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What is This?

Toward a Deeper Understanding of the Meaning of Marriage Among Black Men

Tera R. Hurt[1]

Abstract

Black men benefit from healthy, satisfying marriages in domains of physical, psychological, and financial well-being. Yet marriage among Black men has declined and remains elusive for many. One gap in the research concerns the positive meaning that Black men find in their marriages. Prior research has failed to collect in-depth accounts of Black men's experiences of marriage. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the meaning of marriage among 52 Black men, using interview data. Findings highlight four themes in the meaning of marriage—secure emotional support, lifelong commitment, enhanced life success, and secure attachment. Two themes emerged from the data related to important influences on the construction of meaning relative to marriage—faith, and the dynamics of give and take. Responses among the men concerning the change in marriage over time related to transitions in American marriages and a deepened respect for marriage. Implications are discussed.

Keywords

Black, men, marriage, meaning

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The research evidence is clear: Black men benefit from being involved in healthy, satisfying marriages socially, economically, physically, occupationally, and psychologically (Blackman, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colon, & Roberts, 2005; King & Allen, 2007; Malone-Colon, 2007; Marks, Hopkins-Williams, Chaney, Nesteruk, & Sasser, 2010). Yet marriage among Black men has steadily declined (Allen & James, 1998; McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000; Taylor, Tucker, Chatters, & Jayakody, 1997; U.S. Census Bureau, 2003; Wilson, 1997). Family scientists have implicated a number of macro-level and micro-level forces in the fall in Black marriage rates. Most of the scholarly discussion has centered on why Black men *do not marry*. The current study takes a strengths perspective in investigating and exploring the benefits of marriage, specifically focusing on the meanings that Black men attach to marriage. In-depth interviews of 52 married Black men provide rich, detailed narratives in the men's own voices—thereby making a significant contribution to the marital literature (Marks, Nesteruk, Swanson, Garrison, & Davis, 2005; Michael & Tuma, 1985).

Background

Married Black men are healthier, more religious, exhibit better parenting behaviors, and have children who show more favorable developmental outcomes over time (Blackman et al., 2005; Malone-Colon, 2007; Marks et al., 2010). At the community level, these men demonstrate more engagement in civic activities and are less involved in crime and the criminal justice system (King & Allen, 2007; Malone-Colon, 2007). In sum, to the extent that Black men marry, one could expect to observe greater stability in their individual and family well-being (especially as it concerns children; Malone-Colon, 2007; Nock, 1998; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Scholars have hypothesized that marriage offers Black men new meaning to their lives and greater access to different types of resources (e.g., social, psychological, financial) that can support their overall well-being (Blackman et al., 2005; Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

In spite of these well-documented benefits, marriage among Black men has declined and remains an elusive goal for many (Allen & James, 1998; McLoyd et al., 2000; Taylor et al., 1997; Wilson, 1997). According to Census estimates, only 32% of Black adults were married in 2009 as compared with 51% of adults from all races (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Although some Blacks have retreated from marriage, scholars note that the desire to marry and the high regard for marriage have not waned over time in the general population (Edin & Reed, 2005; Marks et al., 2008). Culturally, individuals

still value marriage symbolically and view it as a form of success (Edin & Reed, 2005; Hatchet, 1991; Marks et al., 2008).

As it concerns Black men, family scientists and policy makers have largely focused on barriers to marriage for this group and men's lack of marriage readiness (Browning, 1999; Edin, 2000; Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005; King & Allen, 2007; Lloyd & South, 1996; Marks et al., 2008; Oppenheimer, 2003; Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005). Scholars have noted that men may be influenced by subcultures whose values and attitudes undermine marital formation and maintenance (Lloyd & South, 1996). Scientists also point to the role of economic factors; this has been the primary focus in this area, with most of the discourse centering on "marriageable men" in the Black community, defined as those who are stably employed and earning a living wage (e.g., Edin, 2000; King & Allen, 2007; Marks et al., 2010; Oppenheimer, 2003). As men's incomes increase and their jobs stabilize, they are more receptive to marrying and become more attractive to women (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; Lloyd & South, 1996; Smock et al., 2005). However, scholars have observed a rise in the unemployment and underemployment of Black men, a trend linked to a diminished supply of jobs (Browning, 1999; Marks et al., 2008). Among all couples, employment instability strongly undermines the formation and maintenance of marital relationships as it exacerbates difficulties that may exist in the relationship (James, 1998; Pinderhughes, 2002; Taylor et al., 1997; Waller, 1999). In the face of such economic challenges, committed couples have often opted for cohabiting relationships rather than marriage (Smock, Casper, & Wyse, 2008).

Other social scientists have focused on men's demographic characteristics (Koball, 1998; Marks et al., 2008; O'Hare, Pollard, Mann, & Kent, 1991; Oppenheimer, 2003; Staples, 1987). Relative to parenthood, men who have fathered children prior to marriage are less likely to marry than men without children (Marks et al., 2008; Staples, 1987). Concerning education, marriage is delayed when men pursue education, military service, or other professional training beyond high school. Yet these activities encourage marriage in the long term (Koball, 1998; Marks et al., 2008; Marks et al., 2010; Oppenheimer, 2003). Related to the sex ratio in Black communities, women outnumber men; previous work documents 90.5 Black males per 100 females because of mortality, morbidity, and imprisonment among men, and increased longevity for women (Marks et al., 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). During the reproductive years, existing work notes that there are 81 Black males per 100 females (O'Hare et al., 1991). Compounding these problems, Black men are more likely to marry a mate of another race as compared with Black women (Batson, Qian, & Lichter, 2006; Crowder & Tolnay, 2000; Sailor, 2003). This

further reduces the number of marriageable men available to wed Black women. In sum, an imbalance in the sex ratio is consequential for marital formation and maintenance (Hopkins-Williams, 2007).

Despite considerable attention to the influence of economic and demographic factors, only part of the variation in marriages can be attributed to these factors (Cherlin, 1992; Wilson, 1997). It seems critical to reflect on social, psychological, and cultural factors at the micro-level that play a role in Black marriages (Bennett, Bloom, & Craig, 1989; Cherlin, 1992; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). With regard to social and psychological factors, similarities in couples' interpersonal resources contribute to compatibility in marriage (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; Marks et al., 2008; Smock et al., 2005). There may also be communication challenges or confusion about gender roles between Black men and women given the history of strained gender relations attributable to harsh conditions experienced in slavery (Hatchett, 1991; Pinderhughes, 2002). This legacy, along with continuing experiences with prejudice, discrimination, and underemployment, continues to influence Black attitudes and interaction styles in marital ties (Browning, 1999).

Notwithstanding increased understanding of Black marriages, much of the research to date has focused on why Black men do not marry. However, there are clear benefits of marriage for Black men in areas concerning physical, psychological, emotional, and financial well-being (Blackman et al., 2005; Malone-Colon, 2007). Thus, it seems important to find ways to encourage marriage among this population. One way to achieve this is by better understanding and exploring the meaning that marriage has for those men who do marry. What is sorely missing from the discourse on Black marriage is attention to what marriages means to married Black men (Marks et al., 2010; Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, & Lewis, 1990). The current study addresses this gap.

A second gap in this research area is the absence of data gathered from the men themselves. Put simply, scholars have overlooked the significance of engaging Black men in research studies and obtaining in-depth accounts of their marital experiences and the meanings they attach to marriage (Marks et al., 2008; Michael & Tuma, 2005). To advance this area of research, it is vital that scholars understand the larger context of meaning in marriage (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007). Capturing Black male marital experiences in order to develop better approaches to encouraging marital formation could be an important and positive change in Black marriages (Koball, 1998; Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, & Landry, 1992; Marks et al., 2010). Such information could expand the research literature on Black marriages, develop and refine intervention and marriage education programming, and foster culturally sensitive public relations and advertising campaigns (Marks et al., 2008). Therefore, this study focuses on the meaning of marriage among Black men.

Method

Data Set

For this project called Pathways to Marriage, semistructured qualitative data were collected from married Black men who participated in the Program for Strong African American Marriages (ProSAAM), a 5-year randomized trial of 393 couples designed to examine the effects of prayer and skill-based education on strengthening marital relationships. Participating couples resided in northeastern Georgia and metropolitan Atlanta. To take part in ProSAAM, the couples met the following criteria: (a) be at least 21 years of age, (b) be willing to participate with their mate, (c) be legally married and living together or have definite plans to marry within 12 months, (d) agree to attend an educational program session that meets on three Saturday mornings (if selected), and (e) be willing to pray and have others pray for them as a couple. Couples were recruited to the project through referrals and advertisements at churches, community centers, radio shows, newspapers, magazines, and local businesses that serve couples and families (for more information, visit http://www.uga.edu/prosaam).

Sample

Of the couples who participated in ProSAAM, 155 men completed their 3-year follow-up by December 1, 2009, and thus were eligible to participate in the current study. Recruitment brochures were sent to the men who were still enrolled in ProSAAM after the completion of their 3-year follow-up interview. The brochure requested that they enroll in this smaller study on pathways to marriage. In total, 109 men received brochures on the study, and 52 agreed to enroll in the project. The men were paid $75 for their interviews.

In the current study ($n = 52$), the sample mean age was 43 years (range 27-62 years). All the men self-identified as Black and all were married at the time of interview. Seventy-three percent of the men had received some education at a college or technical school. Educational attainment was higher in this sample than national census comparison data, with 44% of husbands reporting a bachelor's degree or more compared with 23.3% of all married Black adults nationally (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). On average, they reported personal incomes in the $30,000 to $39,999 category and household incomes of $50,000 to $59,999. Incomes were wide ranging, however, with some men making less than $5,000 per year and others making more than $80,000. Ninety percent reported some religious affiliation—68% Christian and 22% nondenominational Christian (2% no religion; 8% no response). On

average, the men had two biological children (range 0-7; 2% no response) and indicated that they were living at home with two children (range 0-3; 2% no response).

The married men stated that they had been romantically involved with their wives an average of 16 years (range 2-41 years). Seventy-three percent were not previously married. But 21% of the men were in their second marriage, followed by 4% in their third marriage, and 2% in their fourth marriage. On average, the men had been married 14 years (range 2-35 years). Most reported being very happy in their marriages. In response to a question regarding degree of happiness taken from the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959), 15% reported being perfectly happy, 42% very happy, 23% happy, and 10% somewhat happy. Eight percent of the men noted being very unhappy (2% no response). Most had never separated from their wives (90%), whereas 8% reported a separation (2% no response). One man was currently separated from his wife (2%); all others were living with their wives (98%).

Relative to family of origin experiences, 62% of the men reported that their parents were together through their childhoods (parents married: $n = 28$; parents in a relationship but not married: $n = 4$). For 38% of the men, their biological parents were not together because of marital divorce ($n = 4$), termination of a nonmarital relationship ($n = 13$), or death ($n = 3$). The nature of the parent's relationship status was not always a good indicator of who reared the men. Therefore, it was also important to consider the kind of house that the men were reared in. Among 23% of the men, they reported being raised in single-parent households by mothers ($n = 10$) and grandmothers ($n = 2$). Seventy-seven percent of the men noted that they were reared in a two-parent household arrangement by biological parents and/or stepparents ($n = 36$) or grandparents ($n = 4$).

Procedures

The 52 respondents were targeted for a qualitative interview about their marital experiences. The interviews were completed between January 2010 and April 2010. Semistructured interviews were the primary data collection method to document the men's marital experiences. Basic demographic information and one survey question about marital quality were also collected. To maximize the likelihood that the respondents would be comfortable with the interviewer, they were matched by race and gender. Two interviewers—both Black, married, and male—conducted the interviews. One interviewer visited the research participants in their homes or other private setting (e.g., church, office, private room at coffee shop) to conduct

one interview with them about their marital experiences. In the 2-hour interview, the men were asked about the meaning of marriage, marital socialization, their motivations for marrying and staying married, factors that helped encourage and sustain marriage, barriers to or challenges in staying married, commitment attitudes, and their participation in ProSAAM. For this analysis, data on the meaning of marriage were examined. The interviewers asked the men the following questions: (a) What does marriage mean to you? (b) How has the meaning of marriage changed in your lifetime? The interviewers used digital recorders to collect the information. At the conclusion of each session, the interviewers documented contextual information about the interview and described any meanings the men ascribed to their experiences. The interviewers digitally recorded their impressions, perceptions of the interview experience, and recollections of the participants' affect and nonverbal communication signs. The recordings were then sent electronically to a transcriber to be prepared for the data analysis.

In training for the interviews, the author worked with the two interviewers on various field-readiness tasks to ensure that data collection proceeded smoothly. The interviewers were trained in research ethics, passed human subjects requirements, and were educated about the goals of the study. The interviewers were encouraged to follow the line of questioning in the interview protocol but were also advised to follow up on the interviewees' unexpected disclosures (e.g., [a] the men discussed the role of military service in strengthening their marriages and how this related to the meaning of marriage and [b] for the male who had been married four times, the interviewers inquired about the similarities and differences between his previous marriages and his current marriage relative to the meaning of these relationships in his life). Interviewers were also trained to pay attention to nuances and details in the interview environment and the participants' body language.

The research team achieved consistency in the approach through ongoing communication. The research team met semimonthly to evaluate the project's progress and discuss important themes observed in the field. In addition, the author regularly checked the digital recordings to ensure that interviewers used the interview protocol as a guide and practiced effective interviewing techniques.

The nature of the qualitative data collection process improved the likelihood that the data reflected the experiences of the men (Creswell, 1998). To begin, steps were taken to increase the rapport between the respondents and the interviewers. Building on the rapport that the research team had developed with the men—participants in the larger ProSAAM program for 3 years—the respondent and interviewee engaged in discussion that helped

them get to know one another at the start of each interview (e.g., What kind of work do you do? Where are you from? What kinds of activities do you do for fun?). During the course of the interviews, the respondents provided personal accounts of their experiences. Moreover, the interview method facilitated an understanding of the ways the men thought and felt about their life experiences. Because of the personal nature of qualitative inquiry and a semi-structured style of interviewing, the interviewers were flexible in their line of questioning with the men, rephrasing questions to ensure that the participant understood them, or following up on the respondent's responses to obtain a fuller account of their lived experiences as needed.

Analyses

The analyses proceeded in two phases. First, the author adopted a within-case analysis approach to learn about the content of the data and identify patterns unique to each case. The primary goal was to obtain a detailed understanding of the men's experiences, and describe and determine "what is going on and how things [were] proceeding" for each case (Huberman & Miles, 1994, p. 432).

For the second phase, the author used a cross-case analysis plan to compare information among the 52 men. Using the interactive synthesis of Huberman and Miles (1994), the author reviewed each transcript to search for patterns and identify clusters of cases with similar characteristics. The goal was to uncover themes that occurred across the cases and highlight those that recurred in the data (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). In sum, the analysis involved a sequential and iterative process, cycling between reviewing data, drawing interpretations and conclusions about the data, and discussing impressions with the interviewers. In the final step, the author reflected on the themes that emerged from the data and drew conclusions from patterns in the men's marital experiences.

Results

In this section, the results of the in-depth interviews of the 52 Black men in the study are reported on. First, the results pertaining to the meaning of marriage will be outlined. Next, the ways in which the men described their marriages will be explained. Then, the men's perceptions of how the meaning of marriage has changed over time will be discussed, and the men's opinions of how being married has deepened their appreciation for the institution of marriage will be summarized.

All perspectives shared by the men are included in the results; no responses have been omitted. In addition, the percentages of men who are assigned to each theme are noted. Within each theme, the number of men who offered responses is presented. In some instances, men provided more than one response or example. Therefore, the number of responses may not equal the number of men (expressed as percentage) within each theme.

The Meaning of Marriage

In response to the question about the meaning of marriage, 54% of the sample described it as a lifelong partnership. Their responses revealed several important, overlapping themes about marriage being a lifelong partnership. Next, the four themes related to secure emotional support, lifelong commitment, enhanced life success, and secure attachment are outlined.

Secure emotional support. The first theme related to the men's appreciation for growing with their wives as individuals and bonding with them spiritually and emotionally over time ($n = 26$). Their wives often complemented them, providing support and strength in areas where they were less dominant ($n = 9$); moreover, their wives often provided the men a safe space in which to express their psychological and emotional concerns on a consistent basis ($n = 6$). A 40-year-old educator who had been married for 11 years described his marriage in this way:

> A friendship, meaning my wife is a person who I can sit down and talk with and would come to me and talk about things and we know it's between us. It's not going to be something that's going to be gossiped around town. It's going to be between us.

This theme is labeled *secure emotional support*.

Lifelong commitment. The second theme that emerged from the data was the men's emphasis on the permanent quality of the marital relationship and their strong investment in marriage as a relationship in which they could grow closer to their wives ($n = 5$). The men reflected on the significance of shared memories and emphasized nurturing their intimacy with their wives, whom they viewed as companions and confidantes on their life's journey ($n = 11$). One 51-year-old minister, married for 32 years and retired from the armed services, said, "Without my wife, I really don't know how to live. She has been there my whole life. She has known me [more intimately as a person] longer than my brothers and sisters, mom and dad." The same 40-year-old

educator previously mentioned in the secure emotional attachment theme recalled his decision to marry, saying,

> Initially, [marriage] wasn't important because the focus was on finishing school and establishing a career . . . but as I got older, I realized that I needed a family. I needed somebody who I could spend time, spend the rest of my life with, and you know, have children.

This theme is labeled *lifelong commitment*.

Enhanced life success. A third theme that emerged from the data regarding the meaning of marriage was of marriage serving as an organizing and centering force in the men's lives ($n = 3$). A 33-year-old professional in the chemical industry who had been married for 9 years stated the following:

> It holds everything together, it betters my life, it betters my wife's life, our kids. I mean it just makes everything better to me as far as trying to build things together, provide for one another together, for our kids having both of us in their lives, and it just makes everything so much easier to me than like I say trying to do it on your own or having different relationships here and there. It just makes everything easier to me.

A 41-year-old man who worked for a nonprofit agency and was in his ninth year of marriage to his second wife praised his marriage and his wife, citing her as ". . . the key to my success. I strongly believe that my wife is the key to my success. She keeps me grounded." This theme is labeled *enhanced life success*.

Secure attachment. A fourth theme that emerged concerned the importance of weathering the storms of life and being able to depend on and lean on one another ($n = 4$). The men confided that it was reassuring to know that their wives cared about them, when it seemed as though no one else in the world did ($n = 12$). They recalled defining moments in their marriages where they persevered through thick and thin and when spouses depended on each other in times of stress ($n = 3$). The men also found comfort in knowing that their wives would be there to care for them as needed, as in illness or loneliness ($n = 5$). One unemployed 58-year-old man, who had been married for 19 years, stated,

> [Marriage] means a lot of happiness when you're younger if it's on the right track, and then it means that you won't be lonely when you get

old for one thing and you can live in the joy and the comfort of knowing that when you get old or dream that when you get old, you're going to have a friend.

This theme is labeled *secure attachment*. Next, data concerning the important influences on the construction of meaning relative to marriage are presented.

Influences on the Construction of Meaning

Two themes emerged from the data related to influences on the construction of meaning relative to marriage—faith and the dynamics of give and take.

Faith. Thirty-eight percent of the sample reported that the meaning of marriage was related to faith, inclusive of religion and spirituality. The men recognized marriage as an institution created by God and viewed it as a gift from God. For these men, marriage was also deemed a reflection of their intimate relationship with God; they asserted that their marital bonds were made stronger as a result ($n = 13$). One 44-year-old school administrator and a leader in ministry, who had been married for 24 years, said, "Marriage is the pinnacle of God's well-being done through us, in spite of us. . . . Marriage is strictly a God thing. He created it, He invented it, and it's [his] intellectual property if you will." Another 39-year-old who worked in juvenile justice and had been married for 7 years, asserted, "Marriage to me is a unification of two hearts, souls, and minds that interact for one central purpose and that is, to serve, to provide, to help, to heal, and to nurture each other." Whereas some men viewed marriage as a reflection of their relationship with God, other men referenced the significance of oneness in the meaning of marriage ($n = 6$).

The dynamics of give and take. Thirty-seven percent of the men focused on marital dynamics as they assessed what marriage meant to them. Marriage meant adjusting to their wives' and families' needs on a continuous basis, and their marital commitment reflected their willingness to accept this constant challenge in their lives and their diligence in working to meet the needs of the household ($n = 2$). A 35-year-old education professional, married for 10 years, asserted, "If you want it to work, you can't stop working on it." The men also spoke of resorting to self-sacrifice to persevere through the highs and lows of their marriages ($n = 8$). A 34-year-old, who had been married for 12 years and served in the military, noted that he had experienced many challenges early in his marriage for several reasons, including not having much family and community support. He shared,

I was committed to proving them wrong. And somewhere along in there, I learned—this may sound crazy . . . but somewhere along, in trying to stay in it to prove everybody else wrong, I fell in love. I probably should have fallen in love before I said "I do," but I thought I was, but I wasn't, you know. But somewhere along in there, I fell in love, and I realized why not only was there something in me that wouldn't let go, but now I realize what I'm really fighting for at this point, so then it became not just about proving everybody else wrong, but it became about I'm fighting for it because I want it now, you know, and so then I became committed to the relationship, but even that—it's amazing. You can be fully sold out to the relationship, but stuff comes up, and you're like "You know what? Throw in the towel." Then, it became about okay, now we got a child in the picture. You know, now there's my daughter, and she didn't ask to come here . . . She's never going to have to worry. I'm never going to be absent . . . so if I got to sacrifice what I may feel like I want to do for the sake of my child, then that's what I'm going to sacrifice. And what I've found is that it's really just cycles of life, because I may feel like I'm ready to go, but I'm sacrificing for my child. I'm ready to go, but I'm sacrificing to prove everybody wrong, or I'm ready to go, but I'm sacrificing because I don't want to pay alimony or child support. Whatever your reasons for staying are, it just builds you, it just makes you stronger and stronger and stronger, and it continues to strengthen your foundation, so whatever comes along, you fight it and just keep going.

On making adjustments in marriage, one man acknowledged that it is not always 50-50 ($n = 1$). Other men asserted that marriage involved a process of continually working together with their wives ($n = 4$), being flexible ($n = 1$), and investing in the relationship ($n = 1$). A 56-year-old retired military officer, who had been married for 35 years, shared this wisdom:

Okay, the definition of marriage . . . some people say it's 50-50. It's not. Sometimes it's 10-90, sometimes it's 50-50, sometimes it's 80-20. On a personal level it's a give and take, and the willingness to accept someone for who they are and work around that stuff, you know, and not always being judgmental . . . Marriage is about being phenomenal and able to accept and absorb the weaknesses and the mistakes of your mate and the joy that you get when you come together as one and forge ahead. You know it's always better when you're working together.

Two other men noted how marriage changed every day. A 52-year-old factory worker, married for 30 years, asserted, "In marriage, commitment is the same but you adjust to different circumstances and your thinking sometimes readjusts." Finally, a 49-year-old, who had been married for 25 years, asserted that marriage is a life challenge that was not designed to be fully understood. He noted that it was always new and changing. "Marriage has its surprises. . . . I think it's the beauty of marriage because it keeps the mystique in the marriage." In the next section, the men's responses about changes in marriage over time are addressed.

Change in Marriage Over Time

Responses among the men concerning the change in marriage over time related to transitions in American marriages and a deepened respect for marriage. These themes are outlined next.

Transitions in American marriages. Other men (42%) cited ways in which marriage in American society had changed. A couple of men felt that mankind had changed the purpose of marriage from what God intended it to be, "from a covenant to a contract" ($n = 2$). Yet two other men believed that individuals were marrying for the wrong reasons (e.g., to cope with loneliness, settling for a partner just to be married; $n = 1$) or that people had not properly prepared for marriage (e.g., lack of marriage models and mentors, failing to treat marriage as a serious step in their lives, not setting goals with their partners before marriage; $n = 1$). In other instances, a few men noted that the effects of a rise in dual-earner households and a corresponding decline in traditional breadwinner–homemaker marriages were significant social changes in marriage ($n = 3$). According to a 34-year-old, married for 12 years and retired from the military, "I think the biggest change now is that husbands and wives don't get to spend that much time together, and it's just because we have to work so hard [at earning a living] to be able to make it."

The main sentiment among the men concerned the trend that individuals do not stay married for life ($n = 6$). A 55-year-old retired serviceman (married 25 years) said, "See, back in the old days, no matter what happened, that marriage stuck together. Your mama and daddy they stuck together through thick and thin. It ain't like that now." The men pointed to a decline in commitment, a weakening of marital bonds, and an increased acceptance of divorce as reasons for separation ($n = 5$). A 42-year-old who worked in purchasing and had been married for 18 years insisted, "Our culture has changed, where marriage and then the strength and the bond of marriage once had in the community

and society, I think it's slipping. I really do." He noted how couples have children before marriage now and do not consider getting married. A church pastor, who is 44 years old and married 22 years, agreed, saying,

People aren't as committed—I don't believe . . . They'll say, well, let's try it, or marriage is like an afterthought after they've already formed a family and then they'll say, "Ok, well we might as well be married" . . . Looking at that, I say, I need to find a mate first, you know, before I go on with life's journey.

The men also shared their sense of cultural trends in marriage. According to two respondents, spouses often led separate lives although they commonly resided in the same household and were married. Furthermore, when spouses faced challenges in their marriages, they did not commit to working them out together ($n = 2$). A 37-year-old pastor who had been married for 13 years offered, "[We're not] in it for the long haul; we're in it until one of us can get out of it. Or you know, until the road gets bumpy, and then it's a quick fix, five hundred dollars, no contest." Two respondents characterized the changes in marriage as analogous to shopping or leasing cars. A 57-year-old who was receiving disability and had been married for 25 years said, "[We have] gone from a serious commitment to a shopping experience where you can try it on, and if it don't work, return it or throw it away." A 36-year-old who was laid off from his factory job and had been married for 6 years said,

Folks can get married, be together for about a month and then after that month or year or whatever, they're in a divorce. So, it's like basically going and buying a brand new car. And then ok, I undo what I want to do with that car. It's time for me to trade it in, and get a new another car. . . . I think that's crazy but that's how some folks see it these days.

In the next section, the men's descriptions about how their respect for marriage has deepened are presented.

Deepened respect for marriage. When asked about how the meaning of marriage had changed over time, 23% of the men pointed out how their own personal respect for marriage has deepened. As compared with when they were first married, a few men stated that they now had a more serious regard for their marriage ($n = 1$), the process of uniting and working together with their wives ($n = 2$), and the investment and responsibility that marriage required ($n = 1$). This conclusion was attributable to the passage of time ($n = 2$), a lack of maturity ($n = 1$), or not having a good understanding of marriage

because one's parents were not together throughout one's childhood (*n* = 1). According to a 35-year-old church administrator, who had been married for 7 years, "Prior to [marriage], you don't really see all the things that go into it." A 37-year-old computer analyst who had been married for 9 years said, "When we first got married, I understood what it meant, but it's only through time that I've begun to *embrace* what it actually means."

Other men spoke about how marriage made them better men. It strengthened their resolve as individuals (*n* = 2) and provided them opportunities to learn more about womanhood (*n* = 2). Other men also talked about gaining wisdom (*n* = 1), being more patient (*n* = 1), less self-centered (*n* = 1), and less judgmental (*n* = 2). For others, their enhanced appreciation for the institution of marriage led them to reflect on life's journey with their wives, sharing good and bad times (*n* = 3). A 44-year-old pastor who had been married for 22 years, commented, "I have a deeper respect for it—the word marriage—based on what my wife and I have been through." A mechanic, married only 4 years, began to understand the highs *and* lows of the journey as well, saying,

> What I thought about marriage before I got married is—I don't know—I mean, when you think about getting married you think about the good times. You don't think about the bad times. I think [the meaning of marriage for me] is a little different now.

This participant was still processing the meaning of marriage, having only been married four years. He said he did not have strong marriage bonds and mentors, and spoke of listening intently to how the men at work discussed their marriages and their relationships with their wives. In spite of the highs and lows of marriage, one 47-year-old minister who had been married for 24 years noted that marriage got "sweeter and sweeter" with time (*n* = 1). Of the money he spent on his marriage license, a 33 year-old who had been married for 12 years and worked in the transportation field said "It was the best $25 I ever spent." Next, a discussion of the findings in the context of the extant research literature is presented.

Discussion

In this study, 52 married Black men's perspectives have been collected through in-depth qualitative inquiry to offer narratives of the meaning of marriage, which are largely absent from the marital literature (Marks et al., 2005; Michael & Tuma, 1985). The average man in the sample had achieved

some level of postsecondary education or training, which may have helped him prepare for marriage and sustain his marriage (Koball, 1998; Marks et al., 2008; Marks et al., 2010; Oppenheimer, 2003). More than half of the 52 men interviewed noted that their marriages meant sharing a lifelong commitment with their wives. The significance of their marriages involved (a) a lifelong commitment, (b) enhanced life success, (c) secure emotional support, and (d) secure attachment. Previous research has corroborated this. Nock (1998) noted that marriage provides structure to men's lives regardless of race. Waite and Gallagher (2000) corroborated this point noting that married persons often organize their lives differently than others with less certain relational arrangements. It has also been noted that such marital partnerships are important for overcoming significant sources of stress common among Black couples, including work challenges, health concerns, financial problems, managing duties and obligations to other family members, and rearing biological and nonbiological children (Bryant et al., 2010; Marks et al., 2008; Marks et al., 2010; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Other studies have suggested that most men, regardless of race, benefit from the social, psychological, and emotional support their wives offer (Nock, 1998). More specifically, marriage can give men purpose in their lives, shield them from loneliness and isolation, provide them with a mate to help encourage healthy behaviors, constrain them from engaging in riskier kinds of behavior, and offer an intimate relationship for sharing private concerns, struggles, and worries (Nock, 1998; Sitgraves, 2008; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). In sum, because the men reported enjoying the benefits that their marriages afforded them, the men were more likely to be committed to their marriages (M. P. Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999).

Yet, as concluded by Nock (1998), marriage is more than a relationship between spouses. As observed in more than one third of the men in the current study, marriage was related to faith and their belief that marriage was a gift from God and involved oneness or unity. For these men, the meaning of marriage was closely tied to religion and spirituality. A high regard for spirituality and religion is a central feature of Black culture (Chatters, Taylor, & Lincoln, 1999; Dainton, 1999; Hunt & Hunt, 2001; LaTaillade, 2006; Pew Charitable Trust, 2009; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004).

The men's views of the sanctification of marriage were linked to their religious beliefs and spirituality, which in turn, could have offered meaning for the structure of marriage and the way the men understood marriage's purpose (Fincham et al., 2007; Hopkins-Williams, 2007; Mahoney, Pargarment, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003; Nock, 1998). The view that marriage was a gift from God and a reflection of their relationship

with God and involved oneness likely helped provide a foundation for the men's commitment to their wives (Lambert & Dollahite, 2008; Marks, 2005; Stanley & Markman, 1992). The men could also have felt an obligation to remain with their wives because of their moral and spiritual commitment (M. P. Johnson et al., 1999; Lambert & Dollahite, 2008). Likewise, certain types of constraints (e.g., moral) were likely to reinforce the men's ongoing dedication to their marriages (Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010).

Also noteworthy was that one third of the men emphasized the centrality of sacrifice and taking a lifelong perspective on marriage. The experience of these men suggested that having a perspective that allows for ups and downs in the marital relationship, as well as encouraging each spouse to make adjustments and sacrifice for the relationship and each other, may promote long-term marital outcomes (Fincham et al., 2007). These men suggested that it may be essential to allow meaning to emerge from adversity (Fincham et al., 2007). They perceived that just because the marriage was "down" or in a difficult season did not mean that the marriage was over (Stanley, 2002; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002); rather, it was a signal to take action and invest in the relationship, consistent with a prorelationship motivation attitude (McLoyd et al., 2000; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). The fact that the marriage required work and was in need of sacrifice from time to time was not a matter of crisis or disillusionment (Dainton, 1999). Instead, needing to sacrifice was in keeping with their expectations, and working for their marriages likely offered a source of additional meaning for them (Nock, 1998; Stanley, 2002).

In the context of marriage and significant romantic relationships, one of the functions that sacrifice is believed to play is that it signals commitment, being tangible evidence between partners of commitment and the willingness to continue to build a future together, which in turn fosters trust (Stanley, Whitton, Low, Clements, & Markman, 2006; Wieselquist et al., 1999). Furthermore, in at least two quantitative studies, males valuing sacrifice, compared with females, was strongly related to commitment to the long term (Stanley et al., 2006; Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, 2007). The responses from the men in the current study were consistent with this point regarding the relationship between sacrifice and long-term commitment.

Relative to how marriage has changed over time, some men in this study focused on how their appreciation for marriage had deepened (23%), noting a more meaningful understanding for the work that was required to unite with another person and work together, being molded into a better man, and journeying together through triumphs and tribulations. Some recalled receiving "on-the-job" training in the marriages, as they often lacked marriage models

and mentors. For some men, they had simply worked too hard to make the marriage work to walk away from their wives. These factors contributed to the sense that they were committed to their marriages (Stanley et al., 2006). Many of the men were focused on staying with their wives because of the history shared and the benefits marriage had given them as individuals (Stanley, 2002). In this respect, sharing life's journey together, overcoming challenges together, and benefiting from a couple identity likely operated as barriers to leaving their marriages (M. P. Johnson et al., 1999; Marks et al., 2008; Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

Forty-two percent of the men focused on how attitudes toward marriage have changed in society. From their viewpoint, individuals either did not marry for the right reasons, failed to properly prepare for marriage, were unable to spend quality time with their mates, or simply did not marry for life as people once did. These findings support previous results (M. K. N. Johnson, 2007; Marks et al., 2008; Nock, 1998; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). There was a belief among the men that marriages in America are weak and that marriage is not taken seriously because of the acceptance of separation and the availability of divorce (Nock, 1998; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). The men's viewpoints likely reflected their experience in the Black community, where marriages are more likely to dissolve or be of poorer quality than in other racial and ethnic groups (Bryant et al., 2010; M. K. N. Johnson, 2007). Simply put, the presence of stable, satisfying marriages is less normative among Blacks (Bryant et al., 2010; M. K. N. Johnson, 2007). Additional perspectives shared by the men also pointed to an increase in dual-earner marriages and the effects of such marital arrangements. Previous work has highlighted how dual-earning couples spent less time with one another as compared with traditional breadwinner–homemaker couples, and the balance of power and responsibility changed as both spouses were more nearly equal and depended on each other's incomes (Marks et al., 2008; Nock, 1998).

There were a few limitations to this study. First, the method of data collection relied on participant recall and interpretation of the men's experiences, which may not be accurate. In addition, the sample was nonrandom. To gather rich, detailed information about the men's marital experiences, a small sample of married Black men was recruited for the study. As in many qualitative investigations, breadth was sacrificed for depth, and consequently, the results may not generalize to all Black men, Black men residing in different regions of the United States, or to men from different racial and ethnic groups.

Moreover, the sample also represented a class of highly committed men, whose attitudes and values related to their longevity and success in marriage, which in turn, reinforced similar values and attitudes. Furthermore,

considering that the average man in the sample had attended some college or technical college, achieving some level of postsecondary education for these men may have helped them to overcome critical economic barriers to marrying their wives (Koball, 1998; Marks et al., 2008; Marks et al., 2010; Oppenheimer, 2003). In sum, the respondent's demographic characteristics such as marital status and education may influence their perception of male and female relationships and an ability to maintain their marriages through difficult situations (Cazenave, 1983).

Furthermore, the fact that the data were collected in northeastern Georgia may account for the high percentage of religious affiliation in the sample and the high regard for the sanctity of marriage. A recent survey indicates that African Americans are markedly more religious than the general population; for example, 53% report attending religious services once a week and 76% report praying at least daily (or more often; Pew Charitable Trust, 2009; see also, Bryant et al., 2010; Chatters et al., 1999; Hunt & Hunt, 2001). Indeed, our research team's work with the Program for Strong African American Marriages sample draws on the importance of religion in the lives of African American married persons. Though there were eligibility criteria in place for the research study, no one refused participation in the program because of the requirement that couples be willing to pray and be prayed for. As such, this criterion did not serve as a factor for excluding anyone. Because the majority of African Americans self-identify as Protestant (78%; Pew Charitable Trust, 2009), we used prayers that were reflective of African American Protestant traditions as samples in the educational program. Nonetheless, participants were from a range of Christian denominations with potentially differing theological commitments as well as from Islamic traditions, and so efforts were made to welcome all participants regardless of their particular faiths and beliefs. To do so, the program was offered as nonsectarian and group leaders were trained to provide an open, accepting stance toward all religious orientations. It was explicitly stated that the program was open to those of all religious backgrounds and the prayers were offered as examples only (Beach et al., 2011).

Conclusions and Implications

To develop a better understanding of marriage among Blacks, it is important to acknowledge the voices of a group often neglected in the literature—the voices of Black men, and more important, the voices of Black men who have chosen marriage (Marks et al., 2005; Michael & Tuma, 1985). Perhaps the use of their voices would be effective in recruiting and retaining Black

men in programs designed to strengthen Black couple relationships (Marks et al., 2008). In addition, the current study suggests that older married Black men may have wisdom to share with younger generations. There is a need to help young Black men who may be in the early phases of relationship development recognize the counterintuitive attractions of long-term committed marriages. Many married Black men have perspectives on marriage that are in keeping with an empirically based understanding of relationships, and reflect their personal experience in relationships, a perspective that they are willing to share with others. In many cases, the experiences of married Black men are expressed in language that may be more moving or more effective in conveying meaning to Black men who are starting their relationship journey. One of the themes that emerged from the interviews was the wish that mentoring (e.g., marriage models, husband mentors) had been available and that interacting with others who have gone through relationship development successfully may be beneficial (M. K. N. Johnson, 2007). It is important to note that, as exemplified in the current sample, there are resources in the Black community that could respond to this need. Moreover, such insights could be useful in fostering more culturally sensitive public relations campaigns and advertising, as well as refining existing marital and relationship curricula to ensure that critical dimensions of marriages and relationships are considered.

A large number of the Black men in the study also indicated the importance of marriage as a "God-given" institution. This suggests the potential value in many cases of building on strong participation in church communities and using faith networks to deliver information and feedback about relationships and relationship development. As has been noted in other work, there may be benefits to embedding relationship enhancement messages in religious or spiritual contexts both in terms of dissemination (Hurt et al., 2006) and the unique benefits for the relationships (Beach, Fincham, Hurt, McNair, & Stanley, 2008). It will be interesting to think about the potential benefits of allowing older men to discuss the meaning and value of sacrifice in marriage, especially in a religious context. It may be that this is a context in which older, experienced Black men can be particularly effective in mentoring younger men as they enter marriage.

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