeness and more negative emotions (Lavee & Ben-ari, 2007; Ledermann, Bodenmann, Rudaz, & Bradbury, 2010; Lewandowski, Mattingly, & Pederiro, 2014; Schar & Poffet, 2010). In a retrospective study, Bodenmann et al. (2007) sought to explore the reason for divorce for couples across three nations, Germany, Italy, and Switzerland. The researchers found that there were slight differences in the reasons for divorce among participants based on gender and nationality. However, all participants reported that trivial everyday stressors were an important factor contributing to their decision to divorce; however, these stressors were not considered the primary reasons for divorce but rather cultivated the relationship in such a way to permit other damaging circumstances to take place, which ultimately negatively impacted the relationship.

Economic pressures have been a source of stress for couples, particularly among African American couples as it has found to be a significant stressor for African American married couples across the lifespan (Conger, 2002; Lincoln & Chae, 2010). By investigating the impact of economic pressure on a sample of newly married African American heterosexual couples, researchers found that husbands and wives who had higher levels of economic pressure also had higher levels of depressive symptoms. In addition, couples that had higher levels of depressive symptoms had lower levels of perceived spousal support. Therefore, economic stress has psychological and

interpersonal consequences for African American couples (O'Neal, Arnold, Lucier-Greer, Wickerana & Bryant, 2015).

Previous research has found that when both partners have to face the same stressor it may deplete their emotional resources; therefore, causing both partners to focus on their own needs and preventing them from focusing on their partner (Gottlieb and Wagner, 1991). This attention to self as opposed to attention to one's partner may ultimately create distance among couples. In fact previous research found that distressed and non-distressed couples could be differentiated by the frequency and source of stressors, with more stressors and stress leading to distress in couples (Bird, Schuham, Benson, & Gans, 1981). In regards to stress and African American couples, while there are few studies that examine this relationship, even fewer studies have explored the way in which stress has impacted the functioning of African American romantic heterosexual relationships. Therefore, although we can infer that stress has a negative impact on couples, and may be particularly detrimental to African American couples because of their high levels of stress, there is less understanding regarding how this stress may influence the way in which African American men and women interact with one another or how such stress impacts the quality of their relationship. Research has found that higher levels of stress may literally color a person's lens by which they view their relationship making it difficult for couples to differentiate the affect they are experiencing as a result of the stress and the affect that they may be experiencing from their relationship (Neff & Karney, 2004). Therefore, the evaluation of one's relationships becomes clouded by one's stress, which increases the negative cognitive content. This appears to provide one explanation why African Americans have consistently been found

to report lowered perceived relationship satisfaction compared to other racial and ethnic groups (Broman, 2005; Lincoln, Taylor, & Jackson, 2008). Given the high and varied individual stressors experienced by African Americans, there is merit in examining the role that external stress may have on African American heterosexual romantic relationships.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Individual and dyadic outcomes are influenced by larger contexts such as society and the community (Gapen et al., 2011). The domain of romantic relationships in the empirical literature is vast. However, there are significant gaps in the literature, primarily as it relates to the African American heterosexual couples. Although African Americans suffer from low levels of marriage rates and high rates of divorce, the empirical literature conducted does not sufficiently explore external barriers or stressors that may be impacting the way in which African Americans' function while in relationships. Previous studies have found that financial stress, racism and neighborhood disorder negatively impact African American couples; however, the use of quantitative methods restricts the types of stressors explored and dictates how relationship functioning and satisfaction are operationalized. The use of qualitative methods not only give couples the chance to articulate their perspective on how stressors have influenced their relationship, but also allows for the discovery of identifying additional perceived external stressors for African Americans heterosexual relationships.

### **Current Study**

Given the high levels of stress uniquely experienced by African Americans, because of their race and socioeconomic position within American society, and



oftentimes mitigated by gender, it seems critical to examine the impact of external stress on the functioning and quality of their heterosexual relationships. The Stress-Divorce Model outlines the way in which chronic daily stressors lead to dissatisfaction and ultimately relationship disruption. While there are several pieces to the model, the two major mechanisms are: 1) chronic everyday stress spills over into the relationship and 2) stress negatively impacts the relational functioning and couple's evaluation of the relationship. Given the importance of these two components, the current study, through the use of qualitative methods and a sample of middle-class married couples identified external stressors experienced by African American heterosexual couples and discovered the ways in which these identified stressors impacted their relationship. The use of couples identified as middle-class, as opposed to couple's in poverty, were chosen in order to avoid finances potentially being the primary external stressor across couples and to gain wider understanding of stressors. Therefore, in using couples with some social status navigated stress within their marriage.

### **Research Questions**

The use of qualitative methods to better understand the stress experienced by African American heterosexual married couples produces information that is richer and more nuanced than the extant literature. Given that a small portion of studies have explored the impact of stressors on African American intimate relationships quantitative measures that have been used to assess stress may not accurately capture the specific stressors that African American couples experience; thereby, limiting our understanding of the stressors that ultimately may be influencing the functioning and overall relationship satisfaction of these couples.

The research questions that were specifically addressed in this current study include:

1. What external stressors do heterosexual African American married couples identify?
2. To what degree are these external stressors perceived as taxing to the married couple?
3. How does external stress experienced by one or both partners influence African American heterosexual married couples' relational functioning?
4. How does external stress experienced by one or both partners influence African American heterosexual married couples' perception of their relationship?

## **Chapter III**

### **Methods**

#### **Methodological Approach**

Grounded theory (GT) was proposed in 1967 by sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (Higginbottom & Lauriden, 2014; Robrecht, 1995). The cornerstone of GT is its use of the inductive method. Researchers who use GT are charged with formulating a theory through contact with the collected data as opposed to creating a theory out of prior knowledge or testing an already established theory (Creswell, 1998; Higginbottom & Lauriden, 2014). The original GT model follows a cyclical pattern, which calls for the systematic process of collecting, coding, analyzing and theoretically categorizing the data through constant contact and familiarity with the collected data (Higginbottom & Lauriden, 2014). Relevant to this study, is a second generation GT, Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT). Although GT is still a widely used qualitative framework, students of Glaser and Strauss created what are known as second generation GT. These qualitative frameworks have the some foundational components of GT, but include differing perspectives of analysis and/or conceptualization.

#### **Constructivist Grounded Theory**

Charmez, a student of Strauss, took GT and approached it from a constructivist perspective. Constructivism denies the existence of an objective reality, but rather makes the claim that realities are socially constructed; therefore, it carries the assumption that there are multiple realities (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Constructivism takes a relativist ontological perspective, which asserts that things, such as good, bad, truth, wrong, etc. are all influenced by the context (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Considering the context in

which African American relationships function allows one to more accurately determine if specific relational behaviors and interactions are adaptive or maladaptive.

Furthermore, assessing African American romantic relationships through a contextual lens breaks the cycle of expecting African Americans to adhere to the same romantic relational strategies as other racial and ethnic groups.

The process of CGT is closely aligned with the original GT, specifically in that both theories use inductive reasoning, employ constant comparative method, and work to develop analytical categories, which given the researchers' decision can be formulated into a theory. However, with CGT, Charmez took the stance that the researcher was not and could not separate him or herself from the research (Charmez, 2014). This is the main concept that separates the two approaches. CGT eliminates the assumption that the researcher is a neutral observer. This allows for an examination of how one's values may shape the analysis, as opposed to discounting its existence entirely. As a result, the final product that is generated from CGT is conceptually different than what is formulated from the use of a GT model. More specifically, CGT is grounded in the assumption that it is not just the participants who create reality; the analytic categories obtained are assumed to be co-created by the researcher and the participants. The final product extracted from the interviews is also not assumed to represent the ultimate or total reality, but rather just one possible co-created reality (Charmez, 2014). My position is that reality is a construction of a person's beliefs, experiences, and perception. I take the stance that my personhood, including phenotypical characteristics and personality factors, has an impact on my interpersonal interactions; as our exchanges with people are often influenced by the biases we have about a person based on the way they look. Therefore,

my being an African American woman may elicit a different response from my participants than a White male. Therefore, the results from the study will be a construction of the couples' experience, their interaction with me during the interview and my own understanding of their story and relationship.

### **Rationale**

**Methodological theory.** My interest in African American romantic relationships is long-standing, but it became more pronounced at the start of graduate school when faced with the task of having to examine more closely a topic to research. My starting graduate school was also around the same time that being an “educated black woman” was communicated by the media as a handicap and not an asset in obtaining a viable partner. As a self-identified African American heterosexual, single woman, who was pursuing more education, this caused some concern. Being warned about the dangers of being an educated black woman and seeing repeated discussions on social and mainstream media about the declining marriage rates of African Americans caused me to reflect on the romantic relationships I had observed throughout my life. What I saw were family and friends who had experienced repeated failed relationships and were disappointed by partners. I began to wonder: Wasn't this true for all racial and ethnic groups? Were there not pockets of people within all groups that divorced and broke up? What sets African Americans apart? I wanted to know more about what was preventing African American men and women from getting on common ground and building sustainable healthy relationships.

My personal experiences and research on the topic has caused me to believe that African Americans interface with multiple layers of macro- and micro- barriers that

create challenges in developing healthy, thereby, sustainable romantic relationships. The individual issues and stressors that African Americans experience not only have individual implications, but also create ripples at the dyadic level. I believe that the psychological and sexual trauma experienced by slaves are embedded within the genes of African Americans and unconsciously plays a role in the beliefs and behaviors that are displayed and through epigenetics are passed down across generations. Additionally, institutional racism has set in place policies and practices that have at times caused a deeper wedge between Black men and women. For example, the disproportionate rates of the mass incarceration of African American men not only breaks up families and creates a cascade of economic hardships, it also has implications for the number of perceived available partners for African American women. Furthermore, the African American community's popular music genres, Rap and R&B, particularly among Millennials and Generation Z, consistently present messages that normalize sexual promiscuity and infidelity. In some of these songs, being a "side piece" is an honor. It is my belief that this only works to encourage superficial and surface level relationships and not deeper connections. In total, these dynamic factors work together to make it difficult for African American men and women to obtain and maintain healthy, committed romantic relationships.

My personal interest and investment in understanding the needs of African American couples presumably influenced my interaction with participants and the data through my personal investment in the study. In acknowledging that I have personal biases and assumptions about this topic, which have assisted in crafting my research area of inquiry, CGT is an appropriate framework to use because it takes into consideration

that I, the researcher, cannot fully separate myself from the research (Charmez, 2014). Using CGT provides me with the freedom to admit and examine the way in which the research findings are influenced by my reality.

Research on and about African Americans has often been used as an avenue to perpetuate the invisibility, marginalization, and discrimination experienced by the group (Bell, Bouie, & Baldwin, 1990; Dickson, 1993; Moynihan Report, 1965). The qualitative methods of CGT gives participants' the space for their stories and perspectives to be heard. Participants have the opportunity to dialogue with the researcher and their partner as opposed to completing a quantitative survey, which confines participants to pre-selected constructs. Although semi-structured questions were used to guide the interviews, participants had the autonomy to talk about components of their marriage and stress that they deemed as important to them and their relationship. This provided participants with the power to have a conversation about their own personal experiences, as opposed to being forced to follow the researchers' agenda. Ultimately, participation in the study provided more insight into African American married couples' relationships.

Charmez (2014) indicates that there is not an arbitrary or defined rule to determine the number of interviews that should be conducted. The goal of CGT is to saturate the conceptual categories, as opposed to saturating the data (Charmez, 2014). Saturation of the category occurs when no new dimensions of an established category can be achieved. Therefore, obtaining additional data would not create novel insights. Hypothetically, depending on the research questions, categorical saturation can occur with a small number of interviews. This demonstrates the importance of constant engagement with the data, as opposed to analyzing and coding the data after all the interviews have been

conducted. Interacting with the data during the data collection process is necessary in order to have a better understanding of what the data may be revealing, which may have an impact on the interview guide for subsequent interviews.

### **Procedures**

The University of Houston Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved all study materials before the start of the study. For the purposes of the study, 10 self-identified African American heterosexual married couples were recruited. This sample size was pre-selected in order to ensure that enough data could be obtained, but also to guarantee that the study could be completed with consideration that the study was being conducted to fulfill an academic requirement. Therefore, the saturation method typically used in CGT was not used within this study.

Participants were obtained through purposeful sampling by recruiting couples that potentially met the study criteria. Participants were specifically recruited through social media, direct email, and word of mouth. The principal investigator sent emails to persons identified by colleagues and friends who potentially met the study criteria, as well as to persons who could assist in the recruiting process by forwarding the information to others. Social media and direct email scripts, approved by IRB, outlined the purpose of the study, as well as included study inclusion criteria. When participants expressed interest in being a part of the study, the inclusion criteria were again provided, in order to ensure participants did, in fact, meet the study's criteria. If participants met study criteria, they were emailed a copy of the consent form through the platform Docusign and asked to read and electronically sign the document. Docusign was specifically chosen because of its secure server and user-friendly platform. The consent form provided to



participants outlined the purpose of the study, limits of confidentiality, and the right to quit the study at any time, without penalty. Additionally, the consent to have their interviews audiotaped was requested and included in the consent form. The consent form also outlined that couples would be entered into a raffle to win a \$50 Visa gift card as an incentive for their participation.

All couples that expressed interest in the study met the inclusion criteria; therefore, no couples were excluded from the study by the researcher. However, three couples that expressed interest in the study did not participate. For two of the couples, the researcher and couples were unable to find a common day and time where all interviews could be conducted. One couple dropped out of the study before the scheduled interview day due to the husband being apprehensive about being a part of the study. A total of 30 interviews (10 couples/three interviews per couple) were conducted for this study. Before the interviews formally began, couples were read a script (Appendix A), which provided additional information about the purpose of the study, psychoeducation about external stress, and reiterated that they had the right to refuse to answer any questions if they felt uncomfortable at any time. At the end of the script, couples were encouraged to ask questions. Couples were reminded that their interviews would be audiotaped.

Each couple participated in an individual and couple interview. Individual interviews were conducted first followed by the couple interview. This ordering was selected in order to prevent a participant's response from contaminating their spouse's response. Interviews were conducted by either a video chat platform, such as Skype and Facetime, or through the telephone. The platform used to conduct the interviews was based on what was most convenient and available to the couple. For each couple, all

interviews were conducted on the same day and performed sequentially without a break. This was done in order to prevent couples from talking to one another about their responses or asking each other questions about the interview process. Couples were asked to negotiate among themselves which partner would complete their interview first. For all but two couples, the wife was the first partner to be interviewed. Couples were reminded that individual interviews should be completed away from their partner. Before the start of each individual interview, participants were asked to confirm that their partner was in another room or out of ear range. Each participant confirmed that his or her spouse was in another part of the home and could not hear him or her.

At the start of the individual interview, the demographic survey was administered. The principal investigator chose to complete the demographic survey at the start of the interviews to ensure that the survey could be completed without the partner present. Using technology to complete surveys limits the control that the researcher has on the environment in which participants complete the form. Since the survey contained some questions that participants may have felt uncomfortable answering truthfully in the presence of their partner, it was determined best to include the demographic survey at the time of the interview in hopes that accurate information could be gathered. At the end of the three interviews, participants were thanked for their participation. The entire interview experience lasted approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes in length. After the interviews were completed, couples were emailed a Microsoft Word document that provided information on how to find a couple's therapist in their area, if desired, and a list of references for books and articles on stress and marriage were provided.

## **Participants**

All couples that were recruited and participated in the qualifying survey met the inclusion criteria and participated in the study. For the purposes of confidentiality, a pseudonym for each participant was created. Table 1 outlines the demographics of the participants, including age, highest education obtained, estimated combined yearly income, length of years together (including dating and married years), length of years married, and number of children. The mean age for the participants in the study was 35.5 years old. The mean length of time couples had been married was 7.2 years and the mean length of time couples were together, including dating and married years, was 11 years. None of the couples in the study reported being separated at any time during their marriage, and all couples indicated that they currently lived with their spouse. In regards to infidelity, all participants denied being involved in current and previous emotional and physical extramarital relationships while married. In addition, all participants denied having knowledge of or suspecting their partners of cheating.

The sample of couples within the study ranged in their highest level of education obtained from GED/high school diploma to graduate/professional degree. For 6 of the 10 couples, wives had a higher level of education than their husband. Couples also ranged in their estimated yearly income. Among participants the most frequent mode reported was an estimated yearly income of more than \$70,000. This suggests that couples combined estimated yearly income was \$140,000 or more. In 2014, it was found that the mean income for African American households was \$43,000 and the estimated income for the households of African Americans who were college-educated was \$82,300 (Vega,

2016). This indicates the couples included in the sample are representative of the average African American household in terms of socioeconomic status.

Of the 10 couples, nine reported having children; however, for three of these couples, the child/children were from a previous relationship. For two of these couples, the husband was the biological parent of the child and for one the biological parent was the wife. Of the three couples who had stepchildren, only one couple, whose biological parent was the wife, indicated that these children lived in their home fulltime. The other two couples reported that their stepchildren were only in the home on weekends, summer months and/or specific holidays. None of the couples within the study reported ever experiencing a miscarriage while married. Complete participant demographics can be found in Appendix E.

### **Data Collected**

**Instruments.** *Pre-Screening Survey.* Participants were asked a series of questions prior to the start of the interview to ensure that they met the study criteria. Pre-screening questions gathered information pertaining to age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, length of relationship and relationship status.

*Demographics Survey.* Demographic information obtained included: cohabitation status, length of relationship, highest education obtained by each member of the couple, estimated yearly income, number of children (birth, adoption, and marriage)/pregnancies (to term and miscarriage), information regarding infidelity (frequency) and duration of any separations. The demographic questionnaire can be found in Appendix B.

*Interviews.* The primary source of data collection was obtained through interviews. The interview guides can be found in Appendices C and D. The protocol included

specific open-ended questions intentionally written to obtain information related to the study's research questions. Question three of the individual interview and question two of the couple interview ("What have been some specific external stressors that you have had to face as a couple?") was intended to gather information regarding the specific stressors identified by these African American couples. Question four of the individual interview ("What was your relationship like during this time?") and question three and four of the couple interview ("What external stressor do you think has had the most impact on your relationship?" "Why did you consider this stressor the most impactful to your relationship?") were included to determine how taxing these stressors were to their relationship. In order to gain insight to the way in which external stressors were impacting these couple's relationship functioning, question five on the individual interview protocol ("Looking back, how do you think that the stress you experienced influenced the way you two interacted with one another?") and questions five and six on the couple interview ("What changes, if at all, did you see in your relationship when you two were facing this external stressor?"; "Looking back, how has external stress influenced the way you have interacted with one another?") were included. Questions six and seven ("Looking back, how did the stress influence the way you felt or thought about your relationship?"; "Looking back, how did the stress influence the way you felt or thought about your partner?") of the individual interview were included to obtain information about how external stress impacts the perception of one's relationship and partner. In addition to specific questions included for the purposes of the research questions, there were questions intended to build rapport with the couples and ease participants into talking about more personal, potentially stressful topics, such as "How

did you and your spouse meet?” There were also questions aimed at how couples recovered from their stressors (“How did you and your partner recover from this stressor?”; “What are the most important lessons you learned from these external stressors that you two faced?”). The protocol allowed for flexibility to probe for additional information from participants when desired. Probing for additional information was warranted if clarification or further explanation about a given concept, experience or idea was needed.

## **Analysis**

**Coding.** Various coding methods, aligned with CGT, were used to construct themes. Broadly, coding is a process in which raw segments of the data are analyzed in order to begin labeling each piece, which will over time be filtered into specific categories. Coding is an ongoing process, and given what emerges, it may influence the interview through the addition and/or subtraction of specific questions. For the current study, additional querying questions were asked to obtain further information about the phenomena discussed within the interview.

The first set of coding conducted was initial codes. The initial coding process included line-by-line coding, which involved going through each transcript and, when able, providing codes. The primary investigator transcribed each interview and transported the interview into an excel spreadsheet in order to complete the line-by-line coding. Initial codes are closely tied to the data and explicitly describe the data. For example, for the line “...*I think I expected her to come out and adapt really quickly and it make me...*” the initial code was “*assumed wife would adapt to new environment*”.

After initial codes for each interview were completed, a constant comparative method was used. This technique allows for the researcher to look across interviews comparing initial codes. For this study, the principal investigator compared interviews between couples, as well as interviews across couples. This technique allows the researcher to look beyond one interview and begin to make connections between and sense of all interviews in total.

After initial codes and the constant comparative method were complete, each interview was examined using focused coding. This particular type of coding allows the investigator to be more abstract and conceptual in their coding. Looking across interviews and performing within interview comparisons may expose another layer of action, belief, or process within the data. These codes are more abstract and are less constrained to the data, but are representative and informed by the data. Focused coding allows the researcher to look at larger chunks of the data. In essence, these methods work to fragment the data in order to obtain a clearer view of what exactly is taking place (Charmez, 2014). Using the same example mentioned earlier, for the line “*...I think I expected her to come out and adapt really quickly and it make me...*” the focused code was “*unfilled expectations impacted perception of partner*”. They provide a larger picture of the data and assist with the creation of analytic categories.

### **Rigor**

One of the criticisms of qualitative research is the relative absence of reliability and validity associated with quantitative research. Rigor is then often demonstrated with trustworthiness and goodness from a qualitative lens (Hays, Wood, Dahl, & Kirk-Jenkins, 2016). There are different types of methods used to establish rigor. For this study, a

methodological journal and a review by an independent researcher were implemented in order to increase the trustworthiness of the study's results.

The methodological journal was kept throughout the study. Within the journal, the principal investigator wrote down reactions post-interview, as well as, ideas that came to mind while looking through the data in order to assist in later coding and theme development. In addition, the methodological journal allows the researcher to see if his/her own biases or opinions were shaping the data. An excerpt from the journal includes:

The way that couples appear to reflect one another in language, stressors experienced and even stress response is interesting. Unsure if this is due to their being together for a long period of time or similarities in personality. Also, seems that having outside parties in order for couples to normalize their experiences is helpful and useful for growth.

Once themes were created, an independent researcher was recruited to audit the codes and themes. The independent researcher for this study was an African American, heterosexual, Counseling Psychology doctoral student, with previous experience with grounded theory, qualitative data coding, and thematic creation. The independent researcher was provided access to the interviews, codebook, and a document, which outlined themes. No participant identifying markers were included in the information provided to the independent researcher. The independent researcher analyzed the codes and themes and determined if the same codes and themes could be found. In her audit, the independent researcher agreed with the themes initially found within the data; however, the independent researcher made suggestions regarding the inclusion of



additional components to various themes. The independent and principal researcher engaged in a dialogue to better understand one another and to ultimately determine what seemed appropriate given the data. The researchers came to an agreement on the final listing of themes. Since the principal investigator transcribed the data, the independent research also audited 10% of the transcribed data to ensure accuracy. No discrepancies in transcriptions were found.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Results**

One of the study's aims was to identify specific external stressors experienced by African American married couples. Participants were given the opportunity in both the individual and couple interview to identify and discuss as many external stressors desired. Despite not having any restrictions on the amount or type of external stressors asked to discuss, the study's participants identified a common set of stressors. In specific, there were six discernible, unique sources of stress identified by the couples.

#### **External Stress Identified by African American Married Couples**

Out of the 20 participants, 13 of the participants identified work/career stressors, 10 identified financial stressors, eight mentioned parenting/co-parenting as a stressor, four of participants identified grief, three of the participants reported extended family as a stressor, and two of the participants reported environment as a stressor. In 15 out of the 20 individual interviews, participants cited the same stressors as their partner. In five out of the 20 individual interviews, participants cited a unique stressor not mentioned by their partner. For example, in Rebecca's individual interview she reported parenting, among others, as an external stressor. However, James, her husband, did not mention parenting as a stressor in his individual interview. The couple interview allowed participants to again identify external stressors. In all cases, when a unique stressor was mentioned in an individual interview, the spouse that had not recognized that stressor subsequently agreed with their spouse about the stressor during the couple interview. For example, in his individual interview, Brian reported an environmental stressor, namely having to deal with a landlord, who constantly made him feel like he was being microaggressed.

However, Mary did not identify this stressor in her individual interview. When Brian identified this stressor in the couple interview, Mary reported, “I forgot to mention that because I feel like I blocked it out since we moved.” She went on to describe the environmental stress in more detail. Despite slight differences in the stressors reported in some individual interviews, couples were easily able to come to a consensus on their perceived external stressors.

**Origin and Duration of Stressors.** Of the six stressors identified (i.e., work/career, financial, parenting/co-parenting, grief, environment, family), one acknowledged stressor, parenting, was not external. In situations where parenting was identified as a stressor, couples were still given the opportunity to talk about the stressor and subsequent stress experienced, as to allow the researcher the chance to obtain more insight surrounding the role of stress on African American marriages. Three of the 10 couples specifically talked about the internal stress that they experience within their relationship due to differences in opinions and approaches to parenting. For example, Tiffany stated:

He (her husband) is a little more structured...I spoil our son. That can look a little bit like chaos to be honest. We try to balance and we try to observe each other but sometimes that doesn't come out nice.

Because the stress experienced from parenting differences arises from an interpersonal conflict between partners, as opposed to being driven by an outside force, this particular stressor would not fall under the umbrella of external. However, in some situations parenting can be an external stressor. For example, Gina discussed the difficulty that she and her husband experienced trying to co-parent with her husband's daughter's mother.

Since the stress that they experienced originates outside of the relationship, but ultimately impacted their relationship, this is considered an external stressor. For the purposes of this study, co-parenting and parenting stressors were collapsed together.

The stressors identified in this study were primarily chronic in nature, as they reflected issues the couple had been dealing with throughout their marriage. All, but one of the stressors, grief, can be classified as a minor stressor or daily hassle. Minor stressors are stressors interfaced on a consistent basis. For example, finances or dealing with co-workers are potentially an ever-present stressor. They can possibly occur on a daily basis. The one major stressor mentioned in the study, grief, due to the death of a family member or loved one, is different in that major stressors often cause life changing events and are not necessarily experienced daily. For example, the death of a child is considered a major life stressor. This type of stress could cause a couple to move to another city to avoid dealing with memories, adopt a child, separate, etc. One major life stressor can be impactful, whereas minor stressors experienced on a day-to-day basis can be taxing to a relationship.

While couples identified a common set of stressors, couples were in different stages regarding how close they were to overcoming or eliminating their stressors. For example, finances were a constant stressor for Terry and Joyce. When reflecting on their financial situation, he mentioned, "I feel like we be going in a circle sometimes like it's something we ain't doing right." Other couples, such as Brian and Mary, reflected on stressors that had already resolved, as it only took moving from one side of town to another to make their environmental stressor go away. The varied resolution stages of the stressors identified by couples represent the dynamic interaction that couples have

with external stressors.

### **Specific Stressors Identified**

*Career/Work.* Of the 20 individual interviews, 13 of the participants reported their career/work as a stressor. However, couples varied in the aspects of their work/career that made it stressful. For example, four couples indicated that time commitment to work interrupted the ability to obtain quality time with their spouse. For two husbands within the sample, Oscar and Terry, they both held multiple jobs and had more than one child in the household fulltime. These factors directly limited the one-on-one time they could spend with their wives. Oscar was aware of the competing demands between work and spending quality time with his family, and he acknowledged that he was “dealing with the struggle of time and money.” Oscar expressed a desire to spend more time with his family, but he also knew that less time at work would directly impact his paycheck. Similarly, Albert’s quality time with his family was limited due to his job. His work required him to live out of state during the weekdays and only on the weekends could he go home and spend time with his family. Albert mentioned that he often contemplated quitting his job, as the stress of being away from his family was too overwhelming.

For two couples, it was not the time demand that was stressful, but rather it was not yet being on their desired career path. Brian talked about the disappointment of being passed up on promotions. For both he and his wife, Mary, were still working towards gaining access to their ultimately desired jobs. Brian discussed the compounding effect of the stress associated with their not being in their ideal job, additionally, having to manage office politics. According to Brian, dealing with these stressors “made it hard to

even enjoy the good times” with his wife.

For two other couples it was not necessarily the time or dissatisfaction with their current job position, but rather the different personalities with whom they had to interact with at work made it stressful. For Gina and Chris, they encountered negative interactions with co-workers. Gina reflected:

Whenever people look at us individually and our own work areas it brings out a vulnerability in the other person and they usually come down on us and we tell each other the stressful things that they say. It’s usually because the other people, and they are normally white, feel insecure about something within themselves. They end up bringing more stress to us.

Having to deal with co-workers’ insecurity was nothing new for Gina and Chris, and in fact, Gina considered it a “common thing” for them.

Although couples differed in the components that made their work stressful, this type of stressor was primarily experienced independently by a spouse, but ultimately impacted the other partner. A participant’s work/career stress sometimes created stress for their spouse, but other times pulled support and comfort from their spouse. For example, although Albert was the partner experiencing work stress, his wife made sure their home on the weekends was peaceful. She stated, “I just try not to argue with him when he’s at home so he can have a nice and safe space.”

***Financial.*** Career and income are two variables closely associated to one another. Therefore, it was not surprising that the second most consistent stressor cited across all couples was related to money. Similar to work/career stress, across couples, there were unique components pertaining to finances that made it stressful. Participants, in both

their individual and couple interviews, discussed the financial strain of the cost of child daycare, buying a new home, maintaining a substantial savings, and being able to live and maintain the lifestyle desired. For example, Tiffany stated:

I think its economic we try to live within our means but there are things we want to do as a family and together and for our own careers....Daycare is about as much as a mortgage...we have to make those priority calls and try to save for our son and try to do retirement and have a saving plan....We have paid off things in the past which is great, but it's still stressful you are trying to keep up with the times and the cost of living and get jobs that keep you at those levels. It's a continuous thing.

The ongoing demands to maintain financial stability was identified as a chronic stressor by four of the couples within the study.

However, for some couples, their financial stressor was not associated with the maintenance of financial stability, but rather three couples were still working on achieving some sort of financial steadiness. Difficulty with maintaining a budget, having enough income, and getting on the same page about finances with their spouse prevented couples from achieving this shared goal. Even after being together for 15 years, nine years of dating and six years of marriage, for Joyce and Terry financial stress was still very much present in their relationship. Terry stated, "Going month...well no week to week we just got so many different bills from so many different places... Finances are still something you are trying to figure out." Whether a couple had already achieved financial stability or not, finances was identified as a stressor for half of the couples interviewed.

*Parenting/Co-Parenting Stressor.* Various dimensions of parenting caused stress for couples. For some couples, such as Rebecca and James, being a parent added an extra layer of pressure and forced them to talk about issues and responsibilities that might have not been considered before, such as what type of diet the family should have and where they should live in order to ensure good childcare.

For two of the three couples that had a stepchild in the home, co-parenting was cited as a source of stress. For Gina and Chris, the first few years of their marriage were difficult due to having to deal with the mother of Chris' child. Gina stated:

...she (mother of child) was very upset when we first got married and we kind of cut ties....You know it was kind of like a control game...I never had contact with her but I was really upset with the way she talked down to my husband. Bitterness was coming out. Trying to use their daughter as a pawn...I just didn't like the way she was talking down to him and disrupting our relationship...

Gina recalled that she and her husband experienced a lot of conflict in their relationship during this time, evidenced by an increase in arguments and nights spent sleeping in separate parts of the house.

Unlike Chris and Gina, Patricia and Albert's parenting stress came within their relationship. With two children from a previous relationship, Patricia reported feeling criticized when Albert tried to help parent or provide parenting advice. She stated, "It was me for so long and so it's hard for me to accept someone else's advice is coming from a good place. Cause in my mind I am automatically thinking that he is criticizing things". According to Patricia, she is still working on allowing Albert to make suggestions about her parenting without taking it personally; however, she acknowledges



that this is still a point of contention for the two of them.

**Grief.** Two of the couples within the study discussed the impact that the loss of family member and close friends had on their relationship. For Maria and John, the loss of Maria's mother was the only significant external stressor that they had experienced as a couple. For Rebecca and James, grief was a primary stressor, as James had been coping with grief, particularly from the death of his brother and the seemingly continual murders of friends back in his hometown. Rebecca stated that James' grief "ebbed and flowed"; thereby, causing it to be ever present, whether in the forefront of their marriage or in the background.

**Extended Family.** Extended family was also identified as a stressor for three of the couples. Denise discussed the ways in which her family's lack of finances created additional stress on her husband, Chad, the primary breadwinner in their marriage. While financially helping her family did not necessarily cause financial stress for the couple, it was the disagreements in which they would engage when Denise wanted her husband to help her family, but he did not. His placing limitations on how much he would help her family is what created the stress they experienced. Joyce also mentioned that extended family, specifically her brother going in and out of jail and her sister's physical health, caused her stress, which caused her to be "snappy" with her husband at times.

**Environment.** Last, environment as a stressor was mentioned by a two of the couples in the study. For Mary and Brian, environment was, at one time, a major source of stress. During their first year of marriage they lived in a neighborhood that lacked the presence of other African Americans. They felt they were being constantly microaggressed by their landlord and none of their complaints about housing issues were

addressed. They reported feeling uncomfortable and unwelcomed in their own home and neighborhood. The couple decided to do something about their environment. Brian stated, "...we made a very conscious decision that we wanted to be closer to Blacks and we moved to Crenshaw area and I noticed in Mary and myself being a lot less stressed and a lot more content..." According to Brian, moving to a new environment caused noticeable change in their overall interaction with one another.

**Ethnicity and External Stressors.** While participants identified stressors that persons of any race or ethnicity could potentially experience, for these participants, ethnicity appeared to play a unique role. As Leon put it, being African American "magnifies" the stressors experienced. Half of the couples inadvertently talked about the intersection of their stress and ethnicity. For example, Brian and Mary's environmental stress was amplified by the racial microaggressions they received from their landlord. Chris and Gina's work stress was the result of interacting with white co-workers who they felt were jealous of their knowledge base and status. For Oscar, the way he was forced to act because he was an African American man in a corporate job created his stress. He stated,

I have to jump through so many hoops to be heard. Like I just want to do a great job for someone but literally just based on how I look and talk I have to be so docile and so palatable that they will deal with me or on the flip side I've got to let how you really feel slide just so I can deal with you.

It seemed that for many participants the stressors experienced surfaced as a result of their ethnicity. In the same vein, ethnicity also appeared to play a role in assumed resources. When asked his opinion on the impact of being African American on marriage, James

stated, “There are no loans. It’s harder to get a house. It’s harder to get a car. Just everything. Just the things that you need to uphold a relationship or family – some of those things are shorted.” Similarly, Denise felt that she and her husband started behind financially because they had to work towards creating their own capital while also helping her extended family financially. Therefore, it seemed that, for some of the participants in the study being an African American either caused the stress or amplified its presence in their life.

### **Impact of External Stressors on African American Married Couples**

**Theme 1: Response dictated by source.** Every couple within the study was able to identify external stressors experienced. However, the way in which couples responded to external stressors varied by the perceived source of the stressor. Therefore, not all external stressors created conflict, lack of communication and distance within the relationship. Brian illustrated how he and his wife responded according to the source of the stress:

If we decided to be a united front on something, my ex-landlord for example, we communicate fine. If it’s something that either of us is insecure about we tend to react to that differently – our interpersonal relationship changes as a result specifically if we talk about finances or career.

Even though their ex-landlord and apartment served as an environmental stressor, it did not cause the same internal conflict as their financial or career stress. Therefore, stressors thought to be purely outside of one’s control or being imposed upon them created a different reaction than stressors that were thought to be the result of a partner’s negligence or behavior.

For Joyce and Terry their primary stressors were identified as finances and work/career. When asked what their relationship is like when dealing with financial stress, Joyce stated, “I know when he messes up with finances I will...I wouldn’t lash out about it, but I will go hard on him like ‘why?’ or ‘What were you thinking?’ However, when asked how she responds when they are dealing with work/career stress, she stated, “I leave him alone...I know that that is something he is passionate about.. Despite Terry’s job often spilling over and being a source of stress for the both of them, Joyce’s response to the stress was different.

An external stressor that did not seem to have a negative impact on these couples was racism. Many of the couples within the study acknowledged being discriminated against and felt like they had to deal with racism outside of their home. Husbands, such as Brian and James, particularly felt the weight of racism and were impacted by the recent murders of black men at the hands of law enforcement. James acknowledged “shaking” when being pulled over by police and calling his wife and putting her on speakerphone as a way to achieve some “security”. Brian accounted being unable to focus at work after the death of Philando Castile<sup>2</sup>. Despite the weight of this, racism created more unity and brought into perspective what they had in their partner. Mary stated, “When Philando was killed that was big. So I would agree that caused us to unite even more ‘cause the things that we were worried about before that whole week happened it kind of numbed us. We were in mourning”.

Similarly, Tiffany was aware of the high stress levels faced by African American couples; however, she did not feel defeated about the situation because she had her husband and son. She stated:

I think that we can all agree that African American couples are at a point where we deal with high stress being in America...Even with our family we know that we are going to be okay regardless of the situation because we have each other and we have God at the center. That's it.

Although the stressors that are thought to originate outside of one's relationship cannot be stopped or eliminated, the couples took comfort in knowing that at least they could depend on one another.

**Theme 2: Surrender to stress.** Participants talked about their perception of stress. Four of the couples explicitly talked about the inevitability of stress. Participants were aware that life involved stressors and without doubt that meant that their relationship would go through stressful periods. Similarly, James, who had identified finances as a consistent stressor within his marriage, stated:

I always try to put it in her head like, 'hey, we are going to always owe somebody. It's impossible to be debt free and not be homeless. You are going to constantly have to pay some type of bill. You know that everyday or every month a bill is coming you are going to have to pay...

Maria stated, "The bills are always going to be there. Stuff is always going to reoccur every month." Bills, finances and the inevitable responsibility that comes along with that were not seen as something to fight against, but rather a facet of life that they would have to deal with. Couples focused their efforts not on eradicating stressors from entering into their relationship, but rather keeping themselves equipped with tools and skills that could help combat the stress. Brian stated, "There will always be stressors. The solution is to have a strategy to address it..." Couples appeared to be resolved to the idea that stressors

would come; therefore, they did not exhibit unrealistic expectations that because they experienced stress within their relationship something was wrong with their marriage.

**Theme 3: Immediate versus long term consequences of stress.** Participants spoke of the initial negative consequences of external stressors on their relationship. All of the participants recounted how the interaction with their spouse because of these external stressors caused more arguments, less communication and distance. As Gina stated when asked what she and her husband's relationship looked like during times of stress, "Oh it was bad..." However, despite the initial hurdle that the stressor caused, couples were able to bounce back. Many of the participants talked specifically about needing time to "cool off" and "get over the situation". Terry mentioned, "As time goes on I guess whatever the situation was people just move on and everything is cool until something else happens and then it's like here we go again". Some participants even acknowledged that they and their partner needed a different amount of time to get past a situation. Albert mentioned, "I also get over stuff real quickly. I'll be mad about something 5 minutes and I can pretty much put it out of my head. It stays with her longer than it stays with me".

While stressors created discord within the relationship initially, stress actually had a positive consequence in the long run. Couples spoke of how they had gone through and overcome stressors and that was a way for them to see the resiliency and strength of their relationship. Being able to survive stressors within the relationship was deemed as almost a badge of honor and brought the couples closer together. For Vikki, the stressor of parenting and being away from their son due to his being incarcerated ended up being a positive thing for her marriage as she and her husband learned how to work together to

resolve the stressor. She stated, “It made us closer. It made us lean on one another more and really try to depend on each other and try to figure out what to do it and why did that situation happen.”

Similarly, for Rebecca, who identified parenting as the most significant external stressor experienced in her relationship, felt the benefits of this stressor:

...it really strengthened the way that I felt about him ...I am just reminded how dedicated he is to me and our family as a unit that makes me more secure in what we have even though some of the situations are tough and it doesn't feel positively impactful in the beginning but in the end I'm usually like “we are fine”. Like we survived this or we survived another stressor yet again. I think my love and adoration for him is more secure after we have been able to triumph over whatever stressor it is.

Being able to actively work through a situation together, almost as a team, seemed to be beneficial and serve as an example for couples that they can endure and overcome anything. Additionally, seeing their partner push through difficult times alongside them installed a stronger bond and sense of appreciation.

### **Influence of External Stressor on Relational Functioning**

**Theme 1: Communication.** Communication was a key component that surfaced within the study. When partners were asked to describe their spouse and themselves when stressed, many of the participants reported that the communication decreased and their home was quiet. This lack of communication contributed to creating distance between the couples. For example, when asked about her husband's stress response, Joyce stated, “... he doesn't want to be bothered. He'll be quiet. I'll talk to him but he

won't answer...I'll ask him what color the sky is and he still wouldn't respond..." Terry, Joyce's husband, acknowledged in his individual interview that his stress response includes a decrease in communication, creates withdrawal and ultimately impacts his interaction with his wife. He stated, "I guess I am just like overwhelmed or stressed out. So yea I would say she gets the first blow..."

For many couples even though they knew that importance of maintaining an open line of communication, when they were stressed, communication was still negatively impacted. This was true for Mary,

It (communication) was less and sometimes not there. I know during our premarital counseling and stuff the pastor would say don't let the sun go down without making up or coming together, but there would be times where, and I'm just speaking for myself at this point, where the habit that I grew accustomed to was to just shut down and if I didn't have anything to say I just wouldn't say anything.

Mary had grown accustomed to shutting off that communication, which had a rippling impact on other parts of their relationship such as intimacy and spending quality time together.

However, stress not only decreased communication, but it was shown to be an important element for couples to work through the stressor. Therefore, a relational component that suffered because of stress was essentially what couples needed to regain equilibrium in their relationship. As an example, Chris and Gina overcame their financial stress by talking to one another about their finances, as well as informing one another before making large purchases. For Donald, communicating about the stressor was he



and his wife's number one strategy of recovery. Donald and Tiffany decided that when dealing with a stressor, they would "make themselves" talk about it. Donald stated:

We literally force ourselves to sit down in one room and talk about it just to get it off our chest. Conflict is not comfortable at all it's a very uncomfortable space where we have to talk about emotions.

Given that communication appeared to be so pivotal for the recovery process for couples. It is no surprise that couples' were able to see the importance of communication in maintaining a healthy relationship. For James and his wife Rebecca, learning how to be open and communicate with one another was something that were still working on. James reflected:

Communication is key. I know that sounds very cliché but I think in the early early years of our relationship I don't think we really talked to each other. We talked at each other and told stories enough to get the person to know each other. We both attended (specific school name) and we discussed things we heard about different set of friends. So it was more so discussing not really talking.

Rebecca acknowledged being naturally more of a listener than a talker, like her husband; however, this imbalance in communication caused James to feel like he did not really know his wife. Both partners recently decided to be more intentional in strengthening their communication skills.

Couples even discussed employing specific strategies, such as establishing a date night, to increase communication. Vikki talked about using date nights as a way for her and her husband to stay up to date with each other's life. She stated:

Because what we've been going through all week long we can share that within our date night. We talk of course during the week but you really can go into more depth when we have date night.

Because many of the couples worked fulltime and had children to take care of, setting aside a set time dedicated to allow communication appeared essential for them.

**Theme 2: Evolution of self and relationship.** Couples acknowledged a change within their relationship. Given that many of the couples had been together for over a decade they spoke of how either they or their partner had changed throughout the course of their relationship. This personal change often resulted in a relational change. Tiffany reflected on the way in which her husband's response to stress had changed over time.

She stated:

I think that he is more mature in the way that he processes now he knows what tasks would help to alleviate that stress. He has more context and is more level-headed because of the men that he is around...he is older and mature, more work experience he just handles it in a more mature way.

For Denise, she was able to see how differently she and her husband respond to conflict now compared to when they first started dating. She recalled a recent situation when her husband misplaced a bag of her clothes. She stated, "I was able to tell him that I was mad but not really mad at him just frustrated with the situation. He said okay and apologized again...We eventually got the rest of our stuff together and kissed and went on". She stated that they both have "come a long way" in how they both deal with conflict, as before her husband would be more nonchalant about situations which would

cause her to “blow up”. Similarly, Oscar was able to see the way his marriage had transformed over time:

...the reality is this is a woman I met when she was 19 and I was 21 and we didn't know what we were doing or how to manage our emotions, didn't know how to talk to each other, didn't know how to do a ton of stuff so when I look back it's like alright I can appreciate the growth I've seen and I can say that there is a lot more good there than bad.

However, not only was the change in these relationships the result of time or maturity, but rather change also took place when partners sought to do so intentionally. There were various reasons by which spouses felt compelled to change the way they behaved in the relationship or the way in which they interacted with their spouse. For example, Rebecca discussed the ongoing grief experienced by her husband and the ways in which the stress from that grief often spills over into their relationship. Rebecca details the ways in which she alters her interpersonal interactions and expectations of her husband when he is grieving in order to be mindful of his needs and wellbeing:

...we have different love languages so during a time when maybe he is dealing harder with a stressor I'll be more intentional about loving him the way in which he needs it not to say that I don't at other times but then I also may be less selfish with my own. So if he needs some alone time, my love language is quality time so I'm not going to allow myself to get in my feelings if I know he is having a difficult time with the grief that he needs in order to get back to a place where he is well or coping...

For husband and wife, Maria and John, at the beginning of their relationship, in an effort to make each other more comfortable, eliminate old partners, and establish trust they made the decision to change their cellphone numbers. Maria also noted that there were certain behaviors that her husband engaged in that she did not like. After she brought these things to his attention he made an effort to change them. She reflected:

I use to tell my friend that if it wasn't for him trying and at least showing some effort like I would hang out. But every time we had an issue he would try and show some effort. And vice versa.

Partners making a change for the betterment of the relationship showed their spouse that they were invested. Therefore, for these couples being able to be flexible and respond to a partner's requests or concerns showed effort and helped in creating and maintaining close bonds.

### **Influence of External Stress on Perception of Marriage**

**Theme 1: Divorce is not an option.** Participants discussed both the ups and downs of their relationship. Nevertheless, despite the hardships experienced by the couples, participants expressed the desire to stay with their partner and make their relationship work at all costs. Couples were adamant that divorce was not something that would be considered no matter the stressor. For Mary, this was her second marriage, and her thoughts about what it meant to be married had changed significantly the second time around:

I was married before and I was like 20. I think I took it as a joke. Well I know I took it as a joke...this time around its ...I feel like it's not for play like this is serious like I don't want anything to fall back on me where I can say that I didn't

give it like 110 percent. So this is my life like we built too much for me to play with it. You know like we got houses and cars and time and years and everything invested in this so we got to take it serious.

For James and his wife, they knew that divorce was not an option and their ultimate goal was to stay married forever. He stated, "...we both firmly believe that no matter what comes our way in terms of stress or anything that could be considered anything I don't think it could knock us off our biggest path and goal which is to last forever." Similarly for Donald even in their times of high stress and conflict, he had to keep the goal in mind:

The last few debates we've had have been intense in terms of the content, not necessarily yelling. But I would say I am not going get a divorce, we are not going to do this. She would say the same thing and so we are in this for the long haul.

The commitment to the marriage allowed them to push through. Their conceptualization that marriage was forever and their marriage would be permanent seemed to implement a fighting spirit as a team. Since divorce was not an option, this challenged the couples to find alternative ways to solve their marital disputes.

**Theme 2: Assumed expectations.** Only two of the participants admitted that during specific stressful times within their relationship their view of their partner or relationship changed. However, these participants were able to alter their perceptions of their partner to something more positive once they were willing to adjust their expectations. For example, Gina had specific gender role expectations for her husband at the beginning of their marriage:

I had a lot of expectations about what a man should do and those weren't the same as Chris. Checking the tire, oil change, gas and things like that I didn't explicitly say 'oh, only a man could do that' because I was doing that in college when I was on my own but it was an expectation that I thought he was going to take care of...

Having these expectations was not what impacted the perception of her husband, but rather it was when Chris did not fulfill those expectations that she began to call her relationship into question. She went on to state:

...when he didn't it was like you are the man why don't you have this stuff checked out?... I was like – 'What am I doing?'... I could do bad by myself even though I wasn't doing bad. It just felt like I had this person that I had to keep like dragging along with me to keep up.

Chris's inability to meet her expectations caused Gina to have her doubts about her relationship and if it would actually work. Similarly, a significant stressor for Mary and Brian at the beginning of their marriage was Mary moving to another state and leaving her family in order to live with her husband. While Mary struggled with the adjustment, Brian had an expectation that his new wife would adapt to the city and her new role quickly. Brian recounted:

I think I had a certain level of expectation...I think I expected her to come out and adapt really quickly and when she didn't it made me think, 'Who did I actually marry?'.... For a time I think that my view of her was lower than what it had been prior to us getting married.

For both Gina and Brian, their perception of their partners and relationships only improved after they gave themselves permission to adjust their expectations in a way that

was more aligned with what was feasible for their partners to actually achieve. However, this change in expectation was largely assisted by consulting with people outside of their relationship, like family members and friends, who provided them another way of looking at the situation and challenged them to reconsider their beliefs and the way they were approaching the situation.

### **Additional Themes**

In addition to the themes that surfaced, which provided greater clarity around the study's research questions, the data also elicited themes that provided information about some specific qualities or characteristics of African American married couples. These additional themes provide greater insight into how certain components of these relationships may cause certain stressors to surface. Other themes appear to give more understanding around how these couples further manage and deal with the external stressors within their marriage.

**Theme 1: Childhood experiences and upbringing.** Although no specific questions prompted participants to provide information about their childhood, nine of the 20 participants discussed various aspects of their childhood experiences. Two of the husbands in the study reflected on how the neighborhood and family environments they were reared in shaped specific characteristics that they now possess. For James, growing up in an inner city area cultivated what he described as a "hustler's spirit." He attributed this mentality to the force that he has in staying motivated and driven to make the necessary sacrifices to ensure his family is financially taken care of. For Oscar, growing up in a household where both of his parents held multiple jobs impacted his perception of working. He reported feeling that "hard work", which was associated with working

multiple jobs, was a trait that he acquired from his household. For both James and Oscar, these qualities are not only ones that they now possess but also impact into their relationship with their partner.

Childhood experiences also seemed to be the source of external stressors for couples. For Gina and Chris, the socioeconomic dissimilarities within the environments they were raised were the crux of their primary external stressor, finances. According to Gina, she was raised in an upper-middle class family while Chris was born into “poverty.” Gina and Chris described their upbringings as different “cultures.”

Chris: I think it caused stress because things that she learned that I didn’t really know.

Gina: It’s like a culture and it’s like poverty what do you do with money when you have it. Paying bill. Not just like lights, but going to the doctor, debt, accessing health care, prevention, and hygiene even like washing clothes I think that was the biggest shock for me like what was considered dirty.

Their socioeconomic backgrounds informed their relationship with money. Having different experiences and expectations of money, they were initially on two different pages when it came to finances. For Gina and Chris, it took getting on the same page in terms of knowledge base about finances to alleviate their stress around money.

According to Gina, they were able to achieve this by taking financial education classes and getting educational materials through their church.

Couples were also able to identify that their parents’ relationship had direct implications on how they operated within their own marriage. Many participants talked about how seeing their parents handle conflict impacted how they responded to their own



marital disputes. For example, Albert never saw his parents argue. Although he believed that his parents had good intentions in keeping him sheltered from their disagreements, he felt it had negative implications for how he approached conflict with his wife. According to Albert, "...if my parents would have been more emotionally honest in front of me I would be better at dealing with stuff... Similarly, Donald never saw his parents argue and was only able to recall one time when he knew that his parents were arguing behind a closed door; however, this characteristic about his parents' relationship encouraged him to develop alternative strategies to decrease potential conflict and establish fair fighting rules with his wife, such as never using derogatory words towards one another and never raising their voice at each other. Although these two men had similar experiences growing up it influenced their own marriages differently.

Not only were childhood socioeconomic status and parents' relationship influential to their marriage, but also the relationship that a participant had with a parent as a child appeared to have implications for one's own marriage. Oscar believed that his wife had difficulty communicating with him when issues arose because of her childhood relationship with her father. Oscar stated:

I think that she is intimidated by me and what I mean by that is growing up her father was the man in life and I don't think he made it easy for her to talk to him. And so that relationship was intimating so it's like I don't want to say this or say that.

During the couple's interview, Carrie, Oscar's wife, agreed with her husband and went on to state that her childhood relationship with her father is what causes her to bottle up her feelings until she eventually "blows up" at her husband. In total, for these couples one's

upbringing and childhood experiences with their parents still played an active role in how they operated within their current relationship. The impact of the past on their current relationship appeared to be prevalent even for participants who had insight regarding the connection between these variables.

**Theme 2: Identification of separate identities.** The saying “opposites attract” seemed to be relevant for these couples. Half of the participants acknowledged how different their personalities are compared to their spouse. However, couples appeared to have dissimilar experiences in how these differences impacted their relationship. For some couples the differences in personality and background created a sense of balance. For example Patricia stated, “He’s calm and laid back and I’m really high strung and it fits.” She went on to say, “He is like the calm to my storm.” Similarly, James reflected on the different environments he and his wife were raised. James describes his wife’s background as “good church girl” and his own as “ratchet”<sup>3</sup>. However, he saw this vast difference as complimentary. He stated, “So I think that helps us create our ying and yang.” James saw this difference as an asset in raising their children. However, for other couples personality differences created conflict by impacting the way in which they responded to stress. For Carrier, the differences between she and Oscar’s personality was what drew her to him. However, these same factors have become problematic over the years. Carrie stated:

I just think our personalities are polar opposites. He is more social talkative, able to express himself and I’m the complete opposite. That’s one of those things that drew us together but I think it’s also been one of those things that made it difficult for us to communication during those tough moments.

Oscar agreed with his wife and was able to identify more ways in which he and his wife were dissimilar:

I'm the kind of person that is going to let it out and she's the type of person that will shut down. So exact opposites in that case... she is a habitual rule follower where all her life where if you tell her "hey Carrie I need you to turn in this paper on this date" cool those are the rules. Like she is going to do it just like that.

Where I, not necessarily the complete opposite, where I can kind of read between the lines like okay I can't humanly get all of this done so we are going to priorities.

Their differences not only impacted their ability to communicate during stressful times, but also influenced the way they navigated the world around them and interacted with others. As for Carrie and Oscar, they were not at a place where their differences could be appreciated and used in a way to strengthen their relationship.

**Theme 3: Support.** Five of the couples discussed the positive influence of support on their relationships. The specific outlets identified by couples as support systems were family, church, friends and therapy. Couples were able to see the value in having an additional support system outside of their partner. For these couples having social support gave them an opportunity to talk to others about their experiences without judgment. In addition, for many couples, being around couples that were similar to them provided a sense of normalization pertaining to their experiences. This was particularly important for Brian, who felt like he was misinformed or lacked information about what a marriage really looked like before getting married. Being involved in a support group

that included older African American women was particularly useful for Gina. She stated:

All of the things I use to stress out about I heard all these women ages 65 and down talk about and I thought I was the only one. The leader of the group was talking about when she first got married she thought her husband was slow. She didn't think her husband was functioning at the same speed and that was the same for me as well...

The support group showed Gina that partners truly function differently and that her experience was not unique. Through this knowledge, she learned how to better navigate she and her husband's inherent differences.

Unfortunately, not all couples had the opportunity to be connected to others outside of the relationship. Carrie and Oscar discussed having the desire to increase their support group and engage with couples similar to their own family make up. Oscar stated:

We don't have the time to hang out with people that look like us or people and not just look like us but people with the same core values and ambitions as we do...I want to have some real genuine relationships with people that look like us and have kids and go through what we go through that way we can be a support system for each other...I think it's healthy to have friends you can talk to and can see. I think it would be healthy for our relationship...

In having a genuine desire to increase their interaction with other couples, they were also able to see the potential implications that not spending time with friends or outside

support systems might have on their relationship. Oscar stated that the lack of connection “puts most of the focus on us” creating a sense of overdependence.

However, for some couples, there appeared to be a boundary they needed to be established when socializing with other couples. The idea of “not letting others into our business” surfaced. For James, this was particularly true within the realm of social media, as he believed that users of social media, specifically Facebook, over shared. This invitation to others into the relationship created a concern that outside parties would have a say-so on their relationship. Even for couples that did report the importance of social support, such as Brian, when talking about the benefits of social support he stated, “...not that we go to others and say that these are our problems.” Therefore, couples seemed to want to balance between getting support and also not overexposing their relationship to others.

## **Chapter V**

### **Discussion**

The area of intimate relationships is a widely researched topic. Researchers have explored a variety of components about romantic relationships, such as desire, relationship satisfaction, sexual quality, etc. Although there is a diverse set of literature on romantic relationships, only a subset of this literature uses a normalized sample of African Americans (Karney, Kreitz, & Sweeney, 2004). Since we cannot generalize findings from research using majority white samples, our understanding of African American romantic relationships has limitations. However, while a lack of research on African American intimate relationships restricts our knowledge, studying African American relationships without considering context is also problematic.

This study's goal was to investigate African American romantic relationships in context. African Americans are continually found to experience higher levels of stress than their white counterparts (Dalaker, 2001). Using the Stress-Divorce Model as a guide to inform how external stress can dismantle a relationship, the current qualitative study, using a normative sample of African American married couples worked to identify stressors, as well as the ways in which those stressors were taxing and potentially impacted relational functioning and perception.

One of the assumptions of Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) is that the final project of a study, in the case of this study, themes, are co-created by the researcher and the participants (Charmez, 2014). Therefore, CGT considers the influence the researcher has on the data. Furthermore, while the researcher's beliefs and thoughts influence the language used in coding the data (Charmez, 2014), it seems plausible that characteristics

of the researcher, such as gender, race, etc., may impact what participants elect to share. With this in mind, it appears that the researcher's ethnic identity, as an African American, may have contributed to the participants' comfort in sharing certain aspects related to their experiences as African Americans. This is reflected in both the use of culturally specific colloquial language, such as "ratchet", and discussing socio-political events, such as police brutality and the death of Philando Castile. Previous research indicates that people, even children, tend to be more comfortable and prefer people who they believe are a part of their in-group (Cosmides, Tooby, & Kurzban, 2003; Hetherington, Hendrickson & Koenig, 2014). Therefore, participants of this study may have identified the interviewer as a member of their racial/ethnic group thus prompting their comfort in discussing racially specific events and experiences. It is plausible that the content shared and the ways in which it was communicated may have been different if the interviewer was not deemed to be a part of their ethnic in-group.

For this study, 10 self-identified African American married couples were included. The data from the study encompassed 10 dyadic interviews and 20 individual interviews (two per couple). The participants in the study identified both dyadic external stressors and individual stressors, which often impacted their spouse. Although couples completed individual interviews first and revealed stressors independently, partners were able to identify the same external stressors in the dyadic interviews; thereby, suggesting that partners within a marriage are cognizant of the external stressors that impact their relationship and the consequences of the stressors may actually be a joint experience.

The most common specific stressors acknowledged by the couples (i.e., finances and work/career) seem to make sense given the socio-cultural status of African

Americans within society. Studies find that both African American men and women make less on the dollar than their White counterparts (U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, 2014). In addition, superiors examine African Americans employees more closely as compared to their white counterparts. This higher level of scrutiny directly impacts job reviews, which influence promotions, raises and even job security (Cavounidi & Lang, 2015). Therefore, one can understand why the two domains of work/career and finances may be stressors for African Americans and may be a source of conflict for couples. Interestingly, even within this sample, which included a majority of participants who had at least a college degree or higher, finances and work/career stress were still present. This may suggest that a higher level of education does not serve as a barrier from experiencing these types of external stressors. It is plausible that higher levels of education may place African Americans in specific career position that creates unique stressors. For example, in a study conducted with a sample of African American social workers it was found that feeling undermined by coworkers and supervisors was correlated with increased feelings of irritability and depression (Gant et al., 1993). Having to contend with competition from other employees in order to maintain one's position or advance in one's field seems to create stress; which was also reported by participants within the current study. Also, the sample's modal combined estimated yearly income was higher than the median income of Black households. However, a majority of the participants within the study lived in metropolitan areas, such as Los Angeles, Houston, Baltimore, etc. Therefore, living in a city that has a high cost of living may still place a financial strain on these couples.



The broad category of family was also mentioned as a stressor by the couples. Extended family has been found to be strength for African Americans because resources are shared among members of the family (Mosely-Howard & Evans, 2000). While family was found to be a part of the support unit for many of the couples within the study, for other couples the sharing of resources (i.e., monetary, emotional) were deemed as taxing and not beneficial to their relationship. This finding appears to coincide with a study by Lawson and Thompson (1995), which found that from the perspective of African American men, one of the reasons their relationship ended was because they also had to take care of their extended family, which often created a strain within their marriage. Therefore, there appears to be a point by which extended family moves from being supportive too burdensome for African American couples. That threshold may be dependent on the couple's financial resources. For example, a couple that has to share their already limited resources may perceive it as more intensely taxing than a couple with a robust supply to share with their extended family.

Within the study, the specific external stressors identified did not deviate from the stressors experienced by married couples from other racial and ethnic groups. Previous studies conducted with majority white samples have found that couples experience financial, work, and parenting stress (Berryhill, Soloski, Durtschi, & Adams, 2016; Kostouli, Xanthopoulou, & Athanasiades, 2016; Phillips-Miller, Campbell, & Morrison, 2000). However, this study found that ethnicity often plays a role in the manifestation of stressors. For example, one participant within the study discussed work stress. While work stress is experienced across racial/ethnic groups, for this participant the work stress developed as a result of co-workers being intimidated because he was both educated and an

African American male. Similarly, a couple reported financial stress, but discussed the lack of generational economic capital within their families and within the African American community generally. This study seems to suggest that while African American married couples do not experience unique stressors, the stressors that they do experience often manifest or is intensified as a result of their ethnicity. The minority stress model seemed to support this finding, as the model speculates that minority groups' interaction with prejudice and discrimination are what account for the higher rates of perceived stress reported (LaBlanc, Frost, & Wright, 2015).

The Stress-Divorce Model specifically focuses on chronic, everyday hassles as the type of stressors that negatively impact couple interactions and ultimately leads to divorce. However, some of the couples within the study had been dealing with the same external stressor throughout their entire marriage yet were still together. Unfortunately, the Stress-Divorce model does not provide greater understanding surrounding what would differentiate two couples experiencing the same stressor, but only one of those couples divorcing. This study seems to indicate that there may be some protective factors that prevent couples from divorcing even when the stressors are chronic.

The Stress-Divorce Model posits that stress decreases communication, increases conflict, and decreases self-disclosure (Bodenmann, 1995). The study's findings are somewhat aligned with this position of the model. Couples' interpersonal style was initially disrupted by the stressor experienced, which was evidenced by a lack of communication and frequent arguments. However, this negative interaction between couples was dependent on how the couple conceptualized who was to blame for the stressor they were experiencing. If the perceived source was their partner this caused the

disruption in interactional style that the Stress-Divorce Model predicts. If the partner perceived the source of the stress as an outside force, it did not cause the same disruption. The Stress-Divorce Model does not take into consideration the partner's appraisals of the stress source. Previous literature has found that within romantic relationships a person's perception of their partner's facial and physical response impact interaction, even if that perception is faulty (Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, & Fillo, 2015; Yoo & Noyes, 2016). Therefore, perception may be more of a determining factor of partner interaction than reality. Furthermore, perception that one's partner values them is associated with engaging in relationship maintenance behaviors (Lemay & Spongberg, 2015); this seems supported by the couples in the study whose perception of marriage and stress were oriented in a way to push them towards staying together and working through the stressors. Therefore, the lens by which couples perceived stress and marriage was conducive to remaining married and working with his/her partner.

The couples in this study demonstrated specific cognitive stances and behavioral responses that allowed them to find ways to transform their negative experiences into something positive. Within this study, couples reflected their firm belief that they would be together forever; divorce was not an option for them. Researchers have hypothesized that American society's budding belief that marriage is not necessarily something that should be lifelong may be negatively impacting marriage bonds (Worthington, Lerner & Sharp, 2005). The determination that the couples in this study had to stay married may have created an incentive to weather the hardships experienced. Furthermore, the importance of viewing one's marriage as a lifelong experience in maintaining a relationship was also found as a theme in a qualitative study conducted among African

American couples that had been married for 25 years or longer (Maddox, 2013). Similarly, the couples' viewed the act of enduring stressors together as an indication of their devotion and commitment to one another. This idea that working together through conflict creates a closer bond seems to coincide with the social psychological concept of effort justification, which is the idea that people place greater value on things that they have put more effort in (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). For these couples, dealing through stressors together seemed to create greater appreciation for one another.

With decreased communication and an increase in conflict, the Stress-Divorce model assumes that these factors lead to a decrease in positive relational functioning and creates isolation or distance (Bodenmann, 1995). Some couples in the study did experience moments of distance from their partner and an increase in negative relational functioning. However, the use of social support (i.e. friends, family, church groups) seemed to be key in preventing couples from remaining in that cycle of maladaptive interaction. Within this sample, support systems provided couples with a way to normalize their relationship experiences. A qualitative study conducted by Abrahamson, Hussain, Kkan, and Schofield (2012) found that, among other things, one of the ways couples were able to rebuild their romantic relationship after infidelity was through vicariously learning from friends and family who also had experienced infidelity. Therefore, it seems plausible that through social supports the couples in this study were either explicitly taught skills or vicariously learned alternative ways to interact with one another in order to solve their marital problems. For example, instead of maintaining distance from their partner, a spouse may have decided to make efforts to remove that barrier, as a result of how they saw distance impact their friend's romantic relationship.

Previous research has also found that distressed couples both seek and have less support than non-distressed couples (Verhofstadt, Lemmens, & Buysse, 2013) and African American husbands and wives marital satisfaction has been found to be linked to the emotional support received by one's family (St. Vil, 2015). Therefore, the desire to have connections to outside supports is not only healthy, but may be a way to prevent couples from continually engaging in behaviors that are not beneficial to the relationship.

The current study found that African American married couples' experience multiple stressors. Although the stressors often interrupted the couples' interpersonal style by creating distance and decreasing communication, the couples in this study pushed through those situations. Statistics on African American intimate relationships seem to provide a bleak picture of these romantic relationships; however, the couples in this study were committed to marriage and made behavioral and cognitive adjustments for the betterment of their relationship.

### **Limitations**

This study demonstrated the impact of external stress on African American married couples; however, there were limitations to the study. While couples did openly talk about their stressors and the ways in which their relationship was directly impacted, it is possible that couples may not have been completely forthcoming in their evaluation of their relationship. This may have been a result of their inability to accurately recall their reactions during their time of stress. Participants' perception of their relationship at the time of the interviews may have influenced what they recalled about their relationship during times of stress. However, it may have also been a result of not wanting to completely disclose potentially negative components of their relationship. Therefore,

impression management may have skewed the study's findings. In the same vein, the only method used to obtain the data was interviewing the participants. Having the opportunity to obtain data from other sources, such as family, friends, co-workers, or direct observation of the couples' interactions, may have revealed additional information about the couples and their relational functioning.

Recruitment methods may have also contributed to what information the couples disclosed. Couples were recruited through social media and email. The social media and email scripts encouraged the reader to distribute the script to others. While the principal researcher did not have a personal relationship with any of the couples included within the study, more than half of the couples were connected to the researcher through second, third or fourth degree social connections. Couples may have deliberately or unconsciously presented their relationship in a more favorable light due to potential concern that the researcher would share their relational information to the common party. Furthermore, the recruitment methods may have contributed to the type of couples who participated in the study. The utilization of one's social media network for recruitment methods may cause the sample obtained to reflect similar characteristics of the principal researcher. In the case of this study, the sample reflected the principal researcher's age (i.e. 30s) and educational status (i.e. graduate degree). Using other types of recruitment methods may have elicited a sample with different demographics.

In the same vein, the sample obtained may have been influenced by the study's method of data collection (i.e., interviews). Allowing one's self to be interviewed and verbally answering questions requires a certain level of insight and cognitive ability. Using interviews as the primary and only source of data collection within the study may

have contributed to who decided to take part in the study; specifically, if participants were apprehensive about their own or their partner's ability to successfully articulate their experiences, this may have deterred them from expressing interest and being involved in the study. Therefore, the demographics of the sample, particularly it being a primarily highly educated sample, may have in part been due to the requirements of the actual study and potential participants' self-efficacy in being interviewed.

While this study used a non-pathological sample of African American married couples, the couples were homogenous in a number of ways. A large portion of the sample had at least a college degree. Given the fact that education can have implications for the type and amount of resources available, this may have impacted the intensity and frequency of stressors experienced and reported. Conducting a study of this kind with participants who have less education may have yielded different results. Therefore, caution should be taken before generalizing the study to other African American couples who may have less education or lower wage-earning jobs.

Typically, CGT uses a thematic saturation method to determine when to stop gathering data (Charmez, 2014). However, it was chosen before data was collected that 10 couples would be interviewed for the study. Not following the saturation method may be considered a limitation. However, the 30 interviews that were conducted provided a robust amount of data. Furthermore, within the data there were clear recurring patterns and themes that surfaced indicating that saturation was being obtained. Given that the same patterns and information were being found across interviews it suggests that interviewing additional couples likely would not have resulted in the creation of additional themes.

## **Implications**

This study seems to provide implications for professionals who are providing services to African American couples. Two of the primary stressors within the sample were work/career and finances. The interconnectedness between these two stressors appears to indicate that African American couples may be best served through career development resources and financial literacy. Providing couples with additional supports in achieving their career goals and navigating their career may help to create a sense of mastery, spark motivation, and alleviate stress. Acquiring mastery, motivation, and alleviating stress may have a direct impact on one's mood and energy level; thereby, directly impacting the interaction he/she has with his/her partner. For many of the couples, achieving financial stability was a source of stress; therefore, tailoring financial literacy materials to African American couples may help to give the couples the tools and knowledge needed to achieve a sense of power over their finances. Gaining these specific skills may work to decrease the, often, chronic stress that finances cause couples.

The results from the study seem to be particularly useful for mental health and pastoral care professionals who are providing couples counseling to African Americans. Three of the couples within the study reported seeking therapy, which may suggest that some African American couples may be open to receiving these services. Within the therapeutic space, teaching couples how to effectively communicate with one another seems paramount as communication was found to be influential in a number of ways within these relationship. In addition, therapists may consider gaining a greater understanding about the couple's support systems, such as friends, family, church, as social support seemed to be important to the couples in the study. It seems plausible that



therapists' working to help couples obtain both independent and joint support systems would be an overall benefit to the unit. Therefore, having and creating more robust opportunities for African American couples to meet and connect with like-minded couples may assist in strengthening these relationships.

Additionally, while family proved to serve as a protective factor for many of the couples within the study, for other couples, extended family created stress. It may be useful for African American couples to learn how to establish healthy boundaries with their families, as it may help to prevent potential strain. Although this may be a challenge for some partners, as individuals may feel obligated to take care of their extended family, providing psychoeducation about the depletion of resources and how it may have negative implications for one's intimate relationship may provide more insight into the importance and utility of setting healthy boundaries.

The study identified some of the cognitive strengths of African American married couples. Certain types of beliefs about marriage and stress proved to shield couples from the devastating impact that stress can have on relationships. With this in mind, professionals may consider working with couples and assisting in creating and reframing their understanding of stress and marriage in a way that would be beneficial. Therapists working with African American couples may consider focusing on understanding the core beliefs that couples have about stress and their relationship and work to alter those beliefs to be more adaptive and helpful to their relational functioning and individual health. Additionally, providing couples the opportunity and space to be reflective of their relationship appears useful. Being given the chance to look back at how far they have come within their relationship may work to instill a sense of hope and appreciation for

the growth and process that has occurred within their relationship. Furthermore, challenging couples to be reflective of their relationship may also provide them with the opportunity to look at their relationship from a distance and examine what steps they need to take to make the necessary changes to have a healthier and happier relationship.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

To further obtain needed information about African American relationships, a study of this type should be implemented again. While this study focused specifically on married African American couples and external stress, it may be useful for researchers to include an additional sample of African Americans who are divorced as to obtain more context into what factors may separate these two groups. While all relationships experience external stress, it may be useful to determine how and in what capacity stressors were so taxing that it lead couples to divorce. In addition, replicating this study with an older sample of African American couples may also be useful, as understanding of external stress, how it impacts one's relationship and how they cope with the stressor may transform over time. Conducting studies similar to the current study but using a sample with different demographics provides more context to the full picture of external stress on African American couples' relationship.

The implementation of more intervention studies with African American couples seems important. For example, an intervention study focused on teaching couples effective ways of coping with stressors may be useful. Stress can have a negative impact on one's mental and physical health. Since African Americans are consistently found to experience higher levels of stress, providing African American couples with positive coping skills that they can engage in together, such as mindfulness or even the acquisition

of resources, seems important for their overall wellbeing. Teaching the couples skills and activities that they can perform together may not only help them alleviate some of the negative impact of stress, but may also strengthen their bond because it is allowing them to engage in another joint activity. Additionally, there seems to be some utility in the implementation of an intervention that focuses on supportive units within African American couples. Assessing the ways in which having outside supports may improve certain areas of these relationships, such as relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, intimacy, etc., provides researchers and clinicians with more context to how they can potentially intervene to positively influence specific areas of these relationships.

### **Conclusion**

Empirical literature that both focus on African American couples and takes into consideration context is limited. Through qualitative methods and the use of the Stress-Divorce Model, as a guide, the current study explored the external stressors experienced by African American married couples and the ways stressors can impact one's relationship. The common core external stressors identified demonstrate that African American married couples experience external stressors in multiple areas of their life. However, through the use of cognitive and interactional protective factors, couples were able to prevent their stressors from causing the relationship to dissolve. The findings of this study provide some insight to various factors (i.e., social support, cognitive reframing, financial resources etc.) that may be useful in helping African American couples to obtain and maintain healthy marriages.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> A “side piece” refers to a person, typically a woman, who is knowingly engaging in an intimate relationship with someone that is already in a married or dating relationship. In most cases, the intimate relationship is exclusively sexual and on some occasion material in nature.

<sup>2</sup> Philando Castile was an unarmed African American man who was murdered by a police officer in Minnesota in July 2016. Castile’s murder was recorded and streamed to Facebook Live by his girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds.

<sup>3</sup> Ratchet is a slang term used to describe someone or something that is deemed classless or uncouth.

**Appendix A**

**Interview Script**

*Thank you for taking the time to talk to me and giving me the opportunity to learn more about your relationship.*

*As you already know, the purpose of this interview is to gather additional information from you about the stressors you have experienced as a couple and the ways in which you the experienced you experienced impacted your relationship. I will be interviewing you individually and as a couple. You will notice that some questions will be asked during both interviews, while others will not. This is done to obtain the most accurate information and to allow consideration for one's personal perspective as it relates to stress and your romantic relationship.*

*Throughout the interview, I will specifically be asking you about the "external stressors" and "external stress" that you have experienced as a couple. External stressors are situations/events/circumstances, etc. that originate outside of your relationship and cause stress. Examples of external stressors include your job, finances, extended family, racism, etc. Although these stressors originate outside of the relationship, they create stress within the relationship. If your relationship has not faced external stress, we will consider other stressors.*

*If you ever feel uncomfortable providing an answer to a question, you are free to decline answering, and if at any time you have a question, just let me know.*

*Before the interview begins, there will be a brief survey that you will complete individually. Please read each question carefully and answer honestly.*

*Do you have any questions?*

**Appendix B**

**Demographic Questionnaire**

1. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Do you identify as “African American”? Yes/No
3. What is your relationship status? Married/Dating
4. Do you and your partner currently live with one another? Yes/No
5. How long have you and your partner/spouse been together? (Format in years. If married, add both dating length and length of marriage) \_\_\_\_\_
6. Do you have any children? Yes/No
  - 4b. If yes, how many? \_\_\_\_\_
  - 4a. Do you have children from a previous relationship? Yes/No
  - 4c. Do you have children from your current relationship? Yes/No
7. Have you and your partner experienced a miscarriage? Yes/No
8. What is your estimated yearly salary?
  - a. > 10,000
  - b. 10,001 – 30,000
  - b. 30,001 – 50,000
  - c. 50,001 – 70,000
  - d. <70,001
9. What is your highest education obtained?
  - a. GED/High School
  - b. College Graduate
  - c. Some College
  - c. Graduate/Professional Degree
10. Has there ever been a period of time where you and your partner/spouse “broke up”, “took a break”, or were “separated”? Yes/No
  - 10a. If yes, how many times have you and your partner/spouse separated/broke up? \_\_\_\_\_
  - 10b. If yes, how long was each separation/break? \_\_\_\_\_
11. Have you ever suspected your partner of emotionally or physically being unfaithful during any point in your relationship? Yes/No \_\_\_\_\_
  - 11a Do you know for sure that your partner has been emotionally or physically unfaithful during any point in your relationship? Yes/No \_\_\_\_\_
12. Have you been unfaithful either emotionally or physically at any time you and your current partner/spouse were together? Yes/No \_\_\_\_\_
13. In three sentences or less, what do you appreciate most about your partner/spouse?

## **Appendix C**

### **Individual Semi-Structured Interview Guide**



1. How would you describe your partner/spouse when he/she is stressed?
2. How would you describe yourself when you are stressed?
3. What have been some specific external stressors that you have had to face as a couple?
4. What was your relationship like during this time?
5. Looking back, how do you think that the stress you experienced influenced the way you two interacted with one another?
6. Looking back, how did the stress influence the way you felt or thought about your relationship?
7. Looking back, how did the stress influence the way you felt or thought about your partner?
8. How did you and your partner recover from this stressor?
  - 8a. How, if at all, is this stressor impacting your relationship now?
9. What are the most important lessons you learned from these external stressors that you two faced?

**Appendix D**

**Couple Semi-Structured Interview Guide**

1. Tell me how you and your partner/spouse met?
2. What have been some specific external stressors that you have had to face as a couple?
3. What external stressor do you think has had the most impact on your relationship?
  - 3a. Tell me more about this stress.
4. Why did you consider this stressor the most impactful to your relationship?
5. What changes, if at all, did you see in your relationship when you two were facing this external stressor?
6. Looking back, how has external stress influenced the way you have interacted with one another?
7. What are the most important lessons you learned from these external stressors that you two

**Appendix E**

**Participant Demographics**

Table E1

*Participant Demographics*

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Education Obtained</b> | <b>Combined<br/>Yearly Income</b> | <b>Children</b>  |
|--------------------|------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| Maria              | 32         | Some College              | 100,001-<br>140,000               | (1 stepchild)    |
| John               | 35         | High School               |                                   | 1                |
| Mary               | 34         | College Graduate          | >140,001                          | 0                |
| Brian              | 36         | Graduate/Professional     |                                   |                  |
| Gina               | 29         | Graduate/Professional     | 100,001-<br>140,000               | (1 stepchild)    |
| Chris              | 34         | Some College              |                                   | 1                |
| Rebecca            | 29         | Graduate Professional     | 100,001-<br>140,000               | 2                |
| James              | 29         | College Graduate          |                                   |                  |
| Patricia           | 35         | Graduate Professional     | >140,001                          | 2                |
| Albert             | 46         | Some College              |                                   | (2 stepchildren) |
| Vikki              | 48         | GED/High School           | 60,001-100,000                    | 2                |
| Leon               | 50         | GED/High School           |                                   |                  |
| Joyce              | 31         | Graduate/Professional     | >140,000                          | 2                |
| Terry              | 30         | Graduate/Professional     |                                   |                  |
| Denise             | 31         | Graduate Professional     | >140,000                          | 4                |
| Chad               | 37         | Some College              |                                   |                  |
| Carrie             | 31         | Graduate Professional     | >140,000                          | 3                |
| Oscar              | 33         | College Graduate          |                                   |                  |
| Tiffany            | 36         | College Graduate          | >140,000                          | 1                |
| Donald             | 35         | Graduate/Professional     |                                   |                  |

Table E2

*Participant Demographics*

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Years in a Relationship</b> | <b>Years Married</b> |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------|
| Maria<br>John      | 8                              | 6                    |
| Mary<br>Brian      | 4                              | 1                    |
| Gina<br>Chris      | 6                              | 4                    |
| Rebecca<br>James   | 9                              | 5                    |
| Patricia<br>Albert | 6                              | 4                    |
| Vikki<br>Leon      | 30                             | 22                   |
| Joyce<br>Terry     | 9                              | 6                    |
| Denise<br>Chad     | 16                             | 11                   |
| Carrie<br>Oscar    | 11                             | 6                    |
| Tiffany<br>Donald  | 11                             | 7                    |

## **Appendix F**

### **Description of Themes**

Table 1F

*Description of Themes Identified*

| <b>Themes</b>                                  | <b>Description of Themes</b>  |
|--|---|
| Assumed Expectations                           | Having expectations about partner's behavior/role creates a stressor and/or impacts perception of partner/relationship    |
| Childhood Experiences and Upbringing           | Childhood experiences contribute to stress and/or impact how one responds to stress                                       |
| Communication                                  | Stress decreases communication, but is essential for recovery and prevention of negative impact of stress on relationship |
| Immediate vs. Long Term Consequences of Stress | Stress potentially has negative immediate impact on relationship, but long term benefits                                  |
| Response Dictated by Source                    | Perception of the source of stress impacts how one responds to partner  |
| Identification of Separate Identities          | Different identity between self and partner considered "balance" or creates conflict                                      |
| Evolution of Self and Relationship             | Change occurs naturally due to maturity or partner chooses to change intentionally  |
| Support  | Family, friends, church and therapy are sources of support  |
| Divorce Is Not an Option                       | Despite stressors, divorce is not considered  |
| Surrender to Stress                            | Stress considered a part of life  |



