



Spring 5-17-2010

Mending Fences: How Heterosexual Married Individuals Perceive Breaks in their Connection to their Spouses and How Couples Repair Them

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Abstract

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Jane B. Abrams

Jeffrey Applegate, Ph.D., Supervisor

Family life in the United States is in a state of flux. Half of all marriages are ending in divorce, more couples are cohabiting and more children are being born to cohabiting and single mothers. While the meaning of marriage as an institution is shifting, most young people in the U.S. still want to marry and they marry in search of companionship and lasting love.

The field of marital therapy is in a state of flux as well. Existing theories of adult intimate relationships provide incomplete explanations of the role of conflict in marital satisfaction and longevity. Empirical studies have failed to identify any one particular set of interventions that are more effective than others in helping couples repair the breaks in their connection.

This qualitative study was intended to add to the knowledge base concerning the meaning of conflict in modern heterosexual marriages and the ways in which couples resolve their disagreements. A semi-structured interview, lasting approximately one hour, was conducted with 22 subjects who have been married between 7 and 10 years. Findings included four types of repair achieved by the subjects and their spouses and the identification of relational elements that appear to comprise relational resilience. Implications for theory, practice and social work education are discussed. Limitations included the small size and homogeneity of the study sample.

Degree Type

Dissertation

Degree Name

Doctor of Social Work (DSW)

First Advisor

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Keywords

heterosexual marriage, marital conflict, repair in marriage, resilience in marriage, marital therapy

Subject Categories

Social Work

**Mending Fences: How Heterosexual Married Individuals Perceive Breaks in their
Connection to their Spouses and How Couples Repair Them**

Jane B. Abrams

A DISSERTATION

in

Social Work

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Social Work

2010

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Jane B. Abrams

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the subjects in this research study. They took precious time from their complicated and busy lives to welcome me into their homes and spoke frankly and openly with me about their relationships. Their enthusiasm for this project and their belief in its importance and relevance helped me to stay committed to it and passionate about it. I hope that my findings will have meaning for them and that I have created a document in which their voices ring true.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my dissertation chair, Jeffrey Applegate, Ph.D. for his unwavering support throughout my years in this DSW program and especially in the writing of this dissertation. He has calmed me and challenged me and encouraged me, all of which have helped to keep me focused. I consider myself unbelievably fortunate to have had him as a mentor.

To my other committee members, Ram Cnaan Ph.D. and Richard Mackey, D.S.W., I owe an additional debt of gratitude. Dr. Cnaan has pushed and I have pushed back, and he has helped keep this project moving forward. I deeply appreciate the ways in which he has helped me to sharpen my thinking. Dr. Mackey's research on lasting marriages has been an inspiration. He has wisely encouraged me take the time to think deeply about what my data have to tell me.

I have already mentioned, in my dedication, all that I owe to my subjects. Their words were transcribed with efficiency and precision by Cyrille White, whose help was invaluable to me.

To all my teachers in the D.S.W. program and to its directors Lina Hartocollis, Ph.D. and Ram Cnaan, Ph.D. – I will never be able to thank you enough for the richness of my experience in the D.S.W. program and for providing this opportunity for learning and growing. I learned not only from my teachers, but also from the extraordinary group of clinical social workers who comprised our, the first, DSW cohort at SP2. Pioneers, scholars, dedicated and talented professionals – I hope we remain friends and colleagues.

I thank my sister Anne, who not only helped me find half of my subjects, but packed me lunch and snacks to sustain me during my long days of interviews. The peace

of her home and her nurturing support kept me going. Thank you to my sister Ellie who has cheered me on while being devoted to our parents during an important transition time in their lives. I am glad that now I will be available to help!

I thank my nieces Marjorie and Emily, who also found me subjects. Special thanks to Marjorie and her family for affording me wonderful play time, company and nurturing meals during my second intense research trip.

My “girlfriends” have shown confidence in me from the start- Cecie, Margaret, Cecily, Ginny, Jean, Sylvie, Vicky, Anne, Adrienne, and Judith. Renee, although no longer here, has been by my side as well. I hope they know how important their positive mirroring has been over the past three years, not to mention the times they have lured me away from my laptop for some much needed fun.

My parents, in their 68th year of marriage, serve as examples not only of the possibility of lasting marriage, but of staying fully engaged in life and learning well into old age. I hope that they will take the credit due to them for my having completed this doctorate and I look forward to bringing them pride at my graduation.

My own children, Kate and Peter, are my inspiration and joy. Kate challenges me to keep thinking about future research projects. Perhaps someday we will collaborate. Peter reminds me to slow down and enjoy the moment. His music has provided me the perfect vehicle for doing just that.

Finally, I thank my husband, John Paul, who is my life partner. We continue to grow and learn together. His kindness, patience, devotion and acceptance provide me with the secure base from which I can explore the world and take on new challenges. It is sharing in life’s adventures with him that brings me the greatest happiness.

Abstract

Mending Fences: How Heterosexual Married Individuals Perceive Breaks in Their Connection to Their Spouses, and How Couples Repair Them

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Family life in the United States is in a state of flux. Half of all marriages are ending in divorce, more couples are cohabiting and more children are being born to cohabiting and single mothers. While the meaning of marriage as an institution is shifting, most young people in the U.S. still want to marry and they marry in search of companionship and lasting love.

The field of marital therapy is in a state of flux as well. Existing theories of adult intimate relationships provide incomplete explanations of the role of conflict in marital satisfaction and longevity. Empirical studies have failed to identify any one particular set of interventions that are more effective than others in helping couples repair the breaks in their connection.

This qualitative study was intended to add to the knowledge base concerning the meaning of conflict in modern heterosexual marriages and the ways in which couples resolve their disagreements. A semi-structured interview, lasting approximately one hour, was conducted with 22 subjects who have been married between 7 and 10 years. Findings included four types of repair achieved by the subjects and their spouses and the identification of relational elements that appear to comprise relational resilience. Implications for theory, practice and social work education are discussed. Limitations included the small size and homogeneity of the study sample.

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Chapter I Marriage: Past and Present

Introduction

Contemporary marriages exist in a cultural context that is in flux. Marriage in the United States has changed dramatically since the middle of the 20th century. The number of divorces, on the increase since at least the Civil War, rose steadily through the last half of the 20th century and in the past two decades has stabilized at the high rate of about half of all marriages (Amato, 2000, Cherlin, 2005, Raley & Bumpass, 2003). In addition, people are marrying later, cohabitation is widely practiced and accepted, and the number of women giving birth outside of marriage has increased (Huston & Meltz, 2004). In spite of high divorce rates, the option of cohabitation and an overall weakening of marriage as an institution, the majority of young people in the United States still want to marry. Most Americans *will* marry at some point in their lives (Cherlin, 2004), hopefully finding “a secure base from which to face the world” (Johnson, 1991, p. 176).

There are unique and formidable pressures on contemporary marriages. Until very recently, marriage was the only living arrangement available to men and women who wanted to share a life that was sanctioned by society and protected by law. With less stigma attached to divorce, more acceptable options available for family life, gender roles still in transition and our culture’s high value on freedom and individuality, it may be harder for couples today to find meaning in the struggles inherent in married life. People marry today, not out of economic necessity or to conform to social norms, but in the hopes of finding companionship and lasting love. Yet, the realm of intimacy remains mysterious and often painful, as evidenced by the fact that the most frequently presented

problem in psychotherapy is distress in an intimate relationship (Johnson and Lebow, 2000).

Professionals in the business of helping people repair and preserve their committed relationships are working at a disadvantage. Existing theories of adult intimate relationships have focused on the role of conflict in marital satisfaction and longevity. While conflict is seen as the leading cause of distress in relationships, it is a complex phenomenon with different meanings for different couples. The interventions resulting from a focus on conflict and its resolution are somewhat effective, but still leave many couples struggling. Moreover, empirical studies have failed to identify any one particular set of interventions that are more effective than others. Intimacy remains mysterious not only to psychotherapy patients and couples in the throes of a marital crisis, but to the “experts” as well. There is a need for more effective treatment modalities along with a theory of adult intimate relationships that will be grounding to clinicians endeavoring to assist couples with the hard work of staying connected (Johnson & Lebow, 2000). The purpose of this dissertation is to contribute to theory and practice by gaining a deeper understanding of one aspect of contemporary marriage -how heterosexual married individuals perceive serious breaks in their connection to their spouses, and how couples repair those breaks. Findings of this study have been viewed within the frameworks of Attachment Theory, Erikson’s theory of the stages of adult development and the psychoanalytic concepts of projection and projective identification.

The Current State of Marriage in the United States

The average age at first marriage has been increasing over the past several decades. At the beginning of the 20th century, the average age for men to marry was 25.9

years old and for women was 21.9. By 1950, those averages dropped to 22.8 for men and 20.3 for women. They remained stable until the late 1960's, when a gradual increase began and continued until the present. In 2007, the average age for men to marry was 27.5 years and for women was 25.6 (US Census Bureau, 2008).

At the same time that age at first marriage is increasing, more people are deciding not to marry at all. During the 1950's, 73.6% of all males and 80% of all females married, while in 2007 67.3% of all men and 73.9% of women married. Not only are fewer people marrying today, but there has been a growing discrepancy between the numbers of Whites marrying and the number of Blacks marrying since 1950. In 1950, 73.9% of White men married compared to 71.5% of Black men. In 2007, 69.96% White men married compared to 53.5% of Black men. Eighty per cent of White women married in 1950 compared to 79.3% of Black women. In 2007, those figures were 76.9% of White women marrying, compared to 56.7% of Black women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

Besides marrying later, or not marrying at all, an increasing number of women are having children outside of marriage. The most recent upswing in births to unmarried women began in 2002 and reached record high levels in 2006. The increase in nonmarital births was greater by far than the increase in total births. In 2006, 38.5% of births were to unmarried women. Increases were evident across all racial and ethnic groups (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007). However, Black women have proportionally more children outside of marriage than White women. According to data for 2003, 66% of all births to Black women were outside of marriage compared to 17% for White women. For Hispanic women, 45% of births occurred outside of marriage (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2003).

The prevalence of cohabitation has greatly altered family life in the United States (Bumpass & Lu, 2000, Waite, 1995). “It is likely that the rapid spread of cohabitation both reflects and reinforces the declining significance of marriage as a family status, and as a life-course marker in our society” (Bumpass & Lu, 2000, p. 29). Smock (2000) asserted that understanding cohabitation is crucial to understanding “the life course of individuals, children’s well-being, and social change more broadly” (p. 1). The percentage of marriages that began as cohabitation rose from 10% between 1965 and 1974, to over 50% of those between 1990 and 1994. Almost 60% of first unions formed between 1990 and 1994 began as cohabitations (Smock, 2000).

Many of the statistics concerning family stability and unmarried childbearing need to be understood in the context of cohabitation (Raley & Bumpass, 2003). For example, while the percentage of divorces has stabilized at around 50%, there has been a decreasing proportion of cohabitations ending in marriage. In the past two decades, the percentage of cohabiting couples who eventually marry has gone from 60% to 53%. The remaining relationships end within 5 years. While there has been an increase in nonmarital births, 40% of these have been to women in cohabiting, two-parent families (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Single women who become pregnant are more likely to move in with the father of their child than to marry him. Almost half of cohabiting couples live with children and one fourth of step families are headed by cohabiting partners (Seltzer, 2000).

Cohabiting relationships tend to be less stable than marriages. Half of cohabiting relationships end in a year or less either because the couple marries or breaks up. However, cohabiters are more likely to break up than married couples. Within the first

two years of the relationship, 29% of cohabiters are likely to break up, compared to 9% of married couples (Seltzer, 2000).

Finally, although young people are marrying for the first time at a later age, they are not staying single. This is true for divorced and widowed individuals as well. The declines in marriage under the age of 25 and in remarriage are offset by increases in cohabitation among these groups (Brown & Booth, 1996, Bumpass, Sweet & Cherlin, 1991).

With at least half of all marriages ending in divorce and increasing numbers of people choosing to cohabit, marriage is less dominant today as a social institution than ever before in U.S. history. Cherlin (2004) referred to this as the “deinstitutionalization” (p.848) of marriage and defines this phenomenon as “ the weakening of the social norms that define people’s behavior in a social institution such as marriage” (p.848).

Attitudes Towards Marriage

Although marriage has become deinstitutionalized, it is still highly valued in the United States. The practical importance of marriage may have declined, but its symbolic importance remains high (Cherlin, 2004). According to Manning, Longmore and Giordano (2007), a majority of high school seniors, 76%, expect to marry and believe that a good family life and a good marriage are extremely important. These expectations among adolescents to marry have remained consistent over the past two decades. The subgroups of adolescents with weaker expectations for marriage include minority teens, teens who have never dated, teens whose views of marriage are less traditional, teens with poorer educational goals and performance, teens from single-parent and cohabiting - parent families, and teens whose mother are less educated. Thornton and Young-

DeMarco (2001) reported that Americans of all ages believe that marriage is a lifetime commitment. In addition, the majority of young men and women believe that parenthood is fulfilling. Moreover, the perceived importance of marriage and family life among adolescents appears to have increased since the 1970's.

While the value of marriage has remained high in the U.S. in recent decades, its meaning has changed. Marriage and childrearing are perceived as more voluntary and less obligatory. Americans are accepting of the choices to remain single and for married couples to remain childless. An increasing number of high school seniors plan to delay marriage for at least 5 years after high school. In the mid-1980's, 30% of female seniors and 45% of male seniors believed that it was best to wait more than 5 years after high school to get married. In the late 1990's those numbers increased to 42% of females and 51% of males (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001).

According to Manning et al. (2007), marriage has less power to legitimize and control individual behavior in the realms of sexual expression, childbearing and living arrangements. Premarital sex is widely accepted, although most Americans still believe that sex among young teenagers is wrong. While not endorsing unmarried teenage parenthood, most young people do not believe that unmarried childbearing is morally wrong. A majority of high school seniors accept unmarried cohabitation and a significant majority endorse living together before marriage as a way to evaluate the viability of their relationship – 58% of females and 67% of males between 1997 and 1998 (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). The accepted contemporary marriage path appears to be cohabit, and then marry (Manning et al., 2007). Yet, while there is greater tolerance for

alternatives to marriage and for premarital sex, an overwhelming majority of Americans feel that extramarital sex is wrong. (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001).

Thornton and Young-DeMarco (2001) noted a trend towards the endorsement of a high-level gender equality, which has accompanied the trends towards greater freedom of choice in personal behavior. However, there is still strong support for gendered division of labor in marriage. Therefore, there is ongoing tension within marriage among the cultural ideals of gender equity, commitment to family and children and commitment to work outside the home, along with the high value Americans place on personal freedom.

A 2001 survey conducted by the Gallup Organization for the National Marriage Project explored what mattered most about marriage to a group of 20 to 29 year old non-married young adults. Ninety four per cent agreed that the most important part of marriage was to have a spouse who is your soul mate. Forty two percent of those interviewed believed that it is important to marry someone of your own religion and 82% agreed that a woman should not rely on marriage for financial security. Sixty-two per cent of the young men interviewed felt that it is okay for an adult woman to have a child on her own if she has not found her ideal mate to marry. Over 80% of the women valued a man's ability to communicate his deepest feelings more than his ability to make a good living. Eighty-six per cent recognized that marriage is hard work and a full time job. Eighty-eight per cent felt that the divorce rate in the U.S is too high and eight out of ten see little role for government in marriage (Whitehead & Popenoe, 2001).

There do not appear to be differences among the poor, the near poor and the middle class in terms of the value of marriage. Many low-income people appear to view marriage from the capstone perspective – it is the culmination of building a life together

rather than the beginning. In several studies, woman of different classes and ethnicities were in agreement about the potential emotional benefits of marriage – friendship, companionship, romantic love, respect, and joint childrearing (Cherlin, 2005).

Effects of Divorce and Family Disruption

Although marriage is in a state a flux and has lost some of its power as an institution, the dissolution of marital relationships appears to have negative consequences for adults and children. Compared to married individuals, divorced individuals report higher levels of psychological distress, including anxiety and depression, lower self-esteem, lower levels of happiness and less of a sense of control over their lives (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001, Amato, 2000). In addition they reported more health problems and are at greater risk of mortality. They are more socially isolated, report an increase in alcohol use, have a lower standard of living, especially divorced women, and have more difficulties raising their children (Amato, 2000). While causal links can be elusive, studies which control for pre-divorce conditions in families consistently show a steady decline in positive adjustment among the children whose parents divorced compared to children from intact families as those children entered adulthood (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001, Cherlin et al., 1997, Furstenberg & Kiernan, 2001).

On the other hand, Amato (2000) reported evidence that divorce can bring about positive changes for some individuals. Among the positive changes are increased levels of autonomy and personal growth. Some divorced women have reported improvements in career opportunities, greater self-confidence and a stronger sense of control. Some men reported developing more interpersonal skills and a willingness to be more open in expressing themselves following divorce.

Divorce is increasingly understood not as a discrete event, but as a process that begins before the actual dissolution of the marriage, and continues after the parents separate. Divorce often means multiple disruptions for children, including moving to a different neighborhood and changing schools. Because divorce can mean a lower standard of living for the family, the move is often to a poorer neighborhood, with lower quality schools and fewer community resources. Parents tend to become preoccupied and unavailable to children when children are most in need of their comfort and reassurance, especially the non-custodial parent. Outcomes are worse for children when high levels of conflict continue between parents after the divorce. Moreover, children worry about their parents after they separate, and can be particularly distressed if one of their parents is doing better than the other. (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001, Amato, 2000, Furstenberg & Kiernan, 2001, Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004).

Academic achievement suffers among children of divorced parents, which has long-term consequences, as education is linked to socioeconomic success in adulthood. Children, post divorce, are more likely to drop out of high school, less likely to attend college, and complete fewer years of education overall. These negative outcomes can be attributed to disruptions caused by frequent moves and moves to neighborhoods with poorer schools and declines in parental involvement and monitoring, including availability to transport children to enrichment activities and the financial resources to pay for them (Amato, 2000, Amato & Sobolewski, 2001, Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) followed 131 children whose parents divorced when they were between the ages of 3 and 18. They were followed for 25 years and compared to children in the same community, including the same high school, whose parents remained

married. They found that almost all of the non-divorced adolescents talked with both parents about college plans, whereas no child in the divorced group had those talks with both parents. In the divorced group, 30% received full or consistent partial support throughout college and graduate school compared with 90% of the comparison group. While 90% of the comparison group completed their BA, only 56% of the divorced group graduated from college. The necessity to work many hours per week because of financial pressures interfered with studies for the children of divorced parents. Many were forced to abandon career aspiration in order to pursue courses of study that were less academically demanding.

Parenting suffers among divorced individuals. They are less able to exercise as much social control and collaboration as parents who are in a stable relationship. There tends to be more compliance among children when parents share common expectations, and parents who are in a functional marriage can support each other, challenge each others' decisions and share the burdens through difficult times (Furstenberg & Kiernan, 2001).

Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) found that among the children whose parents were divorced, one in five girls had their first sexual experience before the age of 14 and over half were sexually active with multiple partners during high school. Among the comparison group, the majority postponed sex until late high school or early college, and had sex within the context of an established relationship. All of the comparison group had curfews during high school, while a minority of the girls whose parents were divorced had curfews.

Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) concluded “parental divorce impacts detrimentally the capacity to love within a lasting, committed relationship” (p. 363). In addition to fearing failure in an intimate relationship, their subjects did not have the opportunity to learn how to negotiate differences and resolve conflict in an adult relationship. When these children entered adolescence, they lacked an internalized image of how two adults live together in a stable union, which impeded their development of the capacity for intimacy (Erikson, 1959, 1980).

Gerson (2010) offered a window into the experience of a generation who have grown up in the United States at a time when the traditional American family has not necessarily been the dominant model for family life. She interviewed 120 men and women between the ages of 18 and 32. Most had lived in some form of nontraditional home before reaching the age of 18. Forty per cent had some experience of growing up in a single family home. Seven percent had parents who separated or divorced before they left home. About one third had two parents who held full-time jobs for a significant portion of their childhood. Forty-six percent had middle or upper middle class backgrounds, another 38% were from working class families, and 16% lived on the edge of poverty, including 10% whose families at some point during their childhoods received public assistance. Fifty-five per cent identified as non-Hispanic white, 22% as African-American, 17% as Latino or Latina and 6% as Asian. They were reared in various regions of the US.

Among Gerson’s (2010) subjects, the majority was more concerned with the quality of their parents’ relationships than with whether or not they remained married. A slight majority from single parent homes wished that their parents had stayed together,

but almost half believed it was better for their parents to separate than to live in homes either filled with conflict or silent unhappiness. Two out of five from intact homes thought their parents might have been better off splitting up. Her subjects largely felt that the form their families took was less important than whether or not their parents could provide them with economic and emotional support. When parents split up, what mattered most to the children was whether they experienced increasing support or increasing troubles.

Regardless of their experiences growing up in all different types of families, more than nine out of ten of Gerson's (2010) subjects wanted a life-long committed relationship in which to raise their children, which for most of them meant getting and remaining married. Most of them wanted a committed relationship in which they share paid work and family caretaking. Subjects whose parents had been divorced were not deterred from hoping for a happy marriage for themselves. They viewed their parents' unhappy relationships as lessons in what to avoid. Gerson found that rather avoiding commitment, her subjects developed an appreciation for a relationship that could work. Many of them sought role models in other families and by observing marriages that seemed to work and felt hopeful that their lives could be different from their parents' lives.

Mental and Physical Health Benefits of Marriage

Marriage has been associated with better mental and physical health and greater longevity for both husbands and wives when compared to persons who are divorced, widowed or never married. The longevity benefits appear to be greater for men than for women (Holt-Lunstad, Birmingham, & Jones, 2008, Hughes & Waite, 2009,

Johnson, Backlund, Sorlie, & Loveless, 2000, Keicolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001, Parker-Pope, 2010). The advantages of being married affect acute and chronic conditions, from colds to cancer and heart disease (Hughes & Waite, 2009). Married persons are happier and report greater satisfaction with life than their unmarried counterparts, and carry a lower risk for depression (Holt-Lundstad, et al., 2008). It is possible that this discrepancy is due to selection. Healthier people are more likely to marry and stay married. A second explanatory hypothesis is that marriage is protective, bringing with it increased material resources, less stress, more social support and a reduction in risky health habits (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001).

The differential in longevity benefits between married men and women may be due to the fact that women bring better health habits with them into their marriages, and are more likely than men to control other's health. In addition, women tend to have larger social support systems and social support benefits health. While women tend to confide in family and friends as well as their husbands, men tend to name their wives as their main confidant and source of support. There is evidence that some types of marital disruption can be more detrimental to men than to women (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001).

Johnson et al. (2000) analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Mortality Study which included 281, 460 men and women, black and white, who were at least 45 years old. The purpose of the study was to examine the effect of marital status - married, widowed, divorced/separated, and never married – on mortality. Widowed white males and white females have a higher risk for mortality than their married counterparts. While the widowed have a significantly increased risk for cardiovascular disease compared to

married persons, the most frequent causes of death among the widowed were pneumonia and influenza, COPD and liver disease and cirrhosis. The authors surmised that widowhood leads to a less healthful lifestyle. In addition, their data support the possibility of long-term negative health affects of losing a spouse. Divorced and separated individuals and those who never married were found to be at greater risk of mortality than those who are married.

Johnson et al. (2000) found differences within the unmarried groups. Divorced men and women over 65 had the highest mortality rates. In the younger age group, ages 45-64, there were no significant difference among the divorced, widowed or never married. In addition, they found that marriage is more protective for men than for women before adjusting for socioeconomic and labor force variables. When they adjusted for labor force participation, they found that the benefit of marriage was about the same for men and for women. This suggests that there may be a protective effect of being married AND being employed. The authors noted that women who work outside the home have lower mortality rates and are less vulnerable to the negative effects of divorce.

While people in satisfying marriages enjoy the health benefits of their secure unions, certain kinds of marital conflict can make people sick. Eaker, Sullivan, Kelley-Hayes, D'Agostino and Benjamin (2007) looked at the relationship between marital status, marital strain and congestive heart disease (CHD). Their study included 3,682 subjects who participated in the Framingham Offspring Study. Subjects entered the study between 1984 and 1987 and were measured for marital status, marital strain and risk

factors for CHD. Results were reported at the 10-year follow-up for the incidence of CHD and total mortality.

The unmarried men in the study were twice as likely to die as the married men. The married men and women in their study responded differently to different types of conflict. Women who self-silenced during conflict were four times as likely to die as women who openly expressed their feelings during arguments with their husbands. Self-silencing refers to the tendency to keep one's thoughts and feelings to oneself in order to maintain a sense of safety in relationships, particularly in intimate relationships. Self-silencing has been associated with depression in women and men and irritable bowel syndrome in women. The current research found that men are more likely than women to self-silence, but it did not appear to affect their risk for CHD. For men, the stressor most likely to have a negative impact on their health was the strain they experienced if their wife's work was disruptive of their home life because of her unhappiness with her work situation. These men were 2.7 times more likely to develop CHD (Eaker et al, 2007). Overall, this study replicated the findings of many other studies that married men have a survival advantage over unmarried men (Eaker et al., 2007).

Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton (2001) reviewed 64 articles in their exploration of "the pathway leading from the marital relationship to physical health" (p.472). They found that marital interaction studies in particular indicated that problematic marital functioning has direct and indirect affects on health. Marital disagreement was associated with heightened blood pressure and heart rates. In patients with chronic back pain, marital conflict was associated with elevated lumbar muscular reactivity. In addition, conflict led to alterations in immune and endocrine function. Hostile and negative

behaviors resulted in higher systolic blood pressure in women as well as changes in serum levels of epinephrine, norepinephrine, ACTH and growth hormone for both men and women. Furthermore, there is evidence that men and women in longer-term marriages characterized by negative behavior demonstrated relatively poorer immunological responses.

Hostility and marital distress appeared to have a greater impact on women's blood pressure and mood. However, marital distress is associated with depression in both men and women. Furthermore, data suggested that conflict in close relationships could lead to maladaptive health practices, such as increased alcohol and drug consumption and smoking (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton (2001).

In their study, Holt-Lundstad et al. (2008) attempted to determine whether some marital relationships benefit health while other are detrimental (marital quality) and whether or not unmarried persons can benefit from other close, supportive relationships. Does the marital relationship have more impact than other relationships? They recruited 303 adults from the community through advertisements and took measures of their ambulatory blood pressure (ABP). Two hundred and four were married and 99 were single and subjects ranged in age from 20 to 68. ABP appears to be a strong predictor of future cardiovascular disorders. In addition, there is typically a 15 – 20% reduction in blood pressure that occurs during sleep, called dipping blood pressure. Stress has been implicated when there is a lack of dipping blood pressure in healthy individuals. The result over time can be organ damage, cardiovascular morbidity and mortality. The authors measured blood pressures in their subjects over a 24-hour period. Subjects came to their lab and filled out several questionnaires, which addressed marital quality,

network support and mental health. They were then fitted with Accutracker II ABP monitors and returned to the lab 24 hours later. Analyses of ABP were statistically controlled for age and gender and analyses of mental health measures were controlled for gender.

Holt-Lunstad et al. (2008) found that their married subjects who scored high on satisfaction with life had greater BP dipping than unmarried subjects. Marital adjustment and satisfaction were significant predictors of satisfaction with life, stress, depression and systolic blood pressure, waking and 24-hour. They found that both marital status and marital quality are important. When comparing married individuals who reported low-quality marriages with single individuals, differences in dipping BP disappeared. In fact, single individuals had lower 24-hour and waking ABP than those in unhappy marriages. The authors concluded, "One is better off single than unhappily married" (p.243). Social supports did not appear to significantly buffer the effects of an unhappy marriage or being single. This suggests that the spousal relationship may be more influential on health than other relationships. The authors noted that their findings are salient in terms of the need to develop efficacious treatments for marital distress. Helping married couples to increase their satisfaction with their relationships appears to have significant implications for physical health.

Historical Context of Marriage

In order to fully grasp the meaning of the deinstitutionalization of marriage and to understand the complexities of the contemporary marital landscape, it is important to consider the history of marriage in the United States. As the new nation took shape, marriage was constructed to reflect and support the new social order and political system. Women ceded all political, economic and property rights to their husbands, in exchange for protection and representation in the political process. The roles and responsibilities of married partners were unambiguous, determined and regulated by state laws. Consent was at the core of the ideals of the young nation and marriage was framed as a consensual relationship. Just as citizens delegated authority to their chosen representatives, so wives chose to cede authority to their husbands. In return, they each voluntarily fulfilled their responsibilities under the contract of marriage, just as citizens of the new nation conformed to its laws (Cott, 2000).

Abolitionists were the first to challenge existing marriage law, comparing marriage to slavery. In fact, according to the Anglo-American legal tradition, both slavery and marriage were considered domestic relations, and slavery in the Southern United States was legally considered a private relationship. Master/servant and husband/wife relationships were considered domestic relationships because the head of the household had ultimate authority over them. The crucial difference between wives and slaves was that the marital relationship was based on consent. However, both relationships were based on an independent person having power over a dependent person. In exchange for the protection and support of the independent person, the

dependent person was expected to be obedient and submissive. In addition to fighting for the right to vote, leaders of the Women's Rights Movement of the mid-1800's gave voice to the serious inequities in their domestic lives. They never lost sight, however, of the fact that women married by consent, whereas enslaved persons had no such choice (Cott, 2000).

With the passage of the thirteenth amendment to the constitution in 1863, slavery was declared illegal in the United States. The Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the 14th Amendment to the Constitution further clarified and guaranteed the rights of former slaves. They fell short, however, of granting women the right to vote, and upheld the principle that husbands would represent their wives in the political realm. However, there was progress between the 1830's and 1870's in gradually overthrowing the principle of coverture, which denied married women any rights to the ownership of property. States began passing laws allowing women to retain ownership of the property they brought with them into marriage or were deeded during marriage. By 1900, all states granted women the right to own property in their own name. Finally, in 1920, women in the United States were granted the right to vote (Cott, 2000).

Although an assumption of the principle of consent was that people married for love, it wasn't until the end of the 19th century and early 20th century that the emphasis on love became dominant. Cott (2000) refers to "new psychologies around the turn of the century [that] instigated public discussion of sexual attraction" (p.150). Movies and graphic advertising were new media, which picked up on the themes of sexual magnetism and the "irrationality" of true love.

Coontz (2006) asserted that the rise of the incidence of divorce is a result of the elevation of the “marital relationship above all other personal and familial commitments: the concentration of emotion, passion, personal identity and self-validation in the couple relationship and the attenuation of emotional attachments and obligations beyond the conjugal unit” (p. 9). This reflects Parson’s (1943) analysis of the emerging dominance of the nuclear family in middle of the 20th century. Parsons emphasized the isolation of the American nuclear family from the families of origin of both spouses, making clear that he was referring to mainly white, middle class families. He stated that this isolation “is the most distinctive feature of the American kinship system and underlies most of its peculiar functional and dynamic problems” (1943, p.28).

In tightly knit kinship groups, in contrast to the isolated nuclear family, the emphasis is on obligations to other kin and ones status in the system, not on one’s individual feelings. In our system where the conjugal family is isolated, there is much greater freedom to have and express feelings. While inhibiting affective expression, the restrictive forces in kinship systems can serve to maintain stability and solidarity in the unit. Expectations and role definitions are clear. In contemporary American society, there is the institutionally sanctioned expectation that partners should be in love. Parsons (1943) claimed that since marriage in America rests primarily on affective attachment, it puts a premium on “a certain kind of mutuality and equality” (p.36).

What Parsons described is what some sociologists are referring to as the move from institutional marriage to companionate marriage. In the early 20th century, marriage in the US moved away from being an institution to being a companionship. An idealized version of the typical marriage of the 1950’s painted a picture of husband and wife

adhering to a strict division of labor, and yet being companions, friends and lovers. This model of marriage provided gratification for husband and wife through successfully fulfilling their roles as good providers, homemakers and parents. Moreover, to have a sexual relationship and raise children was still only socially acceptable in marriage (Cherlin, 2004). However, the pressure on marriage to be all things to two people causes considerable strain and, Coontz (2006) asserted, leads to more divorce.

Racial and Ethnic Differences in Marriage Patterns

Cherlin (2005) identified current marital patterns among Blacks as still reflecting the influences of slavery. For over a century more black children have lived in single-family households. Black women married at an earlier age than white women during the first half of the 20th century. However, since mid-century, marriage as a social institution has seen a greater decline among Blacks than among Whites. In agreement with Cherlin, Pagnini and Morgan (1996) asserted that the differences between the organization of White families and Black families have been prevalent since the late 19th century, and therefore must be understood in an historical context. They cannot be explained by recent phenomena related to urban life and welfare.

Marriage among slaves was prohibited by law. Because slaves had no civil rights, they did not have the right to consent to a marriage contract. Whatever obligations slaves made to each other as man and wife could be trumped by the demands of their master. (Cott, 2000). Pagnini and Morgan (1996) asserted that a more flexible approach to family organization would have been an adaptive response to the disruptions and unpredictability of the domestic life of people in slavery. They analyzed interviews conducted during the 1930's as part of a program administered by the Works Progress

Administration, which gathered life histories of ordinary Southerners, including Blacks, Whites, men women young, old, tenant farmers and landowners. They found that Blacks were more accepting of out of wedlock pregnancies than Whites and children born outside of marriage became part of the community and were often cared for by extended family members. In terms of marriage, Blacks were less likely to value marriage at all costs than Whites, and moved in and out of marriage more readily than Whites, especially in cases of violence or infidelity. A history of greater flexibility in family organization may explain current differences in marital patterns between Blacks and Whites.

There is considerable diversity in family structure patterns among Hispanics. Mexican Americans have higher birth rates than all other major ethnic groups and a higher percentage of Mexican American births are to married women than Black births. In addition, Mexican American families are more likely to include extended kin. They have more marriage-based, multigenerational households than Blacks do. Puerto Rican families are the second largest Hispanic ethnic group and the most economically disadvantaged and have rates of nonmarital childbearing second only to Blacks. However, they have a tradition of consensual unions in which couples live together as married but without formal sanctions. As a result, more unmarried Puerto Rican mothers live with partners than unmarried African American mothers (Cherlin, 2005).

Gender and Modern Marriage

Hochschild (1989) used the metaphor of the second shift and coined the phrase *stalled revolution* to describe a phenomenon she observed in her intensive interviews between 1980 and 1988 of 50 married couples, with both spouses working full-time jobs,

who had children under the age of six. She found that 20% of the men in her study shared housework equally with their wives. Seventy percent did less than half but more than a third and 10% did less than a third. Women did two-thirds of the daily work at home, like cooking and cleaning, and more of the childcare. Men did tasks that did not require a daily routine like changing the oil in the car or home repairs. As a result, the men in the study had more control over when they made their contributions to running the household than the women did. Hochschild found that the women complained more of being sick, over-tired and emotionally drained, because they did more of the second shift work than their husbands. Their paying jobs were the first shift, and the second shift began as soon as they walked in the door of their homes or picked their children up from daycare.

Hochschild (1989) attributed second shift stress to forces that were occurring outside of marriage and precipitating changes and transformation within marriages. The changes she referred to were economic and cultural, the result of a greater number of women entering the workforce. The balance of power in the family was shifting. Hochschild observed in her sample that men were changing more slowly than women in terms of role expectations. In the outside world, a cultural understanding of marriage that encompassed new roles for women and new realities for families was lagging. For example, many workplaces were remaining inflexible in terms of offering job sharing and other part-time work opportunities and affordable, dependable daycare was hard to find. Hochschild (1989) stated, “This strain between the change in women and the absence of change in much else leads me to speak of a ‘stalled revolution’ (p. 12).

A Closer Look at the Stalled Revolution

Brennan, Barnett & Gareis (2001) and Rogers and Deboer (2001) looked at the effects of wives' increased incomes on several aspects of married life. Rogers and Deboer used data from a sample of 1,047 married individuals (not couples) in medium duration marriages, drawn from a five-wave panel survey begun in 1980 and continuing to 1997. They addressed three central questions: How does an increase in married women's income affect a) the subsequent marital happiness of married women and men b) their subsequent psychological well-being, and c) the risk of divorce. The main independent variable was change in married women's absolute and relative income between 1980 and 1988. Then they measured the effects of income change on the marital happiness of married women and men in 1988, their psychological well-being in 1988, and the odds of divorce between 1988 and 1997.

Rogers and DeBoer (2001) identified a trend through the 1980's and 90's of an increasing number of married women making a substantial contribution to household income. They considered one possible outcome would be that women would feel more power within their marriages to initiate change, such as the division of household labor. In egalitarian marriages, where spouses share more equally in child-rearing and bread-winning, this could result in higher levels of marital satisfaction. However, if husbands were resistant to these changes, tensions within the marriage would increase. In addition, it appeared that men were continuing to find their role as bread-winner important, which could diminish the positive effect of a wife's added income, even if that additional income reduced financial hardship.

Rogers and Deboers (2001) found in 1980 that marital discord, as reported by married women, significantly increased the likelihood that they would increase their income. As their incomes increased, married women reported higher levels of marital satisfaction and emotional well-being. Marital discord, not an increase in married women's incomes, was identified as a cause of divorce. Men's marital happiness was affected not by their wives' absolute income but by their relative income. In other words, men reported decreases in psychological well-being as their wives contributed a larger *proportion* of the total household income. The authors offered several possible interpretations of this finding. It could indicate the continuing salience of the breadwinner role for husbands. Women may feel more entitled to demand more changes in their marriages as their income increases, which some men may find distressing. The authors concluded that, "though puzzling, this finding is consistent with the notions that marriage continues to be highly valued but that it may be a more difficult and personally challenging arrangement in the current social and economic climate" (p. 471).

In their longitudinal study, Brennan et al. (2001) explored the relationship between relative earnings over time and change over time in husbands' marital role quality (MRQ) and the relationship between relative earnings over time and change over time in wives' MRQ. Data were collected in 3 waves over two years from a random sample of 300, mostly white, middle class, dual-earner couples in which both members were employed full-time and the men were 25-40 years old at first data collection. Subjects completed measures and were interviewed by trained interviewers. Subjects were measured for salary, salary affect - the degree to which they were subjectively

rewarded by the amount of their salary, gender role ideology - how traditional they were in their beliefs about appropriate behavior for men and women, and marital role quality.

Brennan et al. (2001) found that changes in women's earnings relative to their husbands' over time had no significant effects on the quality of their marriages but that changes in the men's earnings relative to their wives' did have significant effects on the men's marital role quality. When husbands earned more over time than their wives, especially if they derived subjective rewards from their salaries, their marital role quality increased. If married men did not value their earnings as much, their marital role quality was not affected as much by any widening salary gap. No significant change was observed in the women over time regarding marital role quality and changes in the salary gap.

Brennan et al. (2001) concluded that men who place a high value on their role as breadwinner and on the size of their salaries are vulnerable to decreases in their marital role quality as their wives' salaries increase. They are more vulnerable than their male counterparts who place less importance on the amount of money they earn. The authors observed a shift from the idealized marriage of the 1950's, when gender-role specialization seemed to guarantee marital stability. Men who are living in nontraditional marriages – those where both partners work full-time – but maintain more traditional gender-role attitudes towards the amount of money they earn are the most vulnerable when their wives' salaries increase over time relative to theirs. “As their wives' earnings approach their own, there is the potential in this group of men for feelings of loss of value in their own eyes and perhaps eventually in the eyes of their wives. Because marital role

quality is relational, it is likely that his low marital role quality will have a depressing effect on her marital role quality” (p. 180).

In her research, Gupta (1999) addressed the following question: How do men change their housework time when they move in and out of marital or cohabiting unions with women, and how do those changes compare with changes made by women who experience transitions in marital or cohabiting status? She analyzed data from the two waves of The National Survey of Households and Families, conducted in 1987-1988 and 1992-1993. Her sample consisted of 2,975 men and 4,973 women who were reinterviewed for the second wave of the study. She looked at two dependent variables – changes in individuals’ total housework hours and changes in hours they spend on “female chores”. The questionnaires asked how many hours respondents had spent in the previous week doing nine tasks: preparing meals, washing dishes, housecleaning, washing and ironing, shopping, doing outdoor chores, paying bills, maintaining the auto, and driving. The first five items were considered “female chores”. Her independent variables were changes in marital or cohabiting status.

Gupta (1999) drew on the concept of doing gender. “Gender is enacted and affirmed continuously by individuals through their interactions with other individuals” (p.701). She paid most attention in her analysis to the tasks she labeled as female chores, because these tend to be regular, if not daily, tasks that need to be performed at fixed times. Most of the day-to-day work in a household tends to fall into the category of female chores.

Gupta’s (1999) findings showed that the average effect on men’s housework time of all significant transitions to cohabitation and marriage is -3.6 hours. The corresponding

figure for women is +4.2 hours. In percentages, Gupta found a reduction of 29% for men and an increase of 17% for women. The transitions out of cohabitation and marriage resulted in an increase in men's housework to 5.2 hours or 61% and a decrease in women's housework by -5.3 hours, or by 16%. Gupta stated, "The conclusion is inescapable. Men substantially reduce their housework time when they enter coresidential unions with women, and women increase theirs when they form unions. Moreover, it is the time that individuals spend doing female-typed household work – the backbone of household life- that is most sensitive to transitions in marital status" (pp. 709-710).

Using the same sample as Brennan et al. (2001), Ozer, Barnett, Brennan and Sperling (1998) examined the relationship among child care involvement, marital quality, and distress. Their data were the result of a third wave of data collection in a 2-year longitudinal study, begun in 1989, involving a random sample of 300, mostly white, middle class dual-earner couples. They measured psychological distress, marital-role quality, and relative contribution to childcare.

Ozer et al. (1998) found that, for fathers employed full time outside the home, spending proportionally more time involved in child care activities than one's spouse was related to lower levels of distress. The findings were more complex for the mothers. Mothers experienced lower distress when spending proportionally more time with their children than their spouse. However, this benefit, of lower distress, was offset by a decrease in marital-role quality, which, then could result in increases in distress. In other words, there is a link between relative child care involvement and marital-role quality for mothers, but not for fathers. When Ozer et al. controlled for marital-role quality, they

found that the benefits to mothers of child care involvement were similar to those of fathers.

This was an unexpected finding. One interpretation offered by Ozer et al. (1998) was that parents who are employed full-time cherish more involvement with their children. Having more time with their children would lower their levels of distress. However, the wife could also resent that fact that her husband is spending less time with the children than she is, resulting in a lower marital-role quality and increases in daily stress.

This may be a conflict for the wife in the realm of gender role identity. Hochschild (1989) referred to gender strategies, which are plans of action that men and women devise to address the demands of family life in the context of cultural notions of gender. For men and women, gender strategies emerge from their beliefs about what it means to be a man or a woman. These beliefs, with their roots in families of origin, are tied to strong emotions. Hochschild identified three types of gender strategies: traditional, transitional, and egalitarian. In addition to identifying types of gender strategies, Hochschild observed that there were contradictions between what her subjects said they believed about their roles and how they felt about those roles. She understood the process of formulating a gender strategy as “unconsciously synthesizing certain cultural ideals with feelings about their past” (p. 16). As a result, a man or woman could believe that they are egalitarian, but discover that they value work less than they “should” or want to be more invested at home than they think they “should” be.

Perhaps the women in the Ozer et al. (1998) study believed they were in egalitarian marriages but found that they were doing more childcare than their husbands

because, although their husbands believed in an egalitarian marriage, they were more comfortable having their wives do more of the childcare. As a result, they found themselves in a marital role they did not believe in nor expect to be in. Brennan et al. (2001) commented on the Ozer et al. (1998) findings: “If in the future more men in full-time-employed dual-earner couples realize that their wives’ marital role quality is more reactive to their participation in child care than to their relative earnings, they might not be so focused on the earnings aspect of their male identity” (p. 180). Perhaps this is one way to move the stalled revolution into first gear. Hochschild (1989) stated, “ If we can’t return to traditional marriage, and if we are not to despair of marriage altogether, it becomes vitally important to understand marriage as a magnet for the strains of the stalled revolution, and to understand gender strategies as the basic dynamic of marriage” (p.18).

Mackey and O’Brien (1995) observed how marital roles evolved over the course of lasting marriages. They conducted semi-structured interviews with 120 spouses who had been married at least twenty years in a qualitative study focused on how marriages change over time. They understood behaviors related to marital roles as existing along a continuum, with expressive behaviors at one pole, and instrumental behaviors at the other. They classified relational behaviors as expressive and behaviors centered on tasks as instrumental. Since their sample was composed of couples who married during the post – World War II era, most of their research participants entered marriage with traditional role expectations. Women expected to be home-centered, and men expected to work outside the home and provide economic support for their families. Like Hochschild (1989), Mackey and O’Brien found that role expectations grew out of experiences in

families of origins. Spouses entered marriage with “mental representations of what it was like to be a husband and wife” (p. 23). From their diverse sample, Mackey and O’Brien observed that race, ethnicity and social class were important determinates of role expectations as well.

Seventy percent of the men in Mackey and O’Brien’s study (1995) talked of mainly instrumental behaviors before their first child was born. One-third of the women talked about mainly expressive behaviors while the remaining two-thirds described a mix of expressive and instrumental behaviors, even if they were full-time homemakers. During the child-rearing years, 44% of the men began to integrate expressive behaviors into their marital roles. This shift was due partly to wives’ asking for more help with child-rearing, but also to women seeking employment outside the home, thus needing more help from their husbands with parenting. In addition, parenting involves expressive as well as instrumental skills. By the time the children had left home, “Fifty-three percent of husbands talked in mixed or expressive terms about their marital roles. Although several women also became more expressive, the dramatic change occurred among the men” (p. 29). Regarding marital role behaviors, Mackey and O’Brien (1995) concluded, “Pure types were more characteristic of role expectations than of actual behaviors throughout marriage” (p.22).

In her study of 120 men and women between the ages of 18 and 32, Gerson (2010) concluded that gender *flexibility* was essential to families when facing ongoing and inevitable challenges. The parents who were most successful at meeting the financial and emotional needs of each other and their children were the parents who were able to devise flexible gender strategies that “...transgress[ed] the once rigidly drawn boundaries

between women as caretakers and men as breadwinners” (p. 10). Moreover, Gerson’s subjects learned from their parents’ failures as well as their successes.

As mentioned above, more than nine out of ten of Gerson’s subjects aspired to a life-long committed relationship in which to raise their children. Most men and women wanted a committed relationship in which they share paid work and family caretaking. Three quarters of those raised in dual-earner households, more the two thirds raised in traditional homes and close to nine-tenths of those raised by single parents wanted their spouses to share breadwinning and caretaking. Four-fifths of the women and two-thirds of the men wanted egalitarian relationships.

Mackey and O’Brien (1995) noted the discrepancy between pure types of marital role expectations and actual role behaviors that result in men and women responding to the needs of each other and their children. Gerson (2010) found that her subjects were aware that their ideal visions of an egalitarian committed relationship might not be possible. They developed what she referred to as their “fallback strategies”. Most of her female subjects considered work essential to their survival. If they are unable to find a supportive partner, they prefer self-reliance to being dependent upon a husband in a traditional marriage. Men worry that equal sharing at home will compromise their performance in demanding jobs. She refers to “neo-traditional” men among her subjects who “grant women’s choice to work but also want to maintain their position as breadwinning specialists” (p. 11). Gerson concluded that the ideal of an egalitarian marriage in which there is a high level of work-family integration is still not possible in the U.S. because of resistant institutions – demanding workplaces and privatized childcare.

What Is It Like To Be Married?: A Look At Lasting Marriages

Long marriages are characterized by both stability and change (Mackey & O'Brien, 1995, Spanier, Lewis & Cole, 1975, Vaillant & Vaillant, 1993, Weishaus & Field, 1998). There is disagreement about how best to capture the experience of couples through the life-stage transitions of their long marriages. With life spans increasing, resulting in longer marriages, the issue of how to effectively study lasting marriages is particularly salient (Mackey & O'Brien, 1995, Vaillant & Vaillant, 1993). Spanier et al. (1975) and Vaillant and Vaillant (1993) argued against drawing conclusions from retrospective and cross-sectional data. Mackey and O'Brien (1995) suggested that retrospective data on marital satisfaction might be more accurate than data collected at particular intervals. "...Distance may enhance the accuracy of personal evaluation by placing memories into both an historical and a relative context" (p. 127).

Vaillant and Vaillant (1993) examined marital satisfaction both prospectively and retrospectively in their 40- year study of 169 couples. Retrospective data revealed a curvilinear pattern, with the lowest point of satisfaction occurring at about the 20 -year point. However, prospective data did not show this pattern and indicated that marital satisfaction remained relatively stable. Their subjects were part of the interdisciplinary Study of Adult Development begun between 1938 and 1942 at Harvard University, designed to follow participants from late adolescence to age 65, and to gather data on various aspects of adult development.

Vaillant and Vaillant (1993) studied the marriages of 169 out of 268 of the original participants. The husbands had been interviewed as college sophomores and then again at age 25. At age 30, a study anthropologist made a home visit to each husband and

wife. Four-fifths of the men were reinterviewed between age 47 and 57. Biennial questionnaires were sent to the men, including questions about their marriages.

Approximately every 10 years, a questionnaire was sent to their wives, which included the same questions concerning their marriages as were sent to their husbands. All of the husbands were Caucasian, 99% were college graduates, most of them successful businessmen and professionals. Ninety-five per cent of the wives attended college, and 71% graduated. As of 1987, 60% of the wives were homemakers and 18% had full-time careers.

Vaillant and Vaillant (1993) did not find a significant difference between husbands and wives in their levels of marital satisfaction or perceptions of the stability of their marriages. There was a general decline in sexual satisfaction over time, but not significantly different for husbands than for wives. However, there was a statistically significant difference between husbands and wives that occurred from the middle to the later period of the marriage. Wives reported greater difficulty in solving marital disagreements than their husbands.

Vaillant and Vaillant (1993) concluded that their findings did not support a relationship between family life cycle and marital satisfaction. Their retrospective data indicated that wives found their marriages most difficult between the 16-20 year period, which is when their children reached adolescence. Vaillant and Vaillant reported that these findings were “suggestive” at best, and noted that their study took place during a period in history – the late 1960’s and early 1970’s - when adolescents were particularly rebellious and anti-establishment. Prospective data showed that the wives were least satisfied with their marriages between the 31-50 year period, but the increase in

dissatisfaction was modest. “On balance, we could conclude that the U-curve of marital satisfaction may be an artifact of retrospective and cross-sectional study” (p. 238).

Using a qualitative and phenomenological research approach, Mackey and O’Brien (1995) studied the marital histories of 120 spouses. Through semi-structured interviews of the individual spouses, Mackey and O’Brien gathered data on the changes that took place in the marital relationships of their subjects as they moved from the beginning of their marriages, through the child-rearing years and into the later, empty – nest years. Their inclusionary criteria were that subjects were married at least twenty years, that their youngest child was at least 18 years old and/or out of high school and that they were not currently receiving psychotherapy and had no history of extensive marriage counseling. The sample included individuals from diverse racial, ethnic, educational and religious backgrounds. Subjects were interviewed in their homes, each spouse separately, and the interviews were approximately two hours in length.

Contrary to the prospective findings of Vaillant and Vaillant (1993), Mackey and O’Brien (1995) found that there was an increase in conflict and a decrease in satisfaction during the childrearing years. Whereas 63% of the women in their study were satisfied with their marriages in the early years, only half were satisfied during the childrearing years, and satisfaction reached its lowest point during the adolescent years.

However, Mackey and O’Brien found that marriage is neither “unidimensional or unidirectional”(p. 126). They cited the difficulties of the childrearing years as an example of how there can be a regression in one aspect of a marriage while another aspect is progressing. The childrearing years produced an increase in serious conflict, a decrease in the frequency and satisfaction of sexual relations, especially for the wives, and a decrease

in emotional relatedness between spouses. Women reported a decrease in autonomy and fairness in the relationship. Conflict was especially intense during the adolescent years and mostly revolved around limit setting and discipline. There was more pressure on parents to address their differences so that they could forge a united front to deal with their teenagers. In spite of, or perhaps because of, these strains, many of the marriages in Mackey and O'Brien's sample improved once the children left home. "Mutuality in parenting helped pave the road to enhanced intimacy and satisfaction between spouses after their children left home" (p. 123). As men became more expressive during the parenting years and there was more of a blending of expressive and instrumental roles for both the husbands and the wives, mutuality increased.

Mackey and O'Brien looked for the underlying meanings of marital satisfaction, rather than attempting to measure it with standardized instruments. They found that satisfaction was significantly correlated to what they referred to as relational values – trust, respect, empathic understanding and equity. The meaning and importance of these values changed over time. In the early years of these marriages, it mattered most to the spouses that their partners viewed them as trustworthy, respectful and understanding. In the later years, *mutual* trust, respect and understanding became more important. In addition, these qualities grew throughout the course of these marriages. While respect remained constant from the early years through the empty nest years, trust, equity and understanding developed.

Communication improved over the course of these lasting marriages, in part due to the husbands becoming more expressive. By the empty nest years, 63% of the respondents described their marriages as expressive compared to 49% in the earlier years,

and expressiveness was correlated with satisfaction. As couples were more able to talk about their differences and conflicts, their feelings of connectedness and mutuality grew. Commitment to the marriage was an essential component in the longevity of these relationships. Many of these couples felt that divorce was not an option. The growth and resilience of these marriages seemed to rest on commitment, along with the relational values of trust, respect, mutual empathy, sensitivity and equity (Mackey & O'Brien, 1995).

Weishaus and Field (1998) conducted a longitudinal study of 17 couples, as part of the Berkeley Older Generation Study, at the Institute of Human Development at the University of California, Berkeley. The couples were interviewed periodically from the time their first child was born between 1928 and 1929 until between 1982 and 1984, as part of the Guidance Study and Berkeley Growth Study. These seventeen older couples survived to be interviewed between 1982 and 1984. They had been married between 50 and 69 years, with a mean of 58.3 years. Husbands and wives were interviewed separately at four different data points corresponding to the following life stages: young adulthood (1929), middle-age (1946), young-old age (1969) and old-old age (1983). Data were gathered through intensive interviews.

Weishaus and Field (1998) proposed a “dynamic” model of long-term marriages that can describe changes in marriages over time. They described the following six relationship styles: *Stable/positive* – moderately high to high levels of satisfaction, stable, generally positive affect and interactions. *Stable/neutral* – overall satisfaction, but never experience high affect, more or less marriages of convenience. *Stable/negative* – primarily negative, and can include hostility and withdrawal. *Curvilinear* – drop in

satisfaction some time in the mid-years of marriage, and then rising again to almost as high a level as the early years. *Continuous decline* – erode gradually and continuously. At the 50-year point, they look like stable/negative marriages. *Continuous increase* - described in some arranged marriages.

Out of the 17 marriages that Weishaus and Field studied, 5 were stable/positive. These marriages were stable but not static, and had their ups and downs. “Throughout their relationship, these couples have had congruent perceptions of each other and of the marriage. Both members were noncritical, they spoke highly of each other and of the relationship, and each expressed high affect for the partner”(p. 768).

Weishaus and Field (1998) found three couples in the *stable/neutral* category. They considered these to be marriages of convenience. The marriage was not the major emotional investment of the spouses, and there was little conflict. The authors noted, “it takes passion to generate conflict” (p. 768). Spouses in these marriages never became intensely involved with each other, but were loyal. In two cases, when the husbands became ill in old age, the wives took excellent care of them.

Two of the marriages were *stable-negative*. There was a lack of any apparent positive feeling between the spouses and the relationships were characterized by resentment, withdrawal, little communication and no display of positive emotion. One couple stayed together because of religious conviction. The other stayed together because of they enjoyed the trappings of their marriage. The wife tended to accommodate to her husband, who derived satisfaction from filling his role as head of the household. The wife felt more satisfied in old old age, when her husband became ill, and she felt that he needed her (Weishaus & Field, 1998).

Seven couples fit the *curvilinear model*. The degree and duration of their declines in satisfaction varied, although the dips coincided with the childrearing years. Weishaus and Field (1998) found that the way in which these spouses described their marriages in old old age were very similar to couples in stable/positive marriages, which were characterized by high, positive affect. There was a high degree of congruence in their perceptions of their relationships and modes of interaction. They found no couples in their sample in the continuous decline or continuous increase categories. However, they assert that these two types are a theoretical possibility. Continuous increase may be characteristic of arranged marriages, and continuous decline may apply to marriages of shorter duration.

Weishaus and Field (1998) identified several common elements across lasting marriages they studied. Included among the common elements were both shared and separate interests, commitment to the marriage, acceptance of each other, tolerance and respect. In the *stable/positive* and *curvilinear* marriages, Weishaus and Field (1998) also observed understanding, affection, love and a non-critical attitude in the spouses towards each other and regarding their marriage.

Expectations were experienced differently across the types of marriages. In the *stable/positive* marriages, Weishaus and Field (1998) noted that the spouses were generally successful in meeting each other's needs, and reacted flexibly when expectations were not met. In the *stable/neutral* marriages, the expectations were moderate and remained relatively stable while in the *stable/negative* relationships there was resentment resulting from unmet expectations. The resentment manifested later in the relationships as resignation and "reluctant acceptance" (p.771), decreased expectations

and lower levels of satisfaction. Couples in *curvilinear* marriages tended to adjust their expectations to become more congruent with reality, resulting in increased satisfaction. Like Mackey and O'Brien (1995) Weishaus and Field (1998) found both continuity and change in the lasting marriages they studied. The *stable/neutral* and *stable/negative* marriages changed the least. Vitality was an ongoing feature in the *stable/positive* marriages, which had some fluctuation in satisfaction. In the *curvilinear* marriages, satisfaction returned to early levels after the children had grown. Weishaus and Field observed in these lasting marriages a kind of love that is "neither energizing nor tiring, but is stabilizing and satisfying, unlike the kind of energy that marriages exhibit in earlier stages" (p. 771).

Sex and Marriage

The frequency of sexual activity in marriage decreases over time (Call, Sprecher & Schwartz, 1995, Lindau et al., 2007, Smith, 1998, Yeh, Lorenz, Wickrama, Conger & Elder, 2006). The steepest decline in sexual activity occurs shortly after marriage and is referred to as the "honeymoon affect". This is explained by the concept of habituation – the novelty of sex with the spousal partner has worn off, they are readily accessible for sex and sexual activity with a spousal partner becomes predictable. However, habituation is not an adequate explanation for why the frequency of sexual activity continues to drop over the duration of the marriage. Other possible explanations include stress and fatigue from careers and the birth of children (Call et al., 1995).

There appears to be a relationship between frequency of marital sex and marital satisfaction (Call et al., 1995, Yeh et al., 2006). "Happy couples have sex more frequently than unhappy couples" (Call et al., p. 641). Yeh et al. examined the causal

sequences among sexual satisfaction, marital quality and marital instability. They analyzed data from the Iowa Youth and Families Projects and the Iowa Midlife Transition Projects, using five waves of data from surveys from 1990, 1991, 1992, 1994 and 2001. They found that higher levels of sexual satisfaction at one point in time predicted an increase in marital quality at the next point in time. In addition, higher levels of sexual satisfaction at one point in time consistently led to a decrease in marital instability at the next point in time. Marital quality has a positive effect on marital stability and sexual satisfaction has a positive effect on marital quality. “Those who were satisfied with their sexual relations tended to be satisfied and happy with their marriages, and better marital quality, in turn, helped reduce marital instability” (p. 342).

In his analysis of data from the General Social Survey Project, Smith (1998) concluded that age appears to be the most salient factor affecting the frequency of sexual intercourse. Among married individuals, frequency falls from 112 times per year for persons under 30 to 16 times per year for those 70 and older. Furthermore, among older married couples, poor health related to ageing appears to have a major effect on the frequency of sexual intercourse. Lindau et al. (2007) found, in their survey of 3005 persons between the ages of 57 and 85 years of age, that the most common reason for sexual inactivity in the previous three months was the male partners’ physical health. Smith noted that poor health can result in a cessation of sexual activity in couples who describe themselves as still being in love and who are very happy with their marriages.

Smith (1998) reported that sexual intercourse is more frequent among married than single individuals. This difference becomes even more notable with age. Sexual activity is 25-300% greater among married compared to non-married individuals at

various ages. Like Call et al. (1995), he found that among married persons, those who report happier marriages report a greater frequency of sexual intercourse. Being younger, being married less than 3 years and feeling happily married are related to greater frequency of sexual intercourse.

Lindau et al. (2007) concluded that physical health is more strongly associated with many sexual problems than is age alone, and that this is particularly true for men. They found that the majority of older adults they surveyed regarded sexuality as an important part of life. Although sexual activity does decline with age, they found that a substantial number of their subjects in their eighth and ninth decades of life were still sexually active and that the frequency of sexual activity does not decline substantially through the age of 74. Older women are less likely than older men to remain sexually active and are more likely to express a lack of interest in sex. Age has a greater effect on the availability of intimate partners for women. Among persons between 75 and 85 years of age, 78% of men and 40% of women reported having an intimate or spousal partner. While both older men and older women reported sexual problems, women were less likely than men to have discussed them with their physicians.

Mackey and O'Brien (1995) found that 75% of their subjects reported that their sex lives were active and satisfying in the early years of their marriages. Frequency of sexual activity declined slightly during the childrearing years along with, for women, satisfaction. During the later stage of marriage, 86% of the subjects reported satisfaction with their marriages and 63% reported that their sexual relations were positive and 37% were negative or ambivalent about sex. Seventy-three percent of respondents described their marriages as intimate during the empty nest years. Eighty-five percent of the

respondents who described their marriages as satisfying during those years also described their relationships as psychologically intimate. Mackey and O'Brien found that their subjects spoke of sexual intimacy and psychological intimacy as interrelated parts of feeling close to their partners. Physical touching remained a means of continuing to feel emotionally connected even if illness interfered with their sexual relationship

Chapter II Theory and Interventions in Couples Therapy

Theories of Marriage and Adult Attachment

In terms of theory, marital conflict has been a core concept in the study and treatment of marital distress for over two decades, but is now seen as too limited a paradigm to explain the complexities of adult intimate relationships (Fincham & Beach, 1999). Proponents of Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT) are focusing interventions on attachment injuries. In trying to understand impasses in couples therapy, Johnson, Makinen and Millikin (2001) identified events in relationships where there was a failure in the response of one partner to the distress of the other at a time of particular vulnerability. These failures, referred to as attachment injuries, damage the security of the attachment and defy repair. EFT researchers are exploring the questions of whether identifying and addressing these injuries in therapy will reestablish trust, and what kinds of therapeutic interventions will be most effective.

Neuroscience is weighing in with studies that attempt to identify the regions of the brain and the specific hormones and neurotransmitters that are involved in sexual attraction and attachment. Fisher, Aron, Mashek, Li, and Brown (2002) have described three “emotion-motivation systems” (p. 413) - lust, attraction and attachment. These three systems are interrelated, but can also function independently. “Humans can express deep attachment for a long-term partner, while they feel romantic attraction for someone at the office or in their social circle, while they feel the sex drive toward stimuli unrelated to either partner” (p.417-418). These findings are compelling and troubling, if one’s goal as a therapist is to assist married couples in keeping passion, interest and intimacy alive in a monogamous relationship.

Conflict

In the development of treatment modalities for marital distress, the focus has largely been on conflict, which has been identified as a key causal factor in distress. Moreover, couples' ineffective responses to conflict have seemed amenable to change. Research points to the possibility that much marital conflict results from negative spousal cognitions, particularly attributions (Fincham & Beach, 1999).

Gottman and Krokoff (1989) found that, in terms of long-term marital satisfaction, conflict may actually play a positive role. When wives are compliant, they may win short-term gains by avoiding conflict. However satisfaction with the relationship deteriorates over time. On the other hand, satisfaction for wives improves when they engage in conflict and express anger and contempt. However, if husbands respond with stubbornness, defensiveness, withdrawal or whining there is no benefit to the wives having attempted to openly confront areas of disagreement. Couples who avoid conflict altogether may be at risk because they fail to develop the confidence that they will be able to negotiate the inevitable difficulties that arise over the course of a life together.

Fincham and Beach (1999) stated that it is overly simplistic to conclude either that negative behavior in marriage may be necessary for long-term satisfaction, or that it leads to the deterioration of marital satisfaction. They suggested that the *meaning* of conflict in marriage is highly variable and must be understood before interventions can be accurately developed. For example, conflict can reflect either an engagement with the relationship and a commitment to solve problems, or a withdrawal from that process. They suggest a contextualization of marital conflict, which would include consideration

of negative life events, social support, theories of adult attachment, commitment and self-processes.

Fincham, Stanley and Beach (2007) suggested setting aside the emphasis on conflict altogether and focusing on strengths, coping and deeper systems of meaning. They posed two questions, which they believe should set a new direction for marital research: “Is there an inherent capacity in many relationships for marital self-repair and relationship-generated change, even in the absence of outside intervention? Can naturally occurring marital self-repair processes be harnessed to improve existing treatments, especially the maintenance of treatment gains over time?” (p.282).

The hypothesis they presented was that positive behaviors can be transformative in marital dynamics. Among the positive behaviors Fincham and Beach (1999) considered the most powerful were forgiveness, commitment and sacrifice. They referred to these as variables, which can transform meaning and motivation in marriage. By emphasizing meaning, they were suggesting a level of change that runs deeper than a change in behavior and cognition alone. For example, sacrificing some immediate personal gain for the sake of the marriage or one’s partner indicates a focus on the couple, not just the self, thus strengthening the commitment. The investment in the future of the relationship can be very satisfying to the partner who has made the sacrifice, and therefore not feel like a loss, but a gain.

Fincham et al. (2007) called for a non-linear conceptualization of marital dynamics. They referred to iterative processes in couples, meaning, for example, that when one partner engages in a negative behavior, this is the “raw material for a response”

(p.283) and begins a cycle of interaction. This cycle can take on a life of its own over the course of many repetitions, and can result in both partners engaging in negative behaviors, even if this was never their intention. The authors suggested that forgiveness, commitment and sacrifice can transform a partner's response to negative behaviors, thus preventing the destructive iterative cycle described above. Moreover, the presence of forgiveness, commitment and sacrifice can support a positive view of the relationship, even in the face of negative behaviors, and can therefore be protective of the relationship.

Mackey and O'Brien (1995) answered the first question posed by Fincham et al. (2007). They found that change characterized the lasting marriages they studied, and that the change took place without professional intervention. "As we listened to people talk about changes that had happened within them and in their marital relationships, we developed a renewed respect for how people adapt to, rather than defend against, change" (p. 143).

Mackey and O'Brien (1995) found that, while unresolved conflict reinforced defensive behaviors, confrontation could have a containing effect on how severe conflict would become. However, confrontation worked well "only if it was grounded in other attributes of relationships, such as mutual trust, respect and understanding" (p. 136). Consistent with their understanding of both regressive and progressive trajectories in lasting marriages, they observed that the experience of successfully confronting and talking about conflicts and differences enhanced feelings of connectedness and mutuality over time.

Karney (2007) argued that the problem historically with the research on conflict in marriage is that it has tended to ignore the content of conflict. He stated, "Severe problems are harder to discuss productively than less severe problems" (p.311). Some couples are at higher risk for divorce than others, due, not to the relative quality of their problem solving skills, but to the severity of the problem they are faced with. He believed that this is one factor that accounts for inconsistencies in the studies of the role of conflict in marriage. In addressing forgiveness in relationships, he made the point that one cannot understand the meaning or implications of forgiveness without taking into account the nature of the transgression. To forgive a partner for one transgression may be appropriate and positive for the relationship. However, to forgive chronic disappointment and hurt does not bode well for marital satisfaction (or mental and physical health). He went on to say that the spontaneous remission referred to by Fincham et al. (2007) could be due, not to a couple's capacity for self-repair but simply to a change in their circumstances, for example, the recovery of a child from a life-threatening illness, or the ending of a period of unemployment for one of the partners. Like Fincham, et al., the developers of Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT) have turned their attention to repair in adult intimate relationships. They are seeking to understand therapy impasses in their treatment of couples using EFT.

Johnson et al. (2001) have identified incidents in a relationship when one member of the couple fails to respond empathically to her/his partner at a time of urgent need, and have labeled these incidents attachment injuries. They believe that attachment injuries are at the root of therapy impasses.

Attachment Theory

The theoretical underpinning of EFT is attachment theory. John Bowlby developed attachment theory as a result of his clinical work with delinquent boys and his realization that they shared histories of early loss and abandonment. Bowlby looked to other disciplines in the development of his theory, including evolutionary biology, ethology, cognitive science and information processing theory (Slade, 2001).

Bowlby challenged the psychoanalytic idea that attachment was motivated by drives and the reduction of tension related to hunger and the need for sex. He postulated that the evolutionary function of attachment was protection from predators, and turned to learning theory to explain how children come to identify with their parents and internalize attachment patterns. They learn about attachment in the same way that they learn other skills from parents (Bowlby, 1977).

Bowlby (1977) described attachment theory as “ A way of conceptualizing the propensity of human beings to make strong affectional bonds to particular others and of explaining the many forms of emotional distress and personality disturbance, including anxiety, anger, depression and emotional detachment, to which unwilling separation and loss give rise” (p.201). He defined attachment behavior as any behavior that is meant to establish and maintain proximity to the important other, such as crying and calling, following and clinging, protest when being left alone. Moreover, early attachment experiences with caregivers lead to the development of stable attachment patterns that last throughout a person’s life. By the end of the first year of life, the child has begun to

form what Bowlby labeled representational models of attachment, based on what she has learned from her interactions with her parents.

Bowlby (1977) provided a rich description of what can go wrong during the critical early stages of attachments. Children will become anxiously attached if parents are unresponsive, rejecting or disparaging of a child's attempts to elicit care. Compulsive self-reliance can result from insecure attachment. Bowlby predicted that anxiously attached adults will form adult relationships in which they make constant demands for love and care, or become compulsive caregivers who then resent those they care for. In addition, there is the emotionally detached person, who is incapable of maintaining a relationship with anyone. This person most likely suffered a prolonged deprivation of maternal care during his youngest years, which was followed by threats of rejection or actual rejection by parents or foster parents.

Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall (1978) identified three attachment styles through their work with infants and mothers. They designed the Strange Situation, in which they implemented controlled separations between infants and mothers and observed the behavior of the infants in response to these separations. They labeled infants either securely attached, anxiously/ ambivalently attached or avoidantly attached. Their laboratory experiment confirmed Bowlby's assertion that the sensitivity and responsiveness of the mothers during the first year of their infants' lives were key determinants of the infants' attachments style.

Slade (2001) described three basic assumptions of attachment theory, elaborating on Bowlby's characterization of the vicissitudes of early attachment. The first assumption

is that the baby will adapt to the caregiver's actions and mind, no matter what the cost. Feelings and thoughts that threaten the attachment are repressed, limiting the access that the individual has to her inner world. The second assumption is that because of this level of compliance, any disruptions in the primary relationship may create problems with the sense of self and affect regulation. If you only know yourself in *reaction* to another, you will have difficulty knowing what you think and feel in other relationships, or on your own. The third assumption is that this adaption to the caregiver's actions and mind lead to the development of patterns of defenses and affect regulation that become stable over time. This is related to Bowlby's concept of representational models – the person begins to know only one truth about attachment, based on her earliest experiences.

Hazan and Shaver (1987) implemented two survey studies to test out five hypotheses, which they derived from the work of Bowlby and Ainsworth. These hypotheses were intended to prove the applicability of basic principles of attachment theory to adult romantic relationships.

Hypothesis 1 stated the expectation that, in their adult population, they would find a similar proportion of individuals in the three categories of attachment styles as were found in studies of infants. This would show that attachment style is indeed stable over time. A summary of infant studies showed that 62% are secure, 23% are avoidant and 15% are anxiously attached (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

Hypothesis II proposed that individuals in the different attachment categories would experience their romantic relationships differently. Hypothesis III would test whether the beliefs about relationships would be different among securely attached,

avoidant and anxious/ambivalent adults. Hypothesis IV stated that adults in the different categories would report different attachment histories, for example, avoidant adults should remember their mothers as cold and rejecting. Finally, Hypothesis V stated that avoidant and anxious/ambivalent adults would be more vulnerable to loneliness. However, due to the defensive structure in avoidant individuals, they would be less likely to report loneliness than those who are anxious/ambivalent (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

Hazan and Shaver (1987) first distributed their survey in a local newspaper, and in the second round of the study, gave it to undergraduates at a local university. In the first study they had 620 responses and in the second study they had 108. Overall, their data supported their hypotheses, suggesting that applying attachment theory principles to romantic love is a valid framework for understanding adult intimate relationships. There were limitations to the studies and the authors caution against taking too simplistic a view of adult romantic relationships. For example, in addressing the interactive dynamics in relationships, they raise the question of what would happen if a secure person were trying to build a relationship with an anxious/ambivalent person. Would the secure person become avoidant? Or, would an avoidant person evoke anxiety in a secure person? “It would not be surprising to find that adult love is more complex than infant-caregiver attachment, despite fundamental similarities” (p. 523).

Johnson et al. (2001) see trauma theory as the link between attachment theory and their conceptualization of attachment injuries. Makinen and Johnson (2006) claimed that when a partner in a marriage experiences an emotional abandonment, she/he may experience symptoms of PTSD, such as disturbing memories, disruption of sleep and

concentration, avoidance and emotional numbing. They suggested referring to attachment injuries as relationship traumas and have observed in their treatment of distressed couples that when attachment injuries are resistant to repair, the injury is compounded. When the injury is not understood and validated, either by the partner who caused the injury or by the therapist, repair is not possible. Compounded attachment injuries result in increased despair and alienation.

The Psychoanalytic Perspective

Bowlby (1977) stated that representational models of attachment formed during childhood and adolescence tend to remain unchanged into and throughout adulthood. Therefore, the expectation is that every relationship will be like the formative relationship. Even in the face of evidence to the contrary, perception of self and other resists modification. Hazan and Shaver (1987) demonstrated the stability of attachment styles over time. Freud's theories of projection and the repetition compulsion and Melanie Klein's theory of projective identification provide the psychoanalytic underpinnings of Bowlby's conceptualization of internal working models and the distortions that can result in adult intimate relationships.

Projection and Projective Identification

The defense mechanism of projection exemplifies how we use the "other" in the service of relief of internal conflict or distress. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) Freud described projection as a way for the organism to manage internal stimuli that are a threat to quiescence. If the stimuli are perceived as coming from the outside, the

organism is capable of shielding itself against them. With projection Freud described the human capacity to repress a forbidden or conflict-laden thought or feeling and have it return to consciousness, not as one's own, but as someone else's. Joan Riviere referred to projection as "the first and the most fundamental of our insurances or safety measures against feelings of pain, of being attacked, or of helplessness "(1937, p.11).

Klein (1937) added a layer of complexity to the concept of projection when she described projective identification. Projective identification occurs in a relational context. The other, the mother, is effectively the creation of the infant. Klein believed that internalized images of the mother emerge from the intrapsychic battle of the good breast vs. the bad breast. The baby experiences life as an internal battle between the death instinct and the libido. Impulses from within and frustrations from the environment threaten to overwhelm the psyche's ability to regain and maintain homeostatis. The baby's aggressive impulses rise up in self-defense. She believes she has the power to destroy her mother, whom she sometimes loves, sometimes hates but, ultimately, needs. This fills her with self-hatred and guilt. Projective identification occurs when the bad and hated parts of the self are not just projected *onto* the mother, but are perceived to be inside the mother.

Ornstein and Ganzer (2005) asserted that, because it is the only defense mechanism with an interpersonal component, projective identification is valuable in understanding transference and countertransference in psychotherapy. In addition, it can be applied to dynamics between intimate partners in the following way: one partner projects a feeling or personality trait that they possess but wish to disown onto the other

partner. That partner takes on the feeling or personality trait as his or her own. This can only happen when this feeling or trait “fits”, meaning that it is also a disowned part of the recipient. The result is that the recipient becomes the “carrier” in the relationship of a trait that is felt to be negative by both partners. The original projector, because he/she has disowned the trait, never has to take responsibility for change in that area. The “carrier” is often treated with disdain and shamed for having the trait.

The Repetition Compulsion

Freud developed the theory of the repetition compulsion as a way to understand those patients who refused to free associate. In *Remembering, Repeating and Working Through* (1924), Freud described the patient who, instead of remembering, repeats or acts out the repressed experience in the transference, believing that he is currently *in* the dreaded situation. In other words, the therapy takes place via a reenactment of the patient’s early relational trauma. Through his projections (Bowlby’s representational models), the patient casts the therapist in the role of the injurious parental figure.

Russell (2006) understood the repetition compulsion to be a crisis of attachment, taking place in the present but with its origins in the past. It is a person’s defense against the grief of early attachment losses. Mitchell (1988) used the term relational fields to describe intractable relational patterns in adult intimate relationships. He explained that it is hard to change our ways of relating because there is safety in the familiar, even if it is painful. If we have only ever known one kind of relationship, then change means venturing into unknown territory where we might be totally alone and lose our sense self. “The central dynamic struggle throughout life is between the powerful need to establish,

maintain, and protect intimate bonds with others and various efforts to escape the pains and dangers of those bonds, the sense of vulnerability, the threat of disappointment, engulfment, exploitation, and loss” (p. 29). Our sense of self and our sense of security in the world are bound up in our earliest relationships, even if all that those relationships have taught us is that we are unworthy and that the world is not a safe place.

We bring our “mental models of self and other” (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, p.522) into our intimate partnerships. Fincham et al. (2007) described repetitive cycles of negative behavior in relationships that take on a life of their own. Makinen and Johnson (2006) described attachment injuries in adult relationships that defied repair due to chronic lack of empathy and trust between intimate partners. Is it possible that these “stand-offs”, which couples therapists refer to as therapy impasses, result from projections and projective identification being played out in the repetition of early relational traumas? How often do couples’ therapists hear from their clients that they don’t feel like themselves anymore, or they don’t recognize their partner as the person they married? I suggest that these couples have indeed lost themselves in a confusion of past with present (Russell, 2006).

Mackey and O’Brien (1995) stated, “What surprised us were the similarities between the observations of wives and husbands about their own and their spouses’ modes of handling differences and dealing with interpersonal conflict. That finding has importance for the validity of the data. It may also have considerable relevance for understanding why these marriages survived for more than thirty years”(p. 65). Weishaus and Field (1998) found in marriages that fit the descriptions of stable/positive and

curvilinear – the two types with the highest levels of marital satisfaction- that “these couples have had congruent perceptions of each other and of the marriage”(p. 768). For the *stable/positive* couples, this congruence was present throughout the marriage. For the *curvilinear* couples it was evident in the later years of marriage, when satisfaction returned to almost as high levels as in the early years of the marriage. It may be that in marriages with high levels of satisfaction, there is less projecting and distorting. Perhaps spouses in happy marriages have histories with fewer early attachment traumas and more positive internal working models of attachment.

Interventions in Couples Therapy

Several meta-analyses have addressed the question of the efficacy of existing modalities for treating marital distress. The two methods of marital therapy (MT) with the strongest research base are Behavioral Marital Therapy, (BMT) (Baucom, Mueser, Shoham, Daiuto, & Stickle 1998) and Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) (Johnson, Hunsley, Greenberg, & Schindler, 1999). Insight Oriented Marital Therapy (IOMT), although less studied, is considered an empirically supported modality (Baucom et al.).

Baucom et al. (1998) Dunn and Schwebel (1995), Shadish et al. (1993) and Wampold et al. (1997) concluded from their meta-analyses that marital and family psychotherapy clients have a better outcome than couples who have no therapy when experiencing distress in their intimate relationships. Shadish et al.(1993) included 163 studies in their analysis. In these studies the distressed subjects were randomly assigned to conditions and were treated with either marital or family therapy. Dunn and Schwebel (1995) included 15 marital therapy outcome studies in their analysis of the treatment of

558 couples – 180 controls and 378 in treatment groups. Baucom et al. (1998) chose published studies with an *n* of at least 50 clients per condition, using treatment modalities they considered efficacious if treatment resulted in increases in marital adjustment or satisfaction. Finally, the meta-analysis of Wampold et al. included studies taken from six journals that directly compared two or more treatments which they considered bona fide psychotherapies – therapies delivered by trained therapists based on books or manuals or otherwise containing specified components. The overall conclusion of these meta-analyses was that treatment helps approximately two-thirds of the clients (Pincus & Wynne, 2000). However, they failed to show the superiority of any particular form of MT over any other. Moreover, follow-up studies showed a trend of diminishing effects of MT over time (Johnson & Lebow, 2000). The one exception to this was a study done by Snyder, Mills and Grady-Fletcher (1991) comparing Behavioral Marital Therapy (BMT) with Insight Oriented Marital Therapy (IOMT). This study showed that 4 years post-treatment, the couples who received IOMT did better at maintaining the gains made in therapy than those who received BMT.

Makinen and Johnson (2006) enrolled 24 couples in their study of the efficacy of their 8-step intervention for attachment injuries. Although they identified 15 of the 24 couples resolved at the end of the 13-session treatment, their study raised many questions. As noted above, attachment theory describes styles of attachment that result from attachment experiences in early childhood and are relatively enduring and not easily modified. Pre-treatment attachment styles of the subjects in this study were not known. Therefore, it was not possible to determine whether the injury in the present relationship caused the insecure attachment that was measured at the beginning of the intervention or

whether it activated old patterns and strategies for dealing with conflict, resulting in the maintenance of negative interactional cycles (Johnson et al., 2001).

An important theme that was identified in the study by Makinen and Johnson (2006) was that of the meaning of the event (Johnson et al., 2001). Sometimes couples fail to realize that a particular event has caused the conflict and mistrust that brings them into treatment. Moreover, the therapist can consider an event benign that has caused a deep emotional wound. Finally, it is important for the therapist to ascertain whether a couple is experiencing a compound injury. Compound injuries may “irretrievably shatter the trust in the relationship” (Makinen & Johnson, p.1063).

Although several empirically supported modalities of marital therapy have been developed and studied and shown to be effective, no one modality has proven to be any more effective than any other. Marital conflict has been identified as a key causal factor in marital distress, and yet, some kinds of conflict seem to be good for marriages overtime. Conflict needs to be contextualized in order to understand its meaning, thus determining whether it is benign or harmful, predictive of long-term distress or satisfaction, and what interventions will be most effective in facilitating its resolution. Some marital conflict may be the manifestation of traumatic attachment injuries, which can be resistant to reparation and therapeutic intervention. In the face of such breaches of trust, the therapist must understand what caused the injury and to what extent the failure to repair the injury is a function of the attachment history of each individual in the couple. Again, the *meaning* of the conflict may hold the key to an intervention strategy that will lead to resolution.

Chapter III Research Methods

Research Questions

1. How do heterosexual married individuals who have been married from seven to ten years perceive serious breaks in their connection to their spouses.
2. How do couples repair these breaks?

Serious breaks in connection were identified and defined by the subjects in this study. Two subjects did not report serious disagreements, but did report some disagreements. All other subjects reported disagreements serious enough to cause disconnection and, in some cases, threaten the relationship.

Problem Statement

Family life in the United States is in a state of flux. While half of all marriages are ending in divorce, more couples are cohabiting and more children are being born to cohabiting and single mothers. Marriage has lost a great deal of its institutional power to dictate and control behavior, and young people have more acceptable choices for the formation of their intimate relationships. However, most young people in the U.S. still want to marry and they marry in search of companionship and lasting love.

The field of couples therapy is in a state of flux as well. Existing theories of adult intimate relationships provide incomplete explanations of the role of conflict in marital satisfaction and longevity. The interventions resulting from these theories are somewhat effective, but still leave many couples struggling. Moreover, empirical studies have failed to identify any one particular set of interventions that are more effective than others

Qualitative research can address the complexities of meaning in modern marriages and yield vivid data on what the experience of marriage is like in the United

States today. It provides a methodology to answer some of the questions regarding conflict and repair that are reflected in the above review of the literature.

In order to contribute to the literature on the theory of adult intimate relationships and interventions for couples therapy, this qualitative study focused on couples who have been married between 7 and 10 years and have at least one child over the age of two, who is the product of the marriage. There are several reasons for choosing these criteria. First of all, the childrearing years appear to be the most difficult years in marriages (Mackey & O'Brien, 1995, Vaillant & Vaillant, 1993) and thus a stage of marriage where disagreements are expected. In addition, the first seven years represent one of most vulnerable periods in marriage (Gottman & Levenson, 2000). Bradbury and Karney (2004) stated that marital dissolution is most likely to occur during the first 4 years of marriage. Particular interest was paid to the process of repair in these modern marriage and how these married couples are sustaining their commitment to each other in the face of extraordinary pressures and shifting norms.

Research Design

Each subject was interviewed individually. Before beginning the interview, the researcher reviewed the consent form, answering any questions and then had the subject sign the form. The interviewer conducted a semi-structured interview, self-designed (see appendix II) that lasted approximately one hour. The questions in the interview started with a warm-up section asking about the dating and engagement periods of the relationship, then the wedding and the honeymoon. In the next part of the interview, the questions focused on expectations of marriage, disagreements, and the process of repair. Exit questions included asking the subject to reflect on the process of being interviewed.

Setting

All interviews were conducted in the homes of the subjects. The subjects lived in three geographical areas – greater Philadelphia, Richmond, VA and Cambridge and Chestnut Hill, MA. In a few instances there were interruptions by young children at home during the interview. However, most of the subjects provided a private space in which to conduct an uninterrupted interview, either while children were at school or daycare, or while their spouses kept the children in another part of the house.

Sample Size and Recruitment Procedures

Twenty-two subjects (n = 22) were recruited for this qualitative study. An attempt was made to recruit couples and interview both members of the couple. Ten couples were recruited and both members of the couple were interviewed. Two additional subjects, both women, were participants without their husbands.

Recruitment of the subjects was difficult and took several months. The interviewer distributed an IRB approved flyer to her DSW cohort and via a list serve, to two professional organizations of which she is a member. That effort yielded one couple. She then contacted the heads of several area pre-schools to no avail. Finally, three family members who had access to couples who fit the criteria distributed the flyers and an additional 20 subjects were identified.

Concerns about interviewing subjects known to family members were reviewed with committee members. All agreed that as long as confidentiality parameters were carefully reviewed with subjects, and the subjects were willing to participate, then this would be acceptable.

Inclusionary and Exclusionary Criteria

Subjects were heterosexual married individuals, married between seven and ten years, in their first marriages, with at least one child who was the product of the marriage and was over the age of two. In order to ensure homogeneity for the small sample size, the subjects were Caucasian, English speakers and US citizens with at least a college degree.

Only individuals who met all of the above inclusionary criteria were included in this research.

Analysis

All interviews were recorded on a digital recording device. The interviewer transcribed 6 of the interviews and hired a professional transcriptionist to transcribe the remaining 16 interviews. Since the transcriptionist was equipped to only transcribe from audiotapes, the researcher taped the interviews from her laptop onto cassette tapes. Some of the interviews had been recorded both on the digital recording device and cassette tapes. The transcribed interviews were entered into HyperResearch software, which aided in the organization and cataloguing of the data.

The researcher analyzed the data using the principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 1990, 2006, Corbin and Strauss, 1990, 2008). Analysis began with line-by-line coding of the first six interviews. When the number of codes reached over 600, the researcher consulted with members of her committee who urged her to begin collapsing of codes and coding only those segments of the interviews that were relevant to the research questions.

When collapsing codes, the researcher went back and forth between the data and the codes, writing memos as she decided which codes would be collapsed into more abstract categories. This is considered the “immersion/crystallizing (intuitive) analysis style, [when] the researcher organizes data by examining the text thoroughly and then crystalliz[es] out the most important aspects” (Malterud, 2001, p. 486). The researcher moved from open coding to forming categories, which then became the more abstract concepts informing the theory building. After coding about 13 interviews, saturation was reached in the category of the dimensions of repair. Saturation was reached in the category of relational resilience by subject 22.

Participant Compensation

At the conclusion of each interview, participants will receive a \$5.00 gift card to Starbucks Coffee.

Instrumentation

After being contacted by each subject and setting up a date for their interview, the researcher sent each subject the Dyadic Adjustment Scale, to be filled out, privately, before the interview, and then given to the interviewer at the time of the interview. This was for the purpose of getting the subjects thinking about their marriages prior to the interview. At the time of the interview, each subject was asked to fill out a background information form in order to have the following information for each subject: age, number of years married, number of children and their ages, highest completed grade level and family, annual income. Income information was requested according to categories (i.e. \$0 – 25,000 annually, \$25,000-50,000 annually, etc.).

Data Management

The researcher is managing all data for this study. Any documents with participants names on them, like signed consent forms, are being kept in a locked file cabinet. Data, in the form of transcribed interviews, have been entered into HyperResearch software without any identifying information. The transcriptionist has destroyed all the cassette tapes sent to her by the researcher. Upon the completion of this project, the researcher will erase all the voice recordings in her possession. Only the researcher has access to the recorded interviews and documents in the locked file cabinet.

Risks and Benefits Assessment

Subjects were not meant to benefit directly from participating in this study. However, many subjects expressed the value to them of having an opportunity to reflect on their marriages. Many stated that they felt the research is very important and that they were happy to be of assistance.

There are no known risks of participating in a study like this one. Subjects were informed, before beginning the actual interview, that if answering some of the questions makes them uncomfortable, they should inform the interviewer. Subjects were told that they could stop the interview for a few moments, or the subject could decide to stop participating entirely. Subjects were informed that, should they continue to feel upset in the few days following the interview, they should contact the interviewer, who will provide referrals for counseling if necessary.

One subject was visibly upset during her interview, crying through most of it, but not wanting to end the interview prematurely. She emailed the interviewer following her

interview and told her that the interview had helped her clarify some issues and that she was feeling better. She did not request a referral for professional help.

Human Subjects

This study followed procedures to protect human subjects. Participants were provided informed consent by signing a consent form before beginning the interview. By signing the consent form, participants were made aware of the benefits and risks of the study and all procedures that are in place to protect their confidentiality. The researcher received approval from the University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for this study.

Research Participant Statistics

The mean age of the subjects in this study was 36.5 years. Two were married 7 years, 10 were married 8 years, 8 were married 9 years and 2 were married 10 years. Seven subjects held bachelor degrees, 10 held masters degrees, 4 held PhD degrees and one is an MD. Five subjects have one child, 15 have two children and 2 have 3 children. Two reported household incomes between \$50,000 and \$100,000, 12 between \$100,000 and \$150,000 and 8 over \$150,000.

Reflexivity Statement

Malterud (2001) suggests that a reflexivity statement in qualitative research should include the following components: researchers previous personal and professional experiences related to the topic, pre-study beliefs about the topic, the motivations and qualifications of the researcher and disclosure of any hypotheses prior to conducting the research. Applegate (class lecture, 2007) stated that, as clinicians, our preferred theories

“find *us*”. In the best-case scenario that is true of dissertation topics as well. Otherwise how could we sustain enough interest and passion to complete such a project? The worry is that we are too close to our topic and hence the necessity of a reflexivity statement in qualitative research.

I have been happily married for 25 years, but have harbored a mistrust of the institution of marriage. I have felt that marriage in the US is a dangerous institution for women, having seen many women lose themselves in their roles of wife and mother. When I read Cott’s (2000) book, *Public Vows*, I felt vindicated. I felt that the ghosts of those marriages in which women lost all rights to property and citizenship, marriages that were legally similar to slavery, still haunted and perhaps inhabited marriages of the 20th century. In doing my literature review, I must admit to not feeling regret about the weakening of the institution of marriage in the US and around the world. On the other hand, as a clinical social worker with a private psychotherapy practice, I attempt each day to help patients sort out their relationship dilemmas. My interest in adult intimate relationships, my cynicism and ambivalence about the institution of marriage and the upheaval and contradictions in attitudes towards the institution of marriage in the US were my motivations to learn more about the married lives of young people in the U.S. What I found was not what I expected, and will be elaborated on in my findings and discussion sections. If I embarked on this research with any hypothesis, it was that women had better beware when they marry. I am heartened by the discovery that the women in this study have found their voices in their marriages and even more heartened by how different their husbands are from the young husbands and fathers of just a generation ago. These men want what their wives want – above all, intimacy and

connection in an egalitarian relationship. The women in this small sample, at least, appear to be safe in their marriages.

That covers pre-study beliefs, motivations and previous personal and professional experiences. In terms of my qualifications to carry out this project, qualitative research seemed like a natural endeavor for me. I am well trained and experienced at putting people at ease so that they can speak from the heart. I'm experienced at knowing what questions to ask. What was difficult, not surprisingly, was keeping my role as researcher separate from my role as therapist. I know that those boundaries were blurred at times. Keeping a journal helped me to process the many feelings that were evoked during the interviews, everything from awe to sadness. Grounded theory principals encouraged a constant process of learning from each interview so that I could monitor myself and make corrections where I felt I had crossed the line between researcher and therapist.

Another factor that pushed at boundaries was the fact that several of the subjects knew the family member who had informed them of the study and referred them to me. I felt this most acutely when interviewing a man who I knew was a good friend of my niece's husband. He was very open in talking with me about his marriage. I was very aware of the absolute necessity of maintaining strict confidentiality. Even so, at times during the interview I felt some anxiety. I am grateful to the family members involved for the extent to which they have respected confidentiality and at no time have they asked me to disclose anything I learned in my interviews.

Finally, my training and experience as a psychodynamic psychotherapist served me well at the data analysis stage of the research, as my daily work is largely about exploring meaning with the people who come to me in the hopes of making sense out of

their struggles and then making changes in their lives.

Chapter IV:

Findings

The findings for this dissertation are derived from the content analysis of semi-structured interviews with 22 heterosexual married individuals, in their first marriage of between 7 and 10 years, with at least one child over the age of two. The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a deeper understanding of what it is like for married individuals to experience a break in their connection to their spouse and how couples repair those breaks. The interview questions examined whether the subject and her or his spouse ever experienced a major disagreement, what the disagreement was about, what it felt like to have a major disagreement and how the disagreement was resolved. In addition, the interview questions examined aspects of the relationship that helped couples to maintain their commitment during times when a disagreement created distance in the marriage.

The Dyadic Adjustment Scale was used as a prompt in preparation for the research interview. One subject scored more than one standard deviation below the mean for this instrument. All other scores fell within one standard deviation of the mean.

The findings of this qualitative study are organized into six sections, each of which describes a major category of the study findings. Section 1 summarizes what issues the 22 couples in this study disagreed about. Section 2 explores “hidden agendas” for disagreements. The term “hidden agendas” refers to functions that disagreements may play other than to resolve a concrete issue. Section 3 explores how the subjects perceived their disagreements with their spouses – how it felt to have a major disagreement, how it affected their sense of self and what they learned about themselves and their marriages.

Section 4 explores the dimensions of agreements the couples in this study reached, which are broken down into four types: coming to agreement, compromising, agreeing to disagree and living with unresolved conflict. Section 5 describes the process of repair and what made repair possible. This includes external resources such as marital and individual therapy as well as the resilience of the subjects and their relationships. Section 6 describes the rewards of married life as described by the subjects, including the security and companionship that their marriages provide for them and the satisfaction they feel with the lives that they have built with their spouses.

While these six sections will be presented as distinct categories, there is significant overlap in the complex ideas expressed by the subjects. Supporting passages taken directly from interviews with the subjects have been chosen to illustrate the main ideas in each section. It will be noted when a passage contains ideas that have overlapping significance.

All subjects have been given pseudonyms. “J” refers to the researcher. Researcher questions and comments are included only to provide context or meaning to the subjects’ quotations.

Section 1

What the Couples Disagree About

The most frequent issues causing disagreements among the study subjects were extended family (4 subjects), household chores and division of labor (9 subjects), parenting (9 subjects), money (5 subjects), and the frequency of sex (5 subjects). Two subjects were struggling with infidelity. Seven subjects talked about what they characterized as minor disagreements about the day to day, which included making plans

for the holidays, dealing with a sick dog, what to watch on TV and home decorating.

Disagreeing about extended family.

Paul and Robert both feel caught between their wives and their parents.

Paul: Serious disagreements, the first one that comes to my mind is in-laws. Her parents are very open and willing to embrace me into their family. My parents, I think it's a combination of a whole bunch of things that have happened over the years, but not a good relationship with us, or my wife and them. Whose fault that is, I do blame myself, because I'm the one who's supposed to keep all groups kind of working together, but there's only certain things I can do...If we could take the in-law thing out, [I would rate my marriage] a 10. It really is hard on me.

Robert: On my side of the family, there are issues in the way I communicate with my family and the way that interacts with the way I communicate with [my wife] and certain concerns that she'll have about my family and the way I get stuck between this. That's often a big friction.

Disagreeing about household chores and division of labor.

Who does what around the house can be a function of personal preference. For some of the subjects it is an issue of fairness and equity as well as a more politicized struggle to examine and redefine traditional gender roles.

Sharon: My biggest pet peeve is that he doesn't help, but gosh, if we're both working full-time, then he would help more, because he wouldn't have an excuse. But my experience, when my daughter was born, I did go back to work full-time for six months, he didn't do a goddamn thing. It wasn't like, Oh, now we're both working, so I'm going grocery shopping and you're doing laundry. I just did everything... but ninety percent of my friends work, either part-time or full-time, and the woman still does the majority of that stuff. So I think I just need to suck it up and realize that that's, even in 2010, still the way it is.

Dianne: It came up, again, this notion of the domestic role, the wife role, really hit home hard. So we fought around things like who was doing the dishes and we fought bitterly. It was around my feminist ideal and not wanting to take on this

domestic role. The fact is that he could care less. He's not a house cleaner. He has a very chill personality about these things. He could care less about how he cleans the house. I was just pissed that dishes would be left in the sink. It's so ridiculous, but dishes left in the sink took on a monumental meaning to me. We just fought bitterly.

Ginny: In the beginning, it was basically house cleaning. He was actually on my case about not putting my clothes away and different things like that, which trickled down from his mother, so he put a lot of that stuff on me, but we got that figured out.

James: How much of the housework do we each do? I think Dianne has a concern that she is the wife. She doesn't want it to fall on her. That's not the way it should be. I agree with that, but she also thinks it's important that the kids see that daddy cleans up also and not just mommy cleans up, so that we're setting good examples for them. So we butt heads about that sometimes.

Disagreeing about parenting.

Most parenting disagreements had to do with discipline and setting limits.

Margaret: But anyway, a major problem we have is that he feels like I baby our son way too much.

Gail: He thinks I baby [our son], I think he's too hard on him, you know, things like that.

Sarah: The biggest things we get into disagreements about, we probably get annoyed with each other about how we parent, when the other person disciplines the children in a way that I wouldn't, or if I do something that he wouldn't. Then that becomes a source of tension between us.

Leslie: The two big things that come to mind, one is limits. So even just how to handle: What are the rules at dinnertime for trying the food that is put in front of you? Since I've done the grocery shopping and the cooking and I've put all this effort in, I would like it to be a little bit more strict than maybe he would have it.

Disagreeing about money.

Perhaps Gail says it all.

Gail: Doesn't everybody fight about money (laughs)?

Attitudes towards spending versus thriftiness appear to be run deep and are hard to change.

Carl: On balance, I think we come at things a little bit differently around money, but not diametrically opposed. I would say I'm probably a little more frugal and more eager to be thrifty and figure things out.

Judith: Well, there have been times when we had disagreements about money because I'm always broke, and I've always been broke, and I don't worry about money and I don't care about money that much and I don't mind being broke. I grew up on teacher's salary, a single parent teacher's salary. And he grew up in a more middle class, two income family, and he was an only child, so he's used to not being broke and not having to worry about money, so we had to kind of, I had to kind of be willing to worry about money a little bit more.

Alan: Finances. That's probably the biggest one, the basic tenets of an economy—money coming in needs to be more than money going out; not the other way around. We don't have the government's ability to issue debt any time we want and people buying it. That's probably the biggest one, finances. Unfortunately for me, it's also what I do, so I'm probably a little more sensitive to financial movements and what's going on than certainly she is.

Emily: I feel like I'm a child in some regard and my dad is yelling at me. That sort of thing. I understand it. It's just that it's sometimes hard to control, because

things cost what they cost. I don't probably need to buy some things; there are some things you just have to have. Groceries are expensive, or whatever. Unless he goes to see exactly what I'll get for \$50, or whatever, it's hard. So I try to use my best judgment, but my best judgment is not his best judgment.

Disagreeing about the frequency of sex

For all of the subjects in this study who identified frequency of sex as a point of disagreement, the husbands wanted sex more often than the wives. The women expressed the wish that they could be more interested, but didn't seem to think that this could change during this demanding stage of marriage.

Cecily: I think that's probably the biggest change and probably the most frequent source of disagreements throughout the years has been sexual relations, the frequency. Early in our relationship, it was much more frequent. Then we were married. Then with a child, things get less and less frequent. So that's probably the biggest change in our relationship over the years. Probably the thing we disagree on the most.

Sarah: I would say that one issue is that the place that I know there's a rub a little bit is that he wishes that I would show affection more, initiate more in terms of our sex life. But I also know from my girlfriends, we're all kind of in the same boat.

Carl: I guess one of the things that was on your questionnaire that we didn't talk about tonight was the physical or affectionate aspect of things. That's one of the things that probably is part-and-parcel of the energy and the parenting tax. That's one of the things that probably gets removed from the equation first. That's been hard for me personally.

Leslie: I think the physical intimacy part is really tricky. I know I would love... It's not that I don't have any desire that way, but of course it's really very tricky to try to manage the daily things that are going on and still feel really physically attracted to the person that you're sharing your life with.

Jack: I think one of the largest outstanding problems in our relationship is our difference in sexual interest. We've sort of come to an equilibrium on that subject, but it's an equilibrium in which I feel like I'm not getting as much physical love as I expected.

Infidelity

Among the subjects, only one couple spoke of an issue of infidelity in their marriage.

Emily: So there was an instance where there was a male friend who sort of overstepped the boundaries and I didn't really know how to handle it. It got a little out of control. He [my husband] found out and it was bad, really bad. We have moments where it rears its ugly head still.

Alan: I don't even know if I can talk about it. I know that it involved another guy that she had some relationship with in the past, while we were dating, so over ten years ago. I don't know what the characterization of it was back then and, frankly, it doesn't really matter to me what it was. Something happened after she saw him. I don't know what it was. Then there's been this thing out there. It was about three months. I know there were phone calls, text messages and e-mails sent back and forth.

Disagreeing about the day to day.

Subjects characterized these disagreements as minor, yet pretty constant.

Margaret: Um... just silly things. Nothing really big, I mean, probably one of the biggest things is what to do for holidays. My parents are divorced, and his family lives in Florida, so a lot of times we disagree about that or I don't know just maybe day to day stuff, you know, he wanting to go to do something, or me wanting to go do something, you know trying to figure that out.

Cecily: Sometimes disagreeing about just making plans: What are we going to do this weekend? Or for Christmas? The everyday rituals, duties that need to go on probably wind up causing more disagreements than major issues. We tend to agree on major stuff most of the time.

James: I guess some of it is about: What shall we do on a weekend, vacation, or something? A lot of it winds up being, I would say, rooted in our different beliefs of what each of our contributions should be to the marriage; in particular from an egalitarian standpoint.

Eric: I think some of the trite aspects are things like TV and music. Yeah, and that's just trivial. That's pretty persistent. It's really not an issue, but it can be a source of bickering. Sometimes we struggle a little bit with, I'm just thinking, you know, recently, hanging a picture just right. Just completely banal stuff that just happens. I don't think we have any major disagreements that last, that are long fights, or that are persistent fights, or that are major issues, fundamental to the core of marriage. Really, as I'm describing it, it's just seemingly small, dumb stuff, just daily stuff that gets to you.

Peter: I think our disagreements generally start from small things. Some of our arguments have arisen from me not being conscientious and that's not surprising because my memory is not the best. I'll admit that so if it's not written down and I'm not reminded sometimes it just slips away. For example, you know, not remembering Mother's Day coming up or something like that and when I'm not remembering to get her an Easter basket.

Section II

Hidden Agendas

Sometimes disagreements occur which are not entirely about the concrete issue being argued, but to serve some other relational purpose. While Mary Beth would truly

like more help from her husband with household chores, she is not optimistic that he will change much in that regard. When she initiates an argument about chores, she does it partly to vent and to evoke from him some appreciation for all that she does around the house.

J: Correct me if I'm wrong, but it sounds like what you're saying is that when you argue with him about chores, or paying more attention to the house, you don't really expect him to change.

Mary Beth: [laughs] I hope he would, or if I'll get out of it just enough. The next day he'll wake up and be more mindful and put things in place. It's a matter of venting and getting some acknowledgement for my hard work.

J: So the arguments are also a kind of emotional release for you, to have those arguments with him?

MaryBeth: Um-hmm. They serve both purposes

Robert has needed to have issues reach the point of arguments in order to overcome his inhibition about expressing his negative thoughts and feelings.

Robert: To me, that was pretty much the motto that my mom raised us by: If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say it. So you hold it back. So I think we did end up talking about things, but the way we ended up talking about things a lot in the early part—and also the first stage after we got married—it would have to reach an argument stage. In other words, things would percolate for a while. Then, when we couldn't hold them below the surface any more, they would erupt into this big argument. And then there would be this communication through the argument essentially, because that was the only way, I think, to get me to cross that threshold.

When Emily was reflecting on her developing a romantic relationship outside her marriage, she understood that it was a time when she felt very disconnected from her husband. He was working a lot and she was home with two small children. This crisis brought them back into connection.

J: It also sounds like the two of you got really disconnected.

Emily: We did, we got very disconnected. We weren't doing a whole lot together. We'd go to parties and stuff, but he'd go here and I'd go there. Now it's a lot different.

Section III

What It's Like to Disagree – Subjects' Perceptions of Breaks in their Connections

Almost half of the subjects in this research study reacted to serious disagreements in their marriages with questions about whether they should stay married, as well as fear that they could not fix the problem. For some, experiencing rough spots in their marriages challenged their sense of self, evoking feelings of failure and self-doubt. Having a successful marriage appears to be central to their adult identity and many responded with a strong desire for self-improvement. In addition, they spoke about what they have learned about themselves as a result of having conflicts with their spouses. Subjects expressed a range of feelings including sadness, fear, vulnerability, worry, disappointment and anger. Often, the subjects compared their marriages to those of friends and relatives. This seemed to be a way to assess how they were doing.

Doubting and Questioning the Marriage

Margaret describes what it was like to have serious doubts about her marriage.

Margaret: Well, our first year we actually almost got a divorce. Yeah, I think, I don't know, you know I had lived here for a year and I think, I don't even know what happened it just seemed like, we were both kind of going in opposite directions. He started working a lot more and I was working a lot, and I really, I don't know what happened. It just seemed like we were really just kind of falling apart, you know, and I think we really questioned whether or not we wanted to stay together and we ended up in actually in therapy and did that for several months and I think it was best thing that we ever did.

Ginny talks about a time when she and her husband were struggling with some serious issues involving his parents.

J: Did you ever think that you wouldn't be able to get through this and that it would mean the end of your marriage?

Ginny: Yeah, there was probably a time that I thought that.

J: What was that like, to be worried about that?

Ginny: It was hard, because he just felt like he couldn't win, no matter what side he chose. I think it was good that we got through it, but it was definitely a difficult time. Yeah, it was, because he was always the person that I would talk to, but he was the problem at the time for me.

Leslie still wonders if her husband knew the extent of her unhappiness.

Leslie: If it weren't for these kids, I think we'd both have parted ways, which is kind of an odd thing to say. I don't know. It's interesting, because I'm not sure that my husband necessarily knew at the time how really, truly unhappy I was.

Jack and his wife seriously considered ending their marriage.

Jack: It was hard, it was trouble, it was difficult. We still had trouble and we asked ourselves... I guess it was in the middle of some of the counseling, because it stirred up more trouble at first than it was a solution. We finally just said, Okay, maybe we should get divorced. Okay, well then maybe we should. Think about that for a few days. We both kind of decided, well, we don't [want to get divorced].

Ben expressed his sadness when he thought that his marriage might fail because of him.

Ben: I felt sad and miserable because I thought that she was going to run out of patience and just give up. At the same time, there was so much pressure on me, because I knew at that point it was all up to me. She was waiting for me to figure out how to talk to her basically.

Robert and James, while not actively doubting that their marriages would survive, questioned whether they really wanted to be married to their spouses. For James, asking that question and responding positively is a way that he reinforces his commitment to the relationship.

Robert: But we've had these arguments which come back. The question is: Do we

really want to spend the rest of our lives together? Are we truly happy together? Is this the best thing for us? In the ideal world, that's the only question you ask... But there are definitely times where I'm sure my wife asks herself, and I know I ask myself, Are we happy together? Is this the way we want to spend the next twenty or thirty years of our lives?

James: Yeah, there have been times when we've both... You asked about me, so I'll answer for me. There have been times when I felt really frustrated and like, You know what? This isn't working out so well. Should we get divorced? I definitely asked that question in my head. I think it's good to ask the question, to make sure your answer is, Yes, I do want to be in this relationship.

Marriage and Identity

Having a good marriage, being a good spouse and parent, appear to be hallmarks of healthy adult development for many of the subjects. For some, it is a way of differentiating from parents whose marriages failed or were difficult. Several subjects spoke of their admiration for their spouses and wanting to emulate the good qualities they saw in their partners and some spoke of feeling like a failure when in the midst of a major disagreement. For many, working through disagreements was a way to gain insight into their own feelings and behavior.

Margaret spoke about being disappointed in herself when her marriage was floundering. Her mother is in recovery from alcoholism, and due to her addiction, has had a chaotic relational history. Margaret is close to her now and proud of the changes her mother has made, but she wants her life to be different.

Margaret: ... At the beginning I was very depressed and just, I guess, disappointed in myself. You know you graduate from college, and you have these

dreams about being successful and you know, and being in a great relationship and that was really hard for me. After my parents divorced, my mother was in several worse relationships and I just always thought that I was just not going to be like that. That was really important to me.

Peter felt sad and disappointed with himself when he did something that really hurt his wife.

Peter: I think the strongest emotion I probably had was regret and like sorry, not sorry, but like feeling saddened that I had hurt her by something that I had done... knowing how much it hurt her actually made me very sad. I was disappointed in myself. I was really disappointed in myself because then I kind of felt like you know what, I'm better than that and you know I should have thought how she would feel before I actually did something that was stupid. I think that she has very high moral and value standards and I would say that it made me want to hold myself to a higher standard too just for personal reasons. I think that one of the things that that incident caused me to do was to reflect and say to myself, "I'm beyond any kind of behavior like that and I'm going to also hold myself to a higher standard a little bit. Yeah.

Paul is striving to attain his ideals for himself as a father and husband and looks to his wife as a model for the kinds of changes he wants to make in himself.

Paul: I'm not perfect. That's an area where I want to do better, because like I said, I think this is what I learned from her, with her patience and the kids. They're always watching. I look at her parents like really good role models for her. My parents both worked, both stressed, a lot of bickering at home. Maybe that led to my behavior sometimes, how I treat my wife, or treat people. I want my kids to see better. I'm getting better, but still not there. The reason I had to learn these things was because we had hard moments where I wasn't doing a good job, or I could have done better, and she had to have the guts to tell me that. It wasn't easy. That's why they say the ups and downs. If I can do a great job with the kids and making her feel special, that's the key.

Leslie believes that she will grow in positive ways through the experience of

being married and continuing to work on her relationship.

Leslie: I have this belief that, in the end, marriage really is going to be a very rich experience, but also really help me be a better person. I remember really trying to hang onto to this idea that there are so many reasons to stay married, but for some reason that's the one—this idea... Situations are different for everybody, but I think sometimes it might be easier to walk away than it is to stay in there. I really just tried to have this faith that if I could stick with this, it was only going to be to everyone's benefit, myself included.

Jack describes how, for him, facing difficult issues in his marriage has been both an opportunity for growth as well as an assault on his self-esteem. It is important to his sense of self to continue working on his marriage.

Jack: I do feel it's been a little hard. I've definitely felt more resentment and loss of self-confidence and self-esteem. I also feel like I've learned and grown through ... I think, for example, as is natural, when you're younger you feel a lot of self-entitlement for good things to come your way. As you get older, you start to feel more responsibility for bringing good things your way. I've learned to feel more, well, if I want things to be better, then I have to make them better. So that's a good growth. There's also facing a sense of failure. Getting married and making it work was something I had dedicated myself to. I would then have to admit that I had failed and deal with that.

Alan talks about how his wife challenges him and pushes him to become the person he wants to be.

Alan: I think the main reason was that my wife made me a completely different person. She challenged me in different ways. She made me want to do different things. This is the unemotional stuff, but she made me into a different and, in my opinion, a better person. As corny as that sounds, when I was with her, I did feel differently. I acted differently. I had more confidence. I was just a different person than I was when she was not there, for better or for worse. Obviously, I loved her and I still do. She is a wonderful person. She has so many great qualities and so many qualities that I myself don't possess. I think that when we're together we work very well as a couple. I think, at the core, when you decide to get married,

you find someone who complements you, who in some way perhaps fills a gap, or forces you to be a person that, by yourself, you wouldn't be; that pushes you to try different things.

Eric describes what he is learning about himself by working through disagreements in his marriage, and how he can apply that learning to other aspects of his life.

Eric: The need to sort of be willing to be open to others, to be able to not enforce my will all the time. Being married has taught me a lot about myself and that I should probably be more open to, not just what my wife says, but what others, she's helped to teach me that, she's helped me to come to terms with the need to be more open to others. And that works really well in our marriage as well because it's forced me to step back and say I need to consider others, or I need to consider what my wife is thinking here, otherwise I would just run right over it. And that's been probably extremely helpful learning for me, not just about myself, but how to deal with others. . What am I trying to say – be more open to the notion that my thoughts, my ideas, my perceptions, aren't always right and aren't certainly the only answers and that's been a pretty eye opening experience... I honestly think the skills that I probably learned from being married and the things that I've learned from my wife, in terms of helping me learn more about myself, apply outside of just our house. I take those with me to work, I take those with me in my dealings and interactions with others. I think that has made a profound change in who I am as a person.

Emily talks about her growth and learning while attempting to understand her attraction to another man.

Emily: That year, it was a lot of soul-searching. When you talk to a therapist, someone who doesn't know you, they bring out stuff that, I really am like that, that kind of thing. It's good to have someone kind of hit you in the head with a flashlight: Wake up! Snap out of it! It really brings out what you're missing or you need or whatever.

Carl hopes that he can be as open in his marriage as his wife has become.

Carl: Right. My wife is a very confident person in some ways, in the sense of who she is as a human being. She's also insecure about other things. It's interesting, now that I think about it, she's been very open about what she's insecure about. I find that really endearing and a quality that I probably would like to have myself, because I think it takes a lot of courage to admit what you're insecure about.

Comparing Their Marriages to Others

Several subjects seemed to find some reassurance in knowing that other couples had struggles. They seemed to be seeking a means of measuring how they were doing in their own marriages.

Emily is certain that all couples have will face some kind of crisis of connection.

Emily: I think everybody has moments of something. And I think, if you don't, you're lying. I really do—whether you've gotten yourself in trouble financially, or you've done this—there's always gonna be some trouble. If you talk to someone and say, No, we have no problems, nothing's wrong, everything's great—they're lying, because being married as long as we have, it's just not feasible.

Robert makes the point that it's not possible to know everything about another marriage, so comparing your marriage to someone else's will result in having unrealistic expectations.

Robert. The thing I've often found frustrating is that you're going to come across many other married couples and you're going to see glimpses of their life. You're never gonna see their whole life. You may see positive glimpses, you may see some negative glimpses. But, by and large, what we tend to do is, we tend to compare one attribute of our relationship to one attribute of one couple's

relationship—usually one that they’re really good at. And then there’ll be another attribute of our relationship where we compare to another attribute of some other couple’s relationship, and it happens to be the attribute that they’re really good at. And you can quite easily find yourself comparing your relationship to some ideal synthesis of many other couples. And you can never win that one. I don’t think anyone can really win that one. I think that’s something we’ve both been guilty of over time in making these comparisons. I think we both realized, over time, that they’re really not fair to us in the sense that you create expectations for yourself that you’re setting yourself up to fail, because it’s really very difficult to live up to this ideal synthetic couple which doesn’t really exist.

Dianne describes her attempts to sort out her anxiety over disagreements during her first year of marriage by looking at the marriages of some of her friends.

Dianne: I actually remember going on a data collection mission to find out how many of my uber-happy, totally-in-love, passionate friends, how they were doing several years into their marriage. And in my data collection mission, one was having an affair, one had left her husband for another guy who apparently was so fabulous—he’s so great and understands everything—they were going through this divorce. So she had left her husband for this guy who she was passionate for and then he ended up treating her like crap. It just felt like any couple around us was working through challenges. It was just a hard challenge.

Section IV

The Dimensions of Repair

The subjects in this study appear to accomplish the repair of their disagreements in four major ways: Coming to Agreement, Compromising, Agreeing to Disagree, and Living with Unresolved Conflict. The dimensions of repair refers to these four outcomes of the couples’ efforts to achieve some sort of resolution to their disagreements.

Coming to Agreement

Coming to agreement involves listening to the other person’s point of view,

understanding their point of view, and then being in agreement regarding a decision or a change in behavior. Ultimately, there is a feeling of resolution and mutual understanding.

Joanne talks about her process with her husband, which involves initially disagreeing, but through talking and listening, they feel the issue is resolved.

Joanne: I think we both usually calm down and then we talk it through. I would go to him try to keep talking about it, then we would just end up talking it through. It might take awhile, we might go back and forth like not agreeing, but then eventually I would say that we would you know both be listening at that point.

J: You eventually get to the point where you can actually hear each other?

Joanne: Right, right. Exactly.

When Peter did something that deeply upset his wife, the agreement they came to was two-fold. One part of it involved Peter promising never to repeat the behavior. The second part involved both of them coming to understand each others' feelings and perception of the problematic behavior.

Peter: Well I promised her it wouldn't happen again, and I think she accepted that. And I got over it in my mind because I meant it and so I've committed to not do that again. Then I think that, I don't want to, I can't get in her mind obviously, but I think, that maybe after a few days she realized it might not be, realized that it wasn't that big of a deal, and it wasn't that big of a, it wasn't that mortal a sin. So, I think that a combination of her kind of coming to feel like maybe that's not the end of the world, and me also like sincerely you know A. sincerely being sorry, and then B., sincerely telling her it wouldn't happen again, maybe a combination of those three things helped to resolve it and I think that probably after a week or two it was behind us.

Gail describes how she and her husband always come to agreement. She attributes this to their mutual respect and support, and their ability to confront each other and then listen to each other. Their agreement may manifest, not necessarily as a verbal agreement, but as a change in behavior.

Gail: We're very good at listening to the other say how they feel then we always, always come to some sort of agreement. There's a lot of, I think one of the reasons that my husband and I are so strong is that we really respect each other and we really like each other and we really support each other so, even if I see something that I'm not, if I think he's being too hard on our son, I would wait, and then, after the situation, say, you know he's only 5 and a half, you're very hard on him and he may not want to hear it at the time, but later I'll see him talk to our son and say he's sorry.

Judith gives another example of the role of listening in come to an agreement or a resolution.

Judith: We do this, it's part of what we actually learned in that initial couples therapy. It's almost a set of skills or tools. I'll say what's on my mind and he'll try to make sure that I've said everything I want to say about it and then I'll say do you have anything you want to say about it and then he'll take his turn. So we each know that we've aired our side of it. And then sometimes there's a resolution, like we decided to do a certain thing, based on what we just discussed. And sometimes it's just saying it that's all that needed to happen.

Carl describes a variation of coming to an agreement. He and his wife can agree in theory about a parenting issue, but this may not necessarily result in changing behaviors.

Carl: I think we have different styles of parenting in some ways. I don't know that those are active disagreements. When it comes time to talk about it, we usually agree, but we might handle a situation differently.

Compromising

Compromising, like coming to an agreement, results in a feeling of resolution. What differentiates compromising from agreeing, is that, with compromise, someone consciously and deliberately gives up something. The giving up is seen as a trade-off for something that is more valuable, usually family harmony.

Ginny's husband loves football to the extent that he would watch every game on television during football season. They both recognize that this would interfere too much with their family life. Ginny describes his compromise.

Ginny: He's starting to realize we had to compromise in that area. I'm like, you can't sit there all day, you have two kids. So he picks his favorite games and makes sure we're there for those and the rest of the day he has to be with us. Definitely compromise with that. He's good about realizing that that's something he has to do. Not all men are.

For Paul, it is better to compromise, even if it means swallowing your pride, than to get locked into a stubborn stand-off.

Paul: Given a non-abusive marriage where somebody is not getting hurt or hit, or even emotionally or verbally beaten, it's okay to put your hat in your hand and take your pride and swallow it for the bigger picture. It's not gonna kill you to give in, or to negotiate, or compromise, because sometimes you just get stubborn and stuck in your way and you forget what you're even mad about... Sometimes it takes one of you to give in, in order to get somewhere; if not, you have two stubborn people, like we do, you just end up bashing heads forever.

Sometimes compromise involves a calculation of whether or not the issue is important enough to keep disagreeing about.

Cecily: I think what we usually wind up doing is coming to some type of agreement where we split up duties, meet halfway on something.

J: Would you say that you compromise, that compromise is something that comes into play?

Cecily: Um-hmm. Compromise and a little bit of give-and-take, or pick your battles.

J: Does that mean that you might back down on something that isn't as important as something else you might push harder for?

Cecily: Right, yeah. Sometimes I may think, well, this isn't really that important. I'll kind of concede this one, let this go. It shouldn't really be an issue.

Robert recognizes that the way their home is decorated affects his wife much more than it affects him, so he concedes on those decisions.

Robert: In other words, I think if I lived in a space that I wasn't thrilled with its décor, I wouldn't suffer. I may not be thrilled about some of the things, but it wouldn't impose on my quality of life. I think, the other way around, it would be terrible. If she allowed me to decorate the walls however I want, she would literally suffer from that. So you recognize that it's less important to me than it is to her. There's only so much I'm willing to go forward and fight and sacrifice other things for. Okay, I'll do what you think you need to do.

Agreeing to Disagree

Agreeing to disagree is not a consensus or a compromise, but a conscious admission that differences – of opinions, preferences, personality - cannot be overcome. The couple agrees that they each are okay with living with this difference. Like coming to agreement or compromise, there is a feeling of resolution.

James seems to accept that he and his wife always have some things unsettled between them.

J: Tell me if I'm wrong. It sounds like there's a trust, or a tolerance of living with some things unsettled because you know you've been able to settle things in the

past and you believe that you'll be okay, even with certain things unresolved?

James: Yeah, I think so. I guess some things you do just kind of say: You know what? This is something that's just gonna stay unsettled between us til we die. Maybe that's just okay. You just have to accept it. Sometimes that can be frustrating, but I think you just have to accept it.

Mary Beth and her husband have been willing to agree to disagree when the issue is not one that they consider of great importance.

Mary Beth: We agree about the major things. So it's really about how I feel when you don't do things around the house. But I do things around the house! But you don't do them enough. Things like that. So the disagreement is lasting. That's the resolution. Not really like that the issue itself has to be resolved.

Robert and his wife have different styles of communicating, which early in their relationship were a source of serious conflict. After several years of marriage, Robert describes the resolution they have come to.

Robert: I think both of us, over time, realized that it's not that we're necessarily right in our way to communicate, but that we have every right to be different in our way to communicate, and that we're likely not gonna really love the way the other person communicates throughout. There's only so much we're going to be able to get. Some of it, we're going to have to just put up with.

James offers a unique perspective on agreeing to disagree.

James: The other piece of advice that a friend of mine gave—this is a friend who is 72 years old—he was telling a story once and it kind of enlightened me to realize that I guess I always had the perception that when you have a discussion with someone, it ends when you're done talking. And after talking with him—he was talking about this three-year discussion he was having with his wife about something—it made me realize that sometimes just starting a discussion is good

and you don't have to end up with decisions together of what you're gonna do. Just kind of talk about it, so that later you can bring it up again, or think more about it. I think that's been helpful for me to realize that my processing of it, let alone my processing of it with my wife, might take more than just one hour of sitting down together and talking. It might take a lifetime. That was really helpful.

Living With Conflicts That Remain Unresolved

Like agreeing to disagree, living with conflicts that remain unresolved involves an admission on the part of both partners that they are not going to agree about a particular issue. The difference between these two outcomes is that deciding to live with an unresolved issue usually feels like resignation and does not feel like a resolution. There is a sense of moving on in spite of the problem, rather than moving on because some form of closure has been attained. Moreover, there is often a reluctance to keep talking about issue.

Margaret has a son with medical problems whom she feels needs extra attention, which her husband considers “babying”. This has been an ongoing disagreement for them, although they do still try to talk about it.

Margaret: Our younger son has had a lot of medical issues and you know we've just found out. I do, I carry him a lot more than what I should and me and my husband we totally disagree about it. I feel like my son needs that right now and I don't mind doing it, whereas he feels like you have got to stop babying him. And it is, it's something that comes up at least once a week, if not twice a week. This has happened now for over a year and you know I don't think either one of us, I think we both think that we're right, you know, but we just kind of, we talk about it, now. You know it's an ongoing talk now, as opposed to saying, "My way is right or your way is right". We kind of meet in the middle, I'll say, " Well, okay, I'm going to try not to hold him as much, or not to do this". But I'm not going to stop, you know, he's my baby and you know we feel differently about it.

J: You're not going to necessarily get to a point where you both just say, where he's going to say, "Okay now I agree with you, do it your way," or vice versa.

Margaret: Right, and this is something that's been ongoing for over a year, this is something that we're constantly dealing with: It's huge, it's huge...

Emily realizes that her attraction to another man has affected her husband in ways that are not resolved and may never be.

Emily: We have moments where it rears its ugly head still. That kind of reason—scare moment in your marriage for that particular reason—I think that really can jostle someone's inner core. I don't like to talk about it and he doesn't like to talk about it together, because it just brings up anger and all of that. You can't change it. There's no point in dwelling on it. It brings back ugly thoughts and feelings. It's not like I try to pretend that it didn't happen. Just stuff it in the closet for a little while. You can't live in the past. We have these kids to raise and we love doing it. So we just go on with it. He's still my best friend. I love him more than ever. I couldn't imagine being without him. I would do anything to make our marriage to work, to work it out, especially for the kids' sake, if nothing else.

Alan expresses his frustration over the disagreements he and his wife have over finances. He lives with constant anxiety about his wife's spending and does not believe that this will change.

J: What's it like for you knowing that this is gonna be an ongoing...

Alan: It drives me insane! It keeps me up at night. Literally keeps me up at night, trying to figure out how on earth to keep everything moving along like it should. It's not a discussion. She doesn't want to talk about it, doesn't want to hear about it, doesn't take any interest in it, walks out of the room when it's mentioned.

J: So you live with this stress all the time. This is something that you've accepted as part of being married?

Alan: I don't know if I've accepted it, but I'm resigned to it.

Jack talks about what it's like for him to accept that the sexual incompatibility in his marriage will probably never change.

Jack: First of all, there's resentment. The way I've come to terms with that is to just sort of get over it. Then there's actual feeling the lack of it. In the good times, we still have some physical-sexual relationship. So I sort of let that be enough. In the bad times, I guess I just sort of suffer a little bit, just sort of live through it.

J: [And] the ways you've attempted to solve that disagreement, or solve the conflict, has been to periodically talk about it?

Jack: Yeah, we do

J: And it sounds like you've also come to accept that this is gonna be something that's gonna be an ongoing...

Jack: Right. I'm gonna have to live with less than I want. I think another important part of this ability for us to keep going forward is that I can see that she's doing her part to try to offer more than she would naturally.

J: So you appreciate the fact that she understands that you would like that to be different and she's trying?

Jack: That's right, exactly...[but] I pretty much live with the difference between what I want and what I have.

In this example, Jack's unhappiness with the differences between him and his wife's interest in sex is somewhat tempered by her attempts to compromise. However, the compromise does not quite work for him, and he expresses a feeling of resignation that he will have to live with this difference between them.

Section V

The Process of Repair

James: I was a competitive ballroom dancer for about two years—[and what I] learned in dancing is, I think, very true in romantic relationships as well. If there's a problem, it's rarely because of one of you. The problem is the partnership is not working. I specifically remember it in learning about in tango, there's a way of spinning around the floor together. When you watch couples do

it, it's this even flow of a couple gracefully moving across the floor. When you actually learn how to do it, it's very choppy, because the idea is you have to make a large movement around your partner. Then you have to react and take a small movement as you allow them to move around you. So that the couple is smoothly moving across the floor, but each of you is doing different things at different times to make it work. So I've always liked that analogy of the dancing. You want the couple to move smoothly. If it's not working, it's the couple's problem and that's the issue. Each of you, in different parts of the dance, or different parts of life, might need to work on different things to make it work.

This section will examine how the couples in this study have worked to resolve their conflicts. The findings are divided into two main categories – Working on Oneself Towards Repair and Working as a Couple Towards Repair. Working on Oneself Towards Repair describes the self-reflection of the subjects and the changes they made within themselves in response to conflict in their marriages. Working as Couple Towards Repair describes what the couples did together to accomplish a repair. Included in Working as a Couple are relational elements that provided the “glue” for the couple as they navigated the rough spots in their marriages. These elements appear to comprise relational resilience.

Working On Oneself Towards Repair

Subjects in this study responded to major disagreements in their marriages with self-reflection. This often took the form of identifying the role they were playing in creating or perpetuating the conflict. In addition, many subjects needed to work on becoming clearer about their feelings and needs and to come to terms with the realities of married life. Many used individual psychotherapy to assist them in making changes.

Self-reflection

Judith describes changes she needed to make in order to mend a disagreement and prevent major disagreements in the future.

Judith: What I learned in counseling and also just from experience is that I have to cut him some slack. I think I'm very intense, and I'm very demanding of myself and everyone else, and what I learned is that I have to, if there's something that I need or want I can ask for it and I may or may not get and that I can't force him or everyone else around me to comply with my, what I think is best. So, for me, what I learned to be able to do is just ease up, so that's one big part of it...For me it was learning to lighten up, learning to ask for things but not be so invested in the outcome.

Mary Beth realized that her way of communicating her feelings to her husband was getting in the way resolving their disagreements.

Mary Beth: I thought it was a good thing to be authentic with your feelings, or that it was in demonstration of intimacy to be very honest, which it is, but I guess at the same time you can also think before you say something—how it's going to impact the other person... That definitely required me to be very introspective and reflect on my own style of communication and how my behavior has an impact on my partner. I guess I learned that I could—only if I want, but I have the ability to control my emotions... while I'm still expressing myself freely, in a sense I'm also acknowledging where he's coming from, how he must hear what I'm saying.

Similarly, Sharon realizes that she needs to allow her husband more space for his feelings.

Sharon: One is that I don't let him speak a lot, so I need to stop talking so much and stop yelling and screaming and give him time to react, because I think he's basically given up. Okay, she's going to rant, I'm just gonna shut down.

Leslie was very close to leaving her husband when she had an epiphany with her individual therapist.

Leslie: [My therapist] said something along the lines of, 'It's okay to get divorced if you have truly done everything that you can do'. And she looked at me and she said, 'And you haven't yet'. I really thank her for that ...It helped me strengthen my resolve. Okay, she said I haven't done everything yet, so I bet there's something else that I can.

Carl realized that his tendencies to be judgmental and draw hasty conclusions were exacerbating tensions regarding the management of finances – the major area of disagreement in his marriage.

Carl: I think my wife is a little more likely to spend money. When she goes to buy the kids' shoes, she buys two pairs of shoes for the kid. I'm like, Well, they can only wear one pair at a time and it's spring, so they can wear sneakers all spring. It's little things. I think one of the things I've reflected on recently is that I think I used to let those things drive me a little more crazy, because I felt like they spoke to larger values based differences. I think I've just been trying to not draw such big conclusions from small data points. I am a terribly judgmental person, so I think I rush to conclusions fast about things. I try to recognize that instinct in myself and maybe let some water under the bridge. In previous time periods, early in our marriage, I probably when I talked to her about drawing a conclusion from something, or jumping to a conclusion, I sort of took a small difference and ran it to its illogical extreme—whatever the judgment was: My wife doesn't care about our money. I don't know that I got that far, but as opposed to saying, She likes to buy two pairs of shoes because maybe it's more efficient that way, or whatever, so be it.

Taking Accountability and Apologizing

Gail describes how she and her husband are willing to take accountability and can admit when they are wrong and apologize.

Gail: I think we're both very good at taking accountability. We don't put the

blame on the other person.

J: Can you say anymore about that?

Gail: Well, again, like if I said something about my husband's drinking, he'd say, you're right, I did drink too much. It never goes further than that. Or, you know, you spent x amount on our son this month, and I don't sit there and try to think, like, "Well, I did it because..." I'm just like, you're right. I did. And I think it makes a huge...it just ends it.

J: Right, so it's about being able to not need to be right, or to be able to...

Gail: I don't think that either one of us ever feels like they have to be right. It's just like, I hear, you're right, I absolutely did that. Or, we had talked about it, and I still did it anyway, and I'm sorry. Neither one of us is afraid to say sorry.

Clarifying Feelings

Ben describes the importance of being able to know what he is feeling.

Ben: I think some of the issues were just me, maybe for the first time thinking about my own emotions. I had no vocabulary to understand them and think about them or talk about them. What I do now is I try to think about my own feelings. I try to be honest with my own feelings and thoughts about our conflict rather than just defer to what her side of it is. So I try to be fair, as fair as I can be, with my own assessment of the disagreement. So, okay, here's why I'm upset and I need to make sure that I convey that.

Cecily echoes Ben's thoughts.

Cecily: Yeah, I would say, for the major disagreements, that helps to figure out: This is my viewpoint, this is why I feel this way about it. Same with him. It helps to kind of resolve things when people realize why we have the viewpoint that we have...I think we each might stand our ground a bit more now than we did at first...The notion that it's okay to disagree, or it's okay to kind of have an argument, was something that kind of went against my nature at first. Perhaps when we were first married, we would be a little more giving, a little more apt to appease the other person, whereas now I think we are a little bit stronger in our convictions about things. . I think the more direct and open we are with each

other, the better things work out.

Eric offers a description of how he and his wife get to the point of being able to come to a resolution.

J: So there may be a lot of emotion in the moment, but then when you take this break, you use your ability to think through things and problem-solve and maybe prioritize?

Eric: I think that's absolutely right. Prioritize is a great word for it, because part of that rationalization is understanding, Okay, I'm upset because of this reason and I can accept this, or I can't accept that. Once you really have your boundaries defined, then you can reach a conclusion a lot more easily.

J: When you say "boundaries," I guess you're talking about your own feelings and needs and understanding of something. You need to clarify those things?

Eric: Yes

J: Then you can have a position that you can work from in terms of resolving it?

Eric: I think that's right. I think, more often than not, when we get to that point, generally our follow-up conversation is full of apologies and acceptance: I can do what you want me to do, or I won't do something else. Whatever the case may be. It proves to be pretty effective, for us anyway.

Becoming Realistic About Marriage

Most subjects mentioned that becoming more realistic about marriage was an important factor in managing conflict. They spoke of accepting their spouse for who they are and accepting that marriage is a lot of work. It appears that there is grief work involved in this process, as it is a letting go of illusions and tolerating disappointment - in themselves, in their spouses and in what it means to be married.

Margaret describes how she was ill prepared for the disagreements that would occur in her marriage.

Margaret: Yes, I think when you start dating someone and you're in that I guess they call it that honeymoon phase you're so happy I think, you just automatically think that when you get married it's going to be great, you know that you're not going have these huge fights. I thought I did know it all. I mean I thought we were perfect, you know. So, yeah.

Ginny, too, had a “fairy tale” idea of what marriage would be like.

Ginny: When I was 23 and thinking about marriage, I guess I probably wouldn't have thought it was as hard and took as much work. At that age when I was young, I probably had a picture that was kind of like a fairy tale—that it just happened and you don't have to work on it.

Sarah began to cry when asked about the early phase of her relationship with her husband. She described what it was like for her to talk about that time.

Sarah:... But also I'm the kind of person that believes in romance and fairy tales... It's fun to talk about the year that we met and our engagement, to think through the history of it all. Especially that first year after you're engaged, you talk about that story so much. It is a story that you tell. And now you don't tell anyone. You don't pull out the wedding album. I remember, I used to watch the wedding video. I don't think I've watched the wedding video for two years now. I

think I watched it a fair amount during all my maternity leaves, but I don't think I've watched it in a long time. So I think just telling, remembering that story, is important. Knowing that part of your history and remembering that kind of rekindles a lot of those emotions. So that's powerful. Just articulating it all, as you have, has been important, has been helpful...To remember to go back to it. We have photo albums that we should take out more often and other ways to go back to that, or to talk about it, just to say, Remember...

Mary Beth's dreams of marriage have turned out to be different from the reality.

Mary Beth: I think it's the best I could have hoped for, but it's not what I expected it to be. When I had dreams about being married, it didn't include all the little challenges and hardships.

Robert was not expecting all the challenges he faces as a husband and father.

Robert: I can definitely say it's been a bumpier road than maybe what I thought of as a teenager or as someone in his young twenties contemplating marriage in the future. I don't think I ever realized it was going to be such a tough challenge that you have to work your way through and actively solve problems. It wasn't just going to happen to you. I think, over time, that was the big realization, that that wasn't necessarily something which meant there was a problem in the relationship; that was probably the reality of what it means to be married in today's world with children, or at least in our social setting. So I don't think there's anxiety or disappointment that comes with this mismatch with some maybe naïve early expectations, but it's definitely been much more challenging than I ever could have expected it to be.

Carl talks about needing "survival tools" during this phase of marriage, balancing careers, parenting, three children and his relationship with his wife.

Carl:...I remember thinking at the time that the myth, the belief, the mindset that my wife and I had when we first met was: Look how similar we are, look how much we have in common, look how much we like doing together. There were very few things that put strains on that. Then along come children and a whole new set of responsibilities. Look how much fun we have, look how much love there is, but okay, let's practice and work on the tools of survival during this period where we're in the wilderness, with these three little monkeys. There will probably be a time where much more in our life will be quote unquote

controllable. I don't think that life is totally controllable. It's not. But we just have a lot of uncontrollable variables right now.

24/7. Emily describes what it's like for her to have other people "in your business"

Emily: You just have to work at it. It's not something that... be it in church, or out on the golf course, or whatever, and say, Okay, that's it, I have a partner, now I have a date to everything. This is your life. Living with somebody of the opposite sex is hard. Living with someone regardless is hard, whether you're gay or whatever. I think it's difficult to have somebody. They're in your business and you're in their business. Then you throw children into it and they're in your business. I can't go to bathroom without having somebody in there with me. You lose a lot of who you are, especially being a mother. You lose a lot of who you are. So you just have to work at it. And if you don't feel like you can work at it and give part of yourself to somebody else, or some other things, then don't get married.

Ben, too, comments on the work of managing close relationships.

J: Would you say that married life was what you expected it to be at this point, ten years into it?

Ben: Well, it's a lot more work than I thought it would be. Just daily effort of thinking about the other person's needs and desires and wants on so many levels—on just practical levels and short-term and long-term and emotional. There's just a lot of staying in touch, a lot of work to stay in touch. But this is the relationship that we have. We like to be in touch and on top of each other's lives. So that's just how our relationship works.

Accepting Your Spouse for Who They Are

Sharon tries to follow her mother's advice on accepting your spouse for who they are.

Sharon: My mother always says, Warren Buffett. He's been married to his wife for sixty years. He always says, Have low expectations and just love them for who they are.

Leslie described a pivotal moment of acceptance in her marriage.

Leslie: You know what? This is it, Leslie. This is your moment. You have to either accept this and somehow get over this anger. It's not going to get better than this. Although the word was not "sorry," - that was what I was looking for...[but] I did really, truly feel like he acknowledged that I had been let down and that he shared some responsibility in that... Yes, I think definitely now, after eight years of marriage, I have a better idea of what is reasonable to expect from him than when I first got married.

James explains his perspective on accepting the difference between him and his wife – differences that create disagreements in their marriage.

James: Everybody has a certain amount of goodness in them and if you want to make someone better on one dimension, you have to make them worse on another dimension, at least from my perspective, how I would interact with them. Other people might have different metrics and not even care about something that I care about. But I think I believe that my wife is far from perfect in my eyes. She's not even perfect for me. But if I wanted to make her more perfect in one dimension, I'd have to give up something on another dimension, because there's only a certain amount of humanity, amount of goodness that she can have. So I think that having that belief says: You know what? So you can't wish that someone was less or more of something else, because then that would change other parts of their character as well. So there's a part of me that likes that my wife dreams big and thinks about how she can change the world. So that if I wanted her to be more rigid and more able to follow the rules, that would take away some part of her. There's a balance. It's not just about the way I want my wife to be; it's about how she wants to be.

Working as a Couple Towards Repair

The hard work of marriage, described in the above section, is accomplished in several ways by the couples in this study. The following section will explore the tools and processes that assist these couples in repairing disagreements and accomplishing their goals for their marriages. In addition, relational factors that appear to be the ingredients

of relational resilience will be described. Many couples used couples therapy as a support and a means of developing relational skills.

Communicating

Communication was mentioned universally by the subjects in this study as critically important to resolving conflict and staying connected. Communication for these subjects involved both expressing their own feelings clearly and listening to their spouses without judging them.

Ginny describes the give and take of talking and listening.

Ginny: I think I'm more apt not to want to have a big blow-out disagreement. I really just want to sit down and talk to him about problems that we have, whereas when I was younger I probably would contribute to some kind of big blow-up where we're not talking to each other for days. Now I would just sit down and talk to him about it. I just try to talk it out and let him see my side, but also listen to what he's telling me and what his position is. I think if I close him off in some way and don't listen to his side, that's not really gaining anything. I try to listen to where he's coming from when we have an argument. And if I'm wrong, then I fix it.

Likewise, Cecily emphasizes how much it helps her to know what her husband is feeling.

Cecily: I think it has helped to have some idea of what the other person is feeling, rather than just keeping it to yourself, or just kind of conceding and letting it go. It has helped to know that's how he feels about it, or vice versa. Letting him know this is how I really kind of feel about this. I think just being more open about your feelings towards an issue. The more comfortable we've gotten with being honest and open about our feelings, the easier we found conflict resolution to be.

Eric offers his perspective on what it means to really listen.

Eric: I would, if I was offering unsolicited advice, I would say you really need to be...it's not enough to say you really need to listen to your partner, I think you need to be open to what they're saying, I think you need to consider what they're saying and be willing to share your thoughts and expressions back to them. And really create an ongoing dialogue with them. I think it's probably one of the most valuable things that I can think about our relationship.

Peter and his wife participated in Marriage Encounters as a way to improve their communication.

Peter: It was really helpful because they taught us ways of communicating on a more, on a less emotional, kind of communicating with each other without judging what we were saying to each other and try to keep our personal feeling out of it so we actually started to use written journals for awhile and kind of communicating that way to express our feelings to each other and that was helpful and we did that for about a year.

Several of the women in the study expressed appreciation that their husbands have become more communicative after having had a major disagreement.

Margaret: We had never really fought that much before and I think that he, the therapist, really helped us to learn to work together more. In fact, I was always the one who wanted to talk and my husband didn't and now it's almost like he would rather talk about it, if we're having a discussion which I think as a woman means a lot because you know, I think it's easy for men just to not want to talk about it and I think it really made us just be more aware of each other and really about when we have problems because I don't think we knew how to deal with that because we just had never really had many arguments before we got married.

Ginny: He doesn't like to talk about things that are bothering me really. He's more likely to do it now. He sees the value in doing it. Sometimes. I think men are wired differently. Getting him to talk is a challenge, because men don't like to do that either. So if I can get him to talk about it, then the problem will be solved quickly.

J: And how do you get him to talk?

Ginny: I bother him until he does. [laughs] I say, We really need to talk about this, because it's not gonna get any better unless we fix it. Eventually he caves. Just so I'll leave him alone and he can watch football.

For Emily, the fact that her husband is more confrontational feels like he's more present in their relationship.

Emily: Before he may not have been as blunt about things, but he is now and he goes right for the attack, which he should. So I think, yes, in that regard, which is good, rather than just lackadaisically, if it came up or whatever. Or he may not have even noticed. But now he does.

J: So he's more confrontational?

Emily: He's confrontational about it, which he should be, but he's definitely more plugged into it. His feelers are out, not that he's probably looking for it, but...

J: He's paying more attention to your relationship?

Emily: Definitely.

Building Trust

Communicating and building trust appear to be interdependent – talking openly builds trust, but openness is not possible without trust. Trust appears to be both something that needs to be worked on in every relationship but to some degree is based on essential qualities that spouses recognize in each other.

Ben: It's kind of a chicken-and-egg problem. You can't have trust unless you're really opening up. And you don't want to open up unless you can trust the other person. So I think it all had to happen at the same time.

Peter believes that trust is both instinctive and has to be earned.

Peter: I think you've got to trust each other. You know, you have to trust that the other person is, I don't know if you can just trust them, I think it almost has to be, I think trust has to be earned as they say, but it's also in an instinctive way you can trust somebody I think that you can just tell if you can trust somebody. If you can trust, I think we trust each other so much, and we're not threatened by each other saying we're going out, we believe that we have each other's interest at heart and I think that if you can trust that the other person has your best interest at heart, then you can be more tolerant and you can be more patient and more forgiving when things don't go exactly as planned.

Dianne saw things in her husband from the beginning of their relationship, which helped her to begin to lay the foundation for trust in their relationship.

Dianne: Part of it was that my husband was one of the first people who I never felt judged by in a whole lot of ways. I felt deeply supported. I remember thinking through this. [In college and grad school] I just got beat up intellectually in an "I suck, I'm not good enough" way. He could care less about any of that. It was something that I was craving, someone who could care less about any of that. But he also, I remember... I would say, "I really want to do blah, but I can't do it for these reasons." And he would just cut through all of that and just help me see how and why and what I could do. It was very inspiring to me.

Leslie had the experience of being disappointed with her husband to point of almost leaving. Her trust rebuilt slowly, based on seeing that his behavior matched his words. Then she was able to see other ways that he was present in their relationship.

Leslie: He dropped everything and took care of it. Don't worry about it, no problem, I got it, I'm all over it. So I really feel like, not only did he say those words to me, but two months later, he was actually put to the test. I do feel much more confident at this point that he's kind of got my back. I also feel that I myself am a stronger person, too. But I realize now that, Okay, maybe he's not doing the laundry, but that's because when he's home, he's the one who's fixing the broken

toys. He's contributing in different ways that I think before I couldn't even see, because the trust wasn't there.

Judith is aware that it is hard for her to be trusting in her marriage because of experiences from her childhood.

Judith: And the other part is and still an ongoing thing for me is trust. Because of where I come from, the environment that I come out of, I'm not a trusting person sometimes and I often, I'm a catastrophizer, I think that everything's going to go to hell in a basket any minute. For me, that's like a daily practice, to remind myself that I'm safe, that I'm with people who are trustworthy, and that my husband is trustworthy, and that everything's alright. But I remind myself of that everyday.

Ben talked about some of the fears he brought to his marriage that initially got in the way open communication and trust building.

Ben: We've learned how to create a safe environment for us to talk to each other. For me, there's no judging and there is acceptance and there's trust. I think that's what makes it not scary, is having a safe place where you can really be honest with yourself and share your feelings and thoughts and know that it's not going to ... For me personally, I didn't want to be judged or criticized for my own thoughts and feelings. For me, that was the scary part. If I tell her everything that I'm thinking and feeling, what if she doesn't like something? What would that do? For me, the thought of her just disapproving of some aspect of me or my personality just felt catastrophic. So that led me to not want to talk about things that were really important to me, which you can't do in a marriage, you have to be honest. Those are the things you have to talk about most, what's important to you. But these are all the things that I had to learn.

J: Did you learn that in the couples therapy?

Ben: Yes, yes. I think we had to learn that. Well, I had to learn that it was good for me to talk and be honest and open and share. We both had to learn how to listen to each other when we're sharing and being vulnerable and have trust that if one of us was in a vulnerable position, the other one wasn't going to take

advantage of that in some way...I think having trust in each other to be able to really share everything with each other, that's really... Communication is the most important part. And how do you have good communication is, you have to have trust and patience to create a safe place to talk and share.

Developing Empathy and Understanding

Developing empathy and understanding is interconnected with both communicating and building trust and for many subjects has been an important factor in being able to resolve disagreements.

Peter: I don't think we've really found different ways of resolving conflict. I think we've more understood each other's ways of dealing with conflict and perhaps that's helped us a little bit. I think we understand each other where we're coming from when it comes to intimacy, to how we spend our money, to what we're going to be, like a long term goal. I think we're more on the same page than we ever were, I think we understand each a little bit more than we ever did, especially more so than our first couple of years of being married.

Margaret describes an exercise she and her husband did in couples therapy that got an important point across.

Margaret: You know one of the biggest things that the therapist did when we walked in, you know he had a picture, and asked both of us to look at it and see what we saw and he explained, you know, that neither one is necessarily wrong. You both saw it the way you saw it and just going and finding out things like that were such eye openers for me because I'm so headstrong and I really think I'm right, you know.

Paul thinks about what it's like for his wife to be home as a full-time homemaker. He has changed his reactions to coming home to a messy house.

Paul: I shouldn't be thinking thoughts in my head when I come home from work, like: Why is the house like a hurricane went through here? I should give her the benefit of the doubt. Maybe she had the worst day of her life and how can I come in and help? Instead, where I would come in and be like: What the hell happened in here! Make a comment like that after she had a terrible day. That would just go downhill... I think there's probably some sort of thing in the back of her head around: I stay at home. I don't know, I'm just guessing. I stay at home. Do others look at me like am I accomplishing as much as others are? I'm still young and I have a college degree. I've had a job, but I've never really worked. My job is this. She takes really big pride in that. Great at what she does. So if I notice that, making her feel special.

Mary Beth describes coming to a realization about a difference between herself and her husband, which has led to her changing her behavior.

Mary Beth: I think my biggest probably aha moment, which will sound terrible, I'm sure, was that people are emotional, we're all different from one another, because I think it's only been like fifty times that my husband told me that when we argue and disagree, or when there are tensions between the two of us and it has an effect differently on him than it has on me—it's not something he feels comfortable or he doesn't feel that it strengthens our relationship the way I do, or things like that—only I think it took me like fifty times to realize that he's different. His emotional range is, I don't want to say shorter I guess the way he feels his emotion is not the same that I do and he really feels intimidated by my strong emotions. So that was something that I learned about myself and in couples in general. What else did I learn about myself? I guess I learned that I could—only if I want, but I have the ability to control my emotions.

Relational Resilience

Communicating, building trust and developing empathy and understanding are processes that appear to underlie the ability of the subjects in this study to repair breaks in their connection to their spouses. Several other aspects of their relationships support these processes and will be described in the following section. These appear to be elements of

relational resilience in that they continually give meaning to the work of the relationship and provide satisfaction and security for the couple.

Being Committed

Not surprisingly, a basic commitment to the marriage often keeps couples working to resolve disagreements.

Margaret's commitment to her marriage was partly based on her religious faith. When she and her husband were on the verge of splitting up, they went to couples' therapy to repair the break.

Margaret: Because we were both at the point where, I was so unhappy that I told him that I didn't want to stay here anymore, that I wanted to move back home and we both decided that we didn't just want to get a divorce and let it go. We really wanted to work through it and you know decide what was best for us. I mean we both still loved each other, we just weren't happy... I'm very serious about my faith and I feel like you know when you make a commitment like that with God, you know that's not something that you don't take lightly, so...

Emily's expectation is that the commitment to marriage is for life. She attributes this partly to the fact that her parents, in-laws and grandparents are in lasting marriages

Emily: It's a vow you take when you get married. You're going to work through good times and bad, in sickness and in health. It's just what you do.

Likewise, Eric believes that the commitment that he and his wife have to their marriage has been influenced by the fact that their parents have lasting marriages.

Eric: Both of our parents are still married and both of them have been for quite a good bit of time. I think that has a huge impact on how both of us view marriage...

It was always just understood that they were together for life. And nothing was going to change that. There was never a moment in my life where I ever felt there was an inkling of a possibility that my parents would never not be together until one of them passed. I think that's a pretty strong notion when you think about what marriage means, to have that as your example—the idea that whatever it takes, whatever needs to happen, that's what happens to make the marriage work, to make sure this thing goes on. I feel we have that same sense of unconditional love. My sense is that we both approach our marriage as this is something that we don't take for granted, but yet we feel strongly that this is something that will endure. This is something that is not going... I can't imagine a scenario in which it wouldn't.

On the other hand, the fact that Margaret's parents' were divorced strengthened her determination to mend the break in her marriage.

Margaret: You know my parents had been divorced but I always thought, "Well that's not going to be me". You know things are not going to be like that and I think, I thought I love my husband so much that how could we ever get to the point where I would want to leave anyway, especially after you get married.

Like Margaret, Sarah's parents are divorced, which in many ways has made her commitment to working on issues in her marriage stronger. Her husband's parents are also divorced but his mother is in a second marriage that has provided them with an image of what they want their relationship to be like.

Sarah: Both of us come from divorced parents where our parents were unfaithful to their spouses. So it was really important to us. When we talked about getting married, we absolutely would never go outside of our marriage... I kind of believe in the institution of marriage. My husband's parents are divorced. Both his parents are remarried. His mother and stepfather have been married for thirty years now and they have an incredible marriage. I didn't have that example

before I met my husband, but once I met my husband, we were both like: That's the kind of marriage that we want. They just have a really beautiful marriage and have worked really hard. I think we both aspire to that kind of longevity... Just having faith. It was like annoyance level was high, because I think we were just so tired, physically tired. It was just feeling that it was a blip and just knowing that we were in this for the long haul.

Jack explains the importance to him of recommitting to his marriage after a major disagreement.

Jack: In summary, one of the main points has been making the conscious decision to stay in the marriage. I do think the business about deciding to stay in the marriage is very important and would be to any couple. Once I've made that decision, then basically it means I can let things go over time.

Alan feels strongly that reminding oneself of why one got married is helpful in managing the strain of disagreements.

Alan: I think it's healthy to constantly question why you got married in the first place, because then you get back to why did you get married. A lot of people tend not to question that, or see that as a negative. I think, if you don't do it, you'll drive yourself insane. I think you have to ask yourself those questions from time to time and just re-anchor yourself, if nothing else. Just get back to your home base. If you can get back to whatever it is that you believed in and why you wanted to be married to somebody in the first place—if you can remember that, then you'll be fine, I think.

Making Time for the Relationship

Subjects spoke of the importance to their marriages of intentionally making time for each other, either to go out and have fun, to be sure and check in with each other on a daily basis or to hash out disagreements.

Gail and her husband spend time together every evening after they put their son to bed.

Gail: We're very lucky that we have one child and he goes to bed at 8:00, so when he goes to bed, we are on the sofa usually, watching something and talking at the same time. Or listening to music, we love music, and we just talk and talk and then we go to bed. And I think it's really helped and we always have date night, at least twice a month. We just, like I said, really get along... We make time for each other...

Sam observed that his parents spent very little time together and he wants his marriage to be different.

Sam: You know if she [his mother] was bored, well nobody was there to see it, you know the way your day and your time and things are scheduled and allotted makes a huge difference I think in how close people are. You can't be affectionate if you don't have any time to be affectionate.

Ginny and her husband take advantage of the flexibility in her husband's work schedule to have quality time together.

Ginny: At nighttime, when we put the kids to bed, we usually watch TV or a movie. I know it's not great quality time. Or when we drop them off, if he isn't working, we'll go get some coffee, or a bagel, or something. We'll have a morning date. You need [time together] to connect with each other.

James considers appointments with a couples therapist to be opportunities to focus on the relationship.

James: I think just the idea of setting aside the time and going for help is also really important for us. We decided to frame it around, We'll go there and then we'll go out to dinner afterwards. So it's not just spending an hour with the therapist and paying her money to do this; it's setting aside time to talk about us. And it reminds us all the time: Let's go for a walk on Sunday so that we can talk

about this stuff. Let's find some time to talk about it so that we're actually processing it.

Ben and his wife scheduled time to talk each week after their twins were born.

Ben: We used to have weekly meetings about the kids, because there was so much change when they were first born, especially for her. She was around them more and she saw more changes and she felt like at some point—every week we had to change something about what we were doing. We would meet every Sunday night and we would talk about the kids. We were pretty geeky about being structured. That's probably another thing that really helped us, because we can take a problem and break it down into a series of logical steps and then it just feels a lot more doable, rather than, Oh, how are we gonna figure this out? I have no idea. We never have time to talk. Forget it. Let's give up. Okay, we have this problem, we should meet once a week. That makes sense. So I think that also helps us. We both think that way.

Carl has come to realize that he has to consciously create space each day to tune into his wife.

Carl: Starting off with my own mindset, I guess I'm trying to become more patient, because I'm recognizing that when I'm tired and I have other things on my mind and I'm still thinking about my day and I'm thinking about what I'm going to be doing tomorrow—that can put me in a place where I'm short with my wife, or don't give her the time and energy and compassion that she deserves. So I guess I'm more recently, in the last maybe three to six months, trying to find a way of carving out a little bit of time--it may just be five minutes—to hear what her day was about or, if she's asking me to do something, to maybe surrender the agenda to her a little bit rather than to being on my own agenda, which I think has been an important way to think about it for me.

Showing Appreciation

Making the effort to show appreciation to each other is related to making time for the relationship. Sarah describes an email she recently sent to her husband.

Sarah: About a month ago, I sent my husband an e-mail. I don't remember what prompted it. But it was just a purely like, I love you, I appreciate you kind of e-mail. He was like, Oh, how refreshing to get an e-mail that's not, What time are you going to be home for dinner tonight? Are you going out tomorrow night? Are you picking up...? It wasn't about logistics. So we're very good at communicating. We're organized and we're good at communicating about the logistic stuff, but I feel like some of that magical, just appreciating each other kind of has gotten lost in the shuffle... To appreciate each other. Just simple gestures like gratitude and acknowledging each other. I think one of the big things is that we take each other for granted way too much. So being able to stop and really appreciate each other goes so far, because I think that sense of feeling taken for granted—I think we've both felt in various ways over the last year probably.

Like Sarah, Paul wants to be sure that he lets his wife know how much he appreciates what she does, especially because she is a stay at home mom.

Paul: I think, for my wife, the thing that's most important to her is probably a tie between me making her feel like she's doing a great job—whether it's motherhood—taking the time just to notice her, because you get caught up, and notice what she's doing. How can I make her feel like she is the most important thing? She's not getting any kind of award for being a stay at home mom, so. Every once in a while, trying to throw some sort of appreciation.

Respecting and Appreciating

Subjects spoke not only of showing appreciation, but of feeling respect and appreciation for their spouses. Alan lists respect as one of the factors that strengthen his marriage.

Alan: Those two personalities have to figure out how they're gonna get along and hope that the premise under which you got married, because you love each other and you respect each other, you have fun, your lives are complementary—you just hope that that tenet is strong enough to kind of take you through the ups and downs... She's just very caring and very giving. Just a wonderful person. Like I said, eight of ten days, I'm very happy to be married to her.

Dianne has struggled with the ways in which she and her husband are different.

However, the respect they feel for each other provides strength for their marriage.

Dianne: He is someone who has a lot of deep integrity, which was really also very inspiring to me. I don't want to say that I lacked integrity or that I grew up in a world that lacked integrity, but I grew up in a world that thought about pushing boundaries in ways that rules were not always rules. Michael had a really deep sense of integrity. And I really honored that and I have learned from that consistently. But I think it's probably really key, that I deeply respect my husband for who he is and I feel deeply respected by him. That's so solidifying.

Mary Beth feels deeply appreciative of how good a father her husband is.

Mary Beth: There is a lot about him that makes me happy about our relationship. Probably the main would be in how he's a father. When I grew up, my father was more or less absent. He was in the same town, but he was never really there for us. And my husband is there one hundred percent for both our kids. In fact, I think he's a better father than I am a mother. He's very hands-on, very involved. I don't say to my daughter, but sometimes when I see them interacting, I feel like saying to my daughter, I picked you such a great dad. I did a better job than my mom.

Of all the subjects, Sharon was struggling the most in her marriage. Even so, there are ways in which she respects and appreciates her husband.

Sharon: He is very intelligent and well spoken and thoughtful. And he's a wonderful father. He is very loving to my children.

Flexible Gender Roles

The subjects in this research give a lot of thought to what kind of marriage they want to create with their partners. This often includes challenging traditional gender roles and wanting a different relationship than their parents had. It appears to be a strength in their marriages that they feel empowered to decide together how they will structure family life, rather than feeling pressure to conform to pre-conceived notions of what marriage should look like.

Besides not wanting the constant bickering he observed between parents, Peter wanted less traditional gender roles in his marriage. Without having an actual model of the relationship he wanted for himself, he created his own ideas of marriage, which he and his wife share.

Peter: I just think that my father played a more traditional role, at least in my mind. My mother might disagree. My mom was in charge of the kids and he was in charge of going to work and sitting down to eat dinner and he used to spend time with us and he did stuff but were definitely lines drawn and I didn't want that to be me. I've always been someone who enjoyed spending time with children... I kind of reflect and say what did I think it would be, I thought it would be more a shared endeavor, and I think it has been...I don't know if I ever looked at a couple and said to myself oh they seem like they have a great marriage and I'd like to wind up like that. I don't think I ever had that, so I think that maybe I just kind of picked it up from pieces here and there as to kind of formulating my own ideas as to what I thought marriage should look like.

Like Peter's parents, Gail's parents remained married, but there was constant fighting between them. Before meeting her husband, she had decided that she would remain single rather than be in a marriage that wasn't what she wanted. What she wanted from marriage was pretty straightforward.

Gail: I wanted us to be able to talk, and be friends, and to do things together.

Sam's parents remained married, but, like Gail and Peter, he wanted his marriage to be different. He was aware of their rigid gender roles and that his mother seemed unhappy.

Sam: So I think we also had this idea that we would kind of make our marriage... a lot of people that are our age, their parents had that dad goes to work, mom cooks...I think to be more affectionate is one thing because I think I've seen my parents kiss maybe four times. My dad can't cook. He doesn't do any laundry, he really doesn't do anything. My mom's definitely the work horse. You know, he goes to work and such but, he really doesn't do anything. They're very, like, it's like 1956 or 1955 at that house. The woman has her duties and the man has his duties and that's how it is. My wife doesn't cook at all. So, I think we just kind of make it you know... I mean my mom wasn't real happy (laughs) so, you kinda figure out well...mom's kind of pissed off. Well, what's she been doin'? Well, she's been payin' bills, doin' laundry, cookin', cleanin' up for us, yea, that's probably not a whole lot a fun (pause) yeah.

While there were elements of her parents' marriage that Cecily wanted to emulate, she did not want the same division of labor based on gender roles.

Cecily: I think there were many elements of their marriage that were definitely what I wanted. I can pick out things in my parents' relationship that I think, Oh, I don't want to turn out that way.

J: Like what?

Cecily: Just their roles in the household. My mom always did all the cooking and cleaning. My dad came home from work and watched TV. I always felt I don't want to fall into those same roles all the time. I want to share more of the household responsibilities. The same with child-rearing. It was pretty much my mom who took care of the kids. My dad was always at work. I look at that and think, I want him to be part of our children's lives and there for everything.

While creating a marriage based on one's own ideas and preferences appears to strengthen the relationships and increase the satisfaction of the subjects in this study, it can also be a source of disagreements and stress. Dianne approached the question of how to structure her marriage from a political vantage point and was very vigilant about not falling into traditional roles. She understands that her husband's ideas of who should be doing what are based on what really matters to him, and what makes their life together work the most smoothly. She wonders whether her fears of falling into traditional roles resulted in part from observing her parents' marriage.

Dianne: So we would have a fight about the dishes and I would go to the place about society and women and feminism. It took us a while until I was ready to have kids. He was ready to have kids before I was. And I was in part arguing around my career and feminism and society. Any time that would come out, it would drive him crazy, because to me the personal is the political. But to him, screw the rest of the world. What works for us? To me, that argument never worked. To me, the argument worked that our actions—who does the dishes—is a highly political behavior. And to him, that was ridiculous. Keep society and your sociology and your politics out of this; I just don't want to have to bother doing the dishes, or I'm just ready to have kids, or whatever else...I think he'll define gender roles however he wants. If he wants to play more of the role of the daddy, he'll do it... And the other thing for me was that I had a lot of feminist, egalitarian anxiety about losing my individuality and identity by becoming a wife. The role of wife was a real anxious one for me. I didn't want to sign up for wife as a more traditional, it was as if wife reduced one's status to be the, I wonder the extent to which my deep commitment to feminism is a function of my mom being subjected to roles that, or feeling like her full self was never honored in their marriage. I don't think it was and I think it still is not.

Carl wonders if things were easier for his parents, whose marriage was based on traditional gender roles, which were accepted as the norm by both his mother and father.

Carl: Just the daily demands on us are very different than what they were for my parents. I think our way of life has changed a lot. Part of it has to do with, again, there's been a huge shift in social norms and generational acceptance of gender

roles. Something which I grew into very naturally, but when I look at it now, the working couple raising children in today's world, it's a lot more demanding than it used to be. Women are not required to bear that burden alone and shut up about it. Let's put it that way... So there are many more stressors, I think, today that we need to deal with, or at least that we openly deal with, that were not on the table thirty and forty years ago when my parents maybe were dealing with the same thing.

Maintaining Some Autonomy

For several subjects, part of creating the structure of their marriages included having separate interests and being supportive of the separate interests of their spouses.

Peter describes how he and his wife have gotten more comfortable taking time for themselves.

Peter: We respect each others' personal space more now than we probably did early on regarding if I want to go out and get together with my friends for an evening or if she wants to go out to a movie with her friends for an evening, I don't think we think twice about telling each other we're going to do that. There's no guilt involved. I think maybe years ago that wasn't true. It would be more like you know feeling like we're keeping score. I don't think we do that anymore. So, that's also kind of lessened the arguments, so that understanding of each other a little more, I think has been helpful.

Margaret explains how important it is for her and her husband to have time for their separate activities.

Margaret: I think the biggest thing for me is just that, obviously we went through a really bad spell over 7 years ago and I do, I feel it made us so much stronger and I do I think one of the things that really works best for us is that as much as we are able to enjoy spending time together we both do our own things, you know at the same time. Not too much so that we're not altogether as a family a lot, but enough that in the evenings, he wants to go work out so, you know, before I put the kids to bed, he usually leaves and he gets to go work out and that's great,

whereas, I get to work out in the mornings. Or on Saturday mornings and I think it's just so important to get to do those things even after you have kids.

Gail values her autonomy and supports her husband's need to have time away from the family.

Gail: He needs space. And I'm okay with that. I love to be alone too. I know he can't be with us, like 24 hours out of the day, it's just not who he is. And I'm fine with that. I know a lot of people like wonder, like where's my husband, you know if we're at an event, or even me, if there's a football game and my husband will sometimes just take my son and I won't go and they'll think it's just shocking that I'm not there, that I'm just getting my nails done or something. But it's just sometimes, we just need our space and we both know that...I think we're both very secure with ourselves. So, yeah. I don't feel like my husband identifies me. Like, I think the same thing for him. I don't think he feels like he's defined by me. So we just, we definitely like doing our own thing.

Ben has observed in his marriage that he and his wife will have a stronger relationship if they maintain and value their individuality.

Ben: I think there's a lot of things in our lives that are separate. Our work is kind of different. Our interests can be very different. Our Netflix movie queues are extremely different. Our musical taste is different, but has some overlap, which is good. I think it's nice that we let each other enjoy our separate lives. This was some good advice from our Unitarian Universalist priest who married us. His slogan-motto-advice was: You must be very two before you can become very one. He saw that we were both just very individual, independent people with lots of our own thoughts and opinions and ideas and interests. I think his advice was, You must be individual greater people and embrace that about yourselves. If you try to stifle that, it's not gonna work, you're not gonna work as a couple. So I think his advice was, celebrate who you are in your individuality and make sure that you have your presence. So we do do that in our relationship. We do let each other have our own lives and still stay very connected.

Sharing Core Beliefs

Subjects mentioned the sharing of core beliefs as an element in their relationships that aided in the process of repair.

Joanne: We have the same values and goals and I think we agree on most things about the direction of life and our kids. We're really on the same page with things, I think, which helps.

Robert feels that the fact that he and wife agree on the most important issues in their life together helps them to keep their disagreements in perspective.

Robert: We do feel very similarly about some very fundamental and important things in life. We've never had this argument about religion, children's raising or education in one way or another, or the really big and fundamental questions of life kind of stuff. Even though we don't necessarily agree about all of those things, I think we're much, more closely aligned on a lot of those things. So it becomes very much about our preferences and things that we like in little elements of life, in our social interactions, in interior décor, and whatever it is. And relationships with family, of course, because you can't avoid those frictions when they're there.

Peter reflects on how sharing core beliefs helps build teamwork in his marriage.

Peter: I don't know if this is something that people say very often but just that idea that we do share like a similar philosophy about how we want to live our lives. Our long term goals, our short term goals, our beliefs, our religious beliefs and our just core beliefs I think we're really on the same page and so I think that goes a long way in us being able to be a team in a lot of ways.

Sharing a Sense of Humor

The subjects in this study frequently mentioned sharing a sense of humor as something they valued in their relationships. This appears to be an important factor in

feeling connected to each other in a unique way.

Emily feels that the fact she and her husband are laughing more is an indication that they are reconnected after having a serious break. She also indicated that their shared sense of humor is something special between them.

Emily: Now it's a lot different. We do a lot of things [together]—whether they're chores around the house or that sort of thing. We laugh a lot more than we were at the time and that kind of thing... We have the same demented sense of humor. We get along likes peas-and-carrots, as my mother says.

Judith describes how humor attracted her to her husband and how it helped them get through the highly stressful time in their marriage after their twins were born.

Judith: I think that humor bonds us. Like when I first met my husband, he was really funny and that was one of the things that attracted me to him in the first place and I think that humor is just you know it's like a coastguard cutter. Humor can get you through a lot, being able to have a sense of humor about a lot of things that are dark and difficult, so that's something else that we have in common. Yeah, that's a really great kind of component of our marriage

It is important to Leslie that her husband appreciates her sense of humor.

Leslie: You know what? I love that we share the same sort of goofy sense of humor. I love that. I can be really, really goofy. And he will just laugh...

Parenting

While many subjects described the transition to parenthood as among the most stressful periods in their marriage, they spoke of how the experience of raising children

together has brought them closer and solidified their commitment to their relationships.

The transition to parenthood was not easy for Peter and his wife, especially because their first child had medical problems. However, several years later, and after the birth of their second child, he reflects that the experience of being parents has brought him closer to his wife.

Peter: I think that since we had children I have seen her as my partner not just in marriage but being a partner in parenting has also given me another reason to feel connected to her.

Judith and her husband had a particularly difficult time when their twins were born. The fact that they got through it proved to her that they were a very strong team and that she could really count on her husband.

Judith: We were slammed and that was one of the things that, that's one of the ways we knew we had a good marriage was that we got through that first year. We got through it minute by minute. I was really debilitated. I couldn't sleep. I had terrible insomnia and anxiety. I had depression that was part of the anxiety and I could not sleep. I was completely unable to sleep and I was trying to nurse them and I needed help and the thing I needed the most help with was giving up my breast feeding so I could take drugs so I could sleep. My husband was so supportive... In order for me to go see a doctor, we all went together. We had to wrap up the babies in the middle of winter, when they were three weeks old, and go to the hospital and go to the doctor, and say this is kind of a crisis and what are we going to do. Yeah, and he did all that together with me. I've read or heard that parents of multiples have a higher chance of divorcing because it's so challenging and he was amazing.

Jack and his wife experienced a time when they questioned whether their marriage would survive. He feels that sharing parenting is a strong unifying force in their

relationship.

Jack: We love our kids together and we're happy with the way each of us parents, so we feel we're able to share the parenting of these kids we both love together.

Cecily describes how the transition to parenthood was the most stressful time in her marriage, but how being parents is a source of ongoing excitement for her and her husband.

Cecily: I would say that was probably the most stress in our marriage, just because it changes everything. It definitely was a difficult transition. Just learning, again, to share roles and share the stress of a new baby. Again, figuring out what our new roles are as parents, not just a couple. I think we found a good balance that keeps everybody happy, keeps us going. We trade off, share in the parenting duties. I think that's really been key for us, to kind of take the stress off each other sometimes.

J: So, ultimately, it sounds like it's brought you closer, being parents?

Cecily: Absolutely. We've gotten closer just through seeing our daughter grow up and sharing new experiences with her. It's exciting all over again.

Section VI

The Fruits of Their Labors

The subjects in this study described aspects of their marriages that bring them deep satisfaction, such as the companionship of marriage, the experience of growing and changing with an intimate partner, enjoying the life they have built together the secure base that their relationship provides them. These are elements of their relationships that can be seen as both the building blocks of relational resilience and the results of relational

resilience.

Enjoying the Companionship of Marriage

Peter and his wife truly enjoy spending lots of time together.

Peter: We truly enjoy each others' company tremendously so we really look forward to spending time with each other and we carve out as much time as we can with each other. We never, we don't get sick of each other. We're both off for the summer. I think some folks spending that much time together would probably lose their minds. We really don't get tired of seeing each other.

The things that Ginny and her husband love to do together haven't changed during the years of some hard work on their marriage.

Ginny: The time that we spend together and the things that we love to do are still there. Even though we're very different now, we found a way to make it work, because neither of us wanted to quit. We still love sports and we still enjoy doing certain things together. Even riding a bike outside, playing catch, silly things like that that our kids are involved with, but we love to do. Watching movies, going out just for a bagel or something, little things still make us happy. We're both very competitive. So having these kids and playing sports together. Like we played hockey last week, which we both really enjoyed. Even though the kids were involved, we still enjoyed playing against each other.

There are many aspects of her companionship with her husband that are very important to Dianne.

Dianne: The things that make me happiest in my marriage, I am thrilled to have a partner to share my life with and who really is invested and engaged. I love the partnership that we have, even as it's hard. I love raising kids together and thinking about the world together. I love thinking about the broader world together. I love supporting my husband in his endeavors. It's exciting to go through our careers.

together. And we have fun. Even though none of this sounds like fun, we have fun. We have fun with our kids. We have fun playing on vacation. Life is hard and it's nice to both support each other through what's hard and to have fun.

Mary Beth loves having the chance to have conversations with her husband

Mary Beth: I love talking to [my husband]. He's very smart and always fun and stimulating—not always, not when we try to do it over dinner, when it's chaotic with the kids, but when we actually get a chance to talk, have conversation.

Growing and Changing Together

Paul speaks of his appreciation for the ways in which his wife has helped him to grow.

Paul: I think she's helped me grow a lot. Maybe that's why you get wiser as you get older. I think we're learning where we both have our strengths and weaknesses and try to complement those.

Dianne feels that she and her husband have grown significantly from the ways they have influenced each other.

Dianne: I think I've grown deeply from who he is. I feel really appreciative of that. I don't know if he'd say the same, or if he would articulate that, but I think he probably has, too. I have seen him grow through our marriage.

James can appreciate how the struggles that he and his wife have had over the ways in which they are different have helped him grow in important ways.

James. In general, I think it has helped me grow a little bit, learn more about the world. My wife and I are both different in some ways, but I think that's really helpful for both of us to grow in terms of understanding another person's perspective on the world. I think that's gonna help us be better parents, because it

means we're going to be more accepting of however our kids turn out. Ours is not the only way of being in the world. We both learned that about each other. So it will hopefully enable us to respect that about our kids as they start to develop more of their own intellects and personalities. In general, I think it has helped both of us. I think we both appreciate the growth in that process.

Appreciating What They Have Built Together

When Emily watches her daughters with her husband, it reminds her of her own happy relationship with her father when she was growing up. She feels good about having created this for her children.

Emily: I think having the kids and having him love me and love the kids and being an awesome dad, them, they adore him to death and him wanting to do the stuff that we want to do, or the kids want to do—I think it makes me happy. It's like it's working the way it's supposed to, the way I know that it's supposed to. I remember the moments with my dad, when I was a little girl. They do it with him and it just makes your heart smile.

For James, appreciating what he and his wife have together keeps their disagreements in perspective.

James: I feel like sometimes when we're struggling, we can at least look at each other and be like: Things suck right now, I'm really frustrated, I don't want to deal with this, you're really angering me a lot. But you know what? Our life is still good. We've been blessed with the opportunity to have this great house. . I've always dreamed about being a dad, being a father, part of a family... We've been blessed with two phenomenally gorgeous kids that we're just in love with. We're blessed with our health. There's so much. And we share that together.

Marriage as a Secure Base

Margaret describes the happiness she feels knowing that she is loved by her husband.

Margaret: I think just how much he cares about me. He really does. Especially if I'm having a bad day he'll call me or text me. I don't even know how to explain it, it's just knowing and feeling how much he loves me just makes me so happy. I feel it everyday and it really just makes me happy and spending time with him. You know, he makes a real effort to spend as much time with me and the kids as he can and that means a lot.

Gail appreciates that she can trust and depend on her husband.

Gail: And I never really thought I needed someone to take care of me and I was never very, I never trusted very easily. But I do trust my husband to take care of me, and to take care of things and I know if there's a problem, he's the first person I think immediately of calling and that he's just so dependable. I mean my husband is definitely by far my best friend.

Eric feels that his marriage is a refuge.

Eric: It's that same level of security [that I had as a child]. Knowing that empowers you in so many ways when you have that baseline of security. And I think being able to come back to our home, to our refuge, and know that there's someone there who I can open to but also relax with – it's just a welcoming environment, that's valuable.

Like Eric, Ben appreciates the comfort and safety of his marriage.

Ben: The first thing that comes to mind is just the comfort. We're just really good partners together. That's No. 1 for me. We're just at ease with each other and we do a lot together because of what I had said before about how our style of being in relationship is to be very close. So we have that closeness and it's very comforting. We're a good team. After the kids go to bed, just sitting on the couch, watching TV or not, or doing separate things, just feel very comfortable.

J: Would you also maybe call that security?

Ben: Yeah, it's so nice to have a partner in life that you can just be with and trust and talk to and listen to and support and be supported by. Yeah, it's safe, feels safe (long pause). I think we support each other when times are hard, so we look at each other to give each other some hope. For whatever reason—there's tons of reasons to find—to be stressed out about, but I think in any given moment one of us is doing okay. That really helps. I think that's what it is. It's kind of going

through life together. It's definitely not a sexy term, but to me that's the most important thing.

Chapter V

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to add to the knowledge base concerning contemporary marriage. A review of the literature revealed gaps in understanding the role of conflict in marriage and a lack of consensus in empirical studies concerning the most effective interventions in couples therapy. Attitudes towards marriage are changing and alternative ways for adults to build lives together and form family units have gained acceptance. Therefore, the gaps in a knowledge base that would assist clinicians in treating problems in relationships are particularly salient. In an effort to understand at least one aspect of contemporary marriage in the United States, this study examined how heterosexual married individuals perceive breaks in their connection to their spouses, and how couples repair them. The findings offer some ideas of how to understand the role of conflict and the process of repair in modern marriages. In addition, the findings point to relational elements that appear to comprise relational resilience. Relational resilience appears to support the process of repair and develop as the result of repair.

In this chapter, implications for theory, practice and social work education will be discussed. Suggestions will be made for future research and the limitations of the study will be addressed.

Implications for Theory

The findings in this qualitative research study address many of the questions and issues raised in the literature review of this dissertation. As suggested by Fincham, Stanley and Beach (2007), the research in this study focused on the strengths, coping, and meaning-

making in couples. Some of the findings replicated those in previous studies, while others either disputed earlier findings or indicated that some dynamics in marriage are changing. The findings will be discussed as they relate to the following topics covered in the literature review: conflict in marriage, positive relationship elements (relational resilience) and the long-term effects of divorce on children. The theoretical and clinical implications of the dimensions of repair and a non-linear understanding of relational resilience will be discussed. Finally, the fit between the findings and the theoretical frameworks of Attachment Theory, Erikson's theory of healthy adult development and the psychoanalytic concepts of projection and projective identification will be demonstrated.

Conflict

The findings in this study support the idea that conflict is not by definition a destructive force in marriage (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989), but an inevitability that can have positive results. While not every subject in this study reported having a disagreement that was serious enough to cause doubt about the marriage, all subjects reported some conflict, and many reported having times when they questioned or doubted their marriage. In fact, several spoke of questioning the marriage periodically as a way to recommit to the relationship and refocus on its positive aspects. Alan describes the benefits of this process for him.

Alan: "Like I said, not all marriages have a fairy-tale ending. Some of them have bumps along the road. That's why I think it's healthy to constantly question why you got married in the first place, because then you get back to why did you get married".

The interviews in this qualitative study yielded rich data describing the benefits of engaging in and resolving disagreements. Subjects reported learning about themselves, especially clarifying their thoughts and feelings. This self-reflection resulted for some in a consolidation of their adult identity as a spouse and parent. In addition, subjects reported learning about and from their spouses, which increased mutual understanding and respect. Often, as a result of the process of resolving a disagreement, the subjects in this study recalibrated their expectations of marriage in general and their spouse in particular, making it possible to more fully appreciate and accept their partner.

Positive relational elements

The subjects in this study described the following positive relational elements in their marriages: communicating, building trust, developing empathy and understanding, accepting your spouse, being committed, making time for the relationship, showing appreciation, flexible gender roles, maintaining some autonomy, sharing core beliefs, sharing a sense of humor and parenting. These findings support those of Mackey and O'Brien (1995) who identified trust, respect, sensitivity and understanding as being "fundamental to marital stability" (p.34). Fincham and Beach (1999) identified equity, forgiveness and commitment as positive elements in the marriages they studied. Similarly, Weishaus and Field (1998) found the positive elements of shared and separate interests, commitment to the marriage, acceptance, tolerance and respect in the lasting marriages they studied. Among their most satisfied couples they found understanding, affection, love and a non-critical attitude towards each other.

Relational Resilience as a Non-linear Process

The findings of this qualitative study regarding positive relational elements

replicate the findings of earlier studies. It is important to note that these elements, which appear to be components of relational resilience, are not static. They did not all exist at the beginning of the marriages of the subjects in this study, nor remain unchanged as couples worked through difficulties. They were both necessary for repair and grew out of the process of repair.

For example, Gottman and Krokoff (1989) made the point that couples who avoid conflict may be at risk because they fail to develop the confidence that they will be able to negotiate the inevitable difficulties that arise over the course of a life together. Another way to understand this is that through successfully resolving conflict, couples develop a repertoire of behaviors and skills that they can apply whenever a disagreement arises between them. The findings in the present study indicate that this is a non-linear, self-reinforcing process, which goes beyond a set of skills. Through the process of developing these skills, couples cultivate relational resilience, which then supports and facilitates repair.

One example is communication. Once a couple figures out what works to enhance their communication with each other, they can use these strategies whenever hard conversations take place. However, open communication is not possible without trust, and trust cannot be built without open communication. Ben calls this the “chicken and egg problem”.

Ben: I think having trust in each other to be able to really share everything with each other, that's really... Communication is the most important part. And how do you have good communication is, you have to have trust and patience to create a safe place to talk and share. I think part of the Catch-22 is that you can't earn someone's trust unless you first open yourself up to being vulnerable, so it's a chicken and egg problem... You can't have trust unless you're really opening up. And you don't want to open up unless you can trust the other person. So I think it all had to happen at the same time.

Peter speaks to how having trust opens the door for several other factors that build relational resilience and help in resolving differences in his marriages.

Peter: If you can trust, I think we trust each other so much, and we're not threatened by each other saying we're going out, we believe that we have each other's interest at heart and I think that if you can trust that the other person has your best interest at heart, then you can be more tolerant and you can be more patient and more forgiving when things don't go exactly as planned.

Carl, married for 10 years, offered a poignant example of how being able to communicate productively with his wife about a problem their son was having in school led to her being able to reflect on herself, increasing their feeling of connection and his respect for her.

Carl: She wants our kids to be successful and have good friendships and be good listeners. So because we handled that situation differently, there's sort of a gap there—her anxiety and then she feels like I'm not being responsive. She might draw whatever conclusions she might draw. The last time this happened, I thought it was a breakthrough for us in the sense that we were able to talk about differences productively without being better or worse, or blame or anything like that. I'm not quite sure how we got there, but I'm going to try not to make "you" statements, but making "I" statements. Reflect on how do we get to a place where we both feel differently about how this is being handled. I think those things can escalate quickly into real gaps or gulfs between a couple. And she did something which is pretty powerful, which made me feel like she was taking it seriously, which was that she sort of reflected for a moment and was just honest: Geez, I feel this anxiety, I feel anxious about a couple of other things, maybe I ought to go talk to somebody about this anxiety that I feel. Which I felt was a really honest thing for her to say in the sense that I felt she was just being very open, whereas it could be, you know what, maybe[she would have said] the way I'm handling this is just fine.

The above examples reflect Mackey and O'Brien's (1995) finding that for confrontation to be a positive factor in a marriage it needed to be "...grounded in other attributes of relationships, such as mutual trust, respect and understanding" (p.136). In

addition, they found that talking about conflicts and differences resulted in enhanced feelings of connectedness and mutuality over time.

Effects of divorce on future intimate relationships

Findings in this study did not support Wallerstein and Lewis's (2004) conclusions about the effects of divorce on the future intimate relationships of children of divorced parents. They found in their study that when the children of divorced parents reach adulthood they encounter difficulties in establishing lasting committed relationships. Several subjects in the present study had parents who divorced. They expressed a strong desire to have a marriage that was different from their parents' marriages. Their commitment to their relationships and to working on themselves in order to make their marriages work seemed as strong, if not stronger, than among the subjects whose parents remained married.

Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) attributed this difficulty in committed relationships to the fact that their subjects did not have the opportunity to learn how to resolve conflicts and that they lacked an internalized image of how two adults live together in a stable union. Many subjects in the present study reported growing up without the advantage of living with parents who were good at resolving conflict or were positive models of adult intimate relationships for their children. This was true for those whose parents divorced as well as for those whose parents remained together in unhappy marriages. The subjects in this study looked to other adult relationships, mostly the parents of friends, for models of what they wanted for themselves. When they found themselves unable to manage conflict in their own marriages, most of the subjects used individual or couples therapy as a way to develop the skills they lacked.

The findings in this study regarding how the children of divorced parents fare in their adult intimate relationships were consistent with what Gerson (2010) found among her 120 subjects. The vast majority of her subjects wanted to marry, regardless of whether their parents divorced, remained happily married or unhappily married, or never married. They learned from their parents' mistakes, developed an appreciation for a relationship that could work, and, when necessary, found models of working relationships outside of their families of origin.

Flexible gender roles

There were many ways in which the subjects in this study created their marriages according to their own ideas of what a marriage should look like. This appears to be an important component of relational resilience. For several subjects, this involved challenging traditional gender roles.

Hochschild (1989) referred to gender strategies in her analysis of marriages in the 1980's. Gender strategies emerge for men and women from their beliefs about what it means to be a man or a woman. She identified three types of gender strategies: traditional, transitional and egalitarian. She observed that her subjects often felt conflicted about their ideal gender strategy. For example, a man may view himself as egalitarian and want to be involved more at home, but find that he actually felt more invested in work. She saw gender strategies as the basic dynamic of marriage.

According to Thornton and Young-DeMarco (2001), young people were still struggling with the question of gender roles as the 21st century began. While the subjects in their study held gender equality as an ideal they still supported a gendered division of labor in marriage. The majority of subjects in the present study expressed very little

conflict about gender roles. Two subjects found some aspects of being stay at home moms difficult. The men appeared to enter marriage with the expectation that they would share parenting and some household tasks. In the marriages where the wives worked part-time or stayed home full time, the husbands were aware of the strains of being home with young children and made a point of showing appreciation for the work their wives were doing. Some were especially sensitive to what it was like for their wives to be educated and trained for careers and to have put that work on hold to be home with children.

The men valued open communication. Some of them found that it was hard for them to be open with their wives early in their marriages and used individual and couples therapy to become more comfortable expressing themselves. Some of the men had observed the traditional gender roles in their parents' marriages and wanted to be different. They wanted more time with their children and they felt that their mothers had carried an unfair burden of household tasks while their fathers came home from work, ate dinner and watched TV.

Mackey and O'Brien (1995) found that marital roles evolved over the course of lasting marriages. Whereas their subjects may have begun marriage with traditional role definitions, these changed over time. Men in their study entered marriage playing a predominantly instrumental, or task centered, role and became more expressive, or relational, through the experience of parenting. This is in contrast to the men in the present study who appeared to enter marriage with the expectation that they would be both instrumental and relational in their behaviors. More men in this study than women mentioned wanting to have different roles in their marriages than their parents had. The women were more apt to express appreciation for how involved their husbands were at

home and to note that having a marriage where most everything is shared was deeply satisfying. Moreover, they valued their husband's ability to communicate openly.

Gerson (2010) asserted that flexible gender roles are essential to successfully meeting the myriad challenges of modern family life. While Hochschild (1989) observed that the gender strategies among her subjects tended to reproduce gender divisions in two-earner families, Gerson examined how adaptations based on gender flexibility could blur and change gender distinctions. Hochschild stated that adults formulate gender strategies by "unconsciously synthesizing certain cultural ideals with feelings about their past" (1989, p. 16). Mackey and O'Brien (1995) stated that men and women enter marriage with "mental representations of what it is like to be a husband and wife" (p.23). The findings of Gerson and Thornton and Young-Marco (2001) give some indication that, among their subjects, cultural ideals of male and female roles are changing. At the same time, there is a sense that there will need to be some compromise of these ideals.

Among the subjects in the present study, three of the women continued to work full-time after having children. One of them spoke of earning more than her husband, and suspecting that he was uncomfortable about this. Four of the women were full time homemakers, and four worked outside the home part-time. All had at least a college degree, and eight held advanced degrees. In the majority of these families, the husband remained the main breadwinner. At the same time, both spouses placed a high value on the men's relational roles in the families – as fathers and expressive husbands. While, as Gerson (2010) noted, there remain barriers to men and women achieving an ideal of total equity in their marriages, it appears that internalized notions of what it means to be a

husband and a wife are changing.

Attachment Theory

The subjects in this study described three additional positive aspects of their marriages – enjoying the companionship of marriage, growing and changing together and marriage as a secure base. These three positive relational aspects are under the heading “The Fruits of Their Labors” because they appear to be the result of and reward for the hard work of staying connected. The subjects spoke of how much they valued the security of their marriages, of their spouse as their best friend, of feeling safe and supported in their relationships. They felt deep satisfaction from providing safety and security for their children. These feelings appear to illustrate a central tenet of Attachment theory: “... the propensity of human beings to make strong affectional bonds to particular others...” (Bowlby, 1977, p. 201). The subjects in this study were highly motivated to sustain their connections to each other to the extent that they were willing to examine themselves, admit their mistakes and sometimes go into therapy to make the changes necessary to repair breaks in their connections and be a better partner to their spouses. Attachment theory speaks to how difficult it is for individuals to alter their internalized working models of relationship. For many of the subjects in this study, altering their patterns of relating was a necessary component to making their marriages work. Several spoke of the difficulties they had with trust, with expressing their feelings and needs, with giving up the need to be in control. At some point they understood that if that didn’t change, they would lose their relationship.

Marriage and Identity

Erikson (1959, 1980) described adult intimacy and parenthood as developmental achievements. Intimacy and generativity are seen as the hallmarks of healthy adult development, which culminates in integration vs. despair. Several of the subjects were earnest in their desire to be good partners and good parents. It appeared that not only would this benefit and sustain their connection to their spouses, but it was important to their sense of themselves as adults to be successful in these realms.

Attachment, Identity and the Work of Marriage

The subjects in this study are working very hard in their marriages. As individuals they are taking risks by showing their vulnerabilities to each other and by confronting personal issues that cause conflict and distance with their partners. As couples, they are working to resolve conflicts and improve communication while raising children, keeping households running smoothly, going to work, pursuing their individual interests and goals and staying connected to extended family and friends. Their commitment to this work and to each other is formidable. The rewards of the work appear to be the establishment of a secure attachment, the pleasure of companionship, the deep satisfaction that comes from building a life together and the attainment of key developmental milestones of adulthood.

Projection and Projective Identification

Mackey and O'Brien (1995) and Weishaus and Field (1998) observed that in the lasting marriages they studied there was a high degree of congruence in the spouses' perceptions of each other. Mackey and O'Brien raised the question of whether this was an important factor in the longevity of the marriages they studied. What this does mean is

that the spouses see each other relatively clearly and there is a minimum of distortion due to projection or projective identification. Another common positive factor across lasting and satisfying marriages is empathy – possible only when one can perceive one’s partner from a differentiated perspective (Abrams, 2009).

All of the subjects in this study appear to have the ability and motivation to self-reflect. All of them responded to disagreements and breaks in their connection by, in part, looking inward. It is possible that without the willingness or capacity to self reflect, these subjects would not have been able to repair the breaks in their connection to their spouses. They would have been unable to take accountability, develop empathy and understanding or know what they need and feel. For these “healthy” couples, these psychoanalytic concepts appear to be less relevant than they would be for couples who tend to externalize rather than to look inward.

Implications for Practice

The most frequently presented problem in psychotherapy is distress in an intimate relationship (Johnson & Lebow, 2000). Of the 22 subjects in this qualitative study, 8 had been in couples therapy and 6 had been in individual therapy. Those in individual therapy used it as a way to work on issues that were having an impact on their marriages. In other words, more than half of the subjects in this study looked to therapy for help in their relationships. They entered therapy when they felt their relationships were on the line, which underscores the urgency to refine interventions for couples in distress.

Assessment and Treatment Goals

The four dimensions of repair identified in this study, along with the positive relational factors, or relational resilience factors, could be used as assessment tools when

treating couples or individuals with distress in their intimate relationships. The four dimensions of repair are: coming to agreement, compromise, agreeing to disagree and living with conflict that remains unresolved. The first three were characterized by a feeling of resolution, while the fourth carried with it a sense of resignation and a possible weakening of the marriage.

This suggests that when assessing relationship issues that an individual or a couple brings into therapy, it might be useful to ask them how they resolve differences with their partners. If their dominant strategy is to live with unresolved differences, then the clinician will want to explore what protective factors exist in the relationship, based on the relational resilience factors identified in this study. In this way, the clinician will have a sense of the relative fragility of the relationship. In addition, clinicians may want to attempt to move couples from living with unresolved differences to one of the other dimensions of repair. Since living with unresolved differences appears to include avoiding talking about the problem, working on building trust and more open communication might be one goal of the treatment. As Emily stated about the unresolved issue in her marriage, “[our relationship is] definitely more fragile in some areas... But I just try to move forward with it. You can’t live in the past.”

The relational resilience factors can stand by themselves as an assessment tool and can be grounding for a clinician facing a couple or an individual in the midst of a relationship crisis. A goal of treatment might be to build or reinforce elements of relational resilience in the couple. Relational resilience factors in this study were identified as: being committed, making time for the relationship, showing appreciation,

respecting and appreciating, having flexible gender roles, maintaining some autonomy, sharing core beliefs, sharing a sense of humor and parenting.

Grief Work

The findings of this study indicate that, while there are aspects of the work of repair that must be done by the couple, subjects confronted their individual issues as part of resolving differences in their marriages. There are four categories identified in this research that demand of the individual a letting go of idealized images about marriage, their partner and sometimes themselves: becoming realistic about marriage, accepting that marriage is a lot of work, accepting differences between themselves and their partners and accepting your spouse for who they are. These four areas represent a “collision of expectations with reality” (Mackey, 2010, personal communication) and are experienced as losses. As Margaret said, “I mean I thought we were perfect”. Dianne stated, “I went through multiple stages of grief, like anger, denial, feeling like ‘Who’s my partner?’” And so I came to a point of acceptance, Okay, this is my partner and there are certain things I can expect and certain things I can’t”.

Therapists are frequently challenged by such questions as, “What is love?” and “Is it *really* possible to stay in love with someone for your whole life?”. The findings of this study offer a conceptualization of working relationships that can be useful for patients who have no frame of reference for imagining what a satisfying relationship might look like. Perhaps the key word is “working”. The findings of this study help conceptualize the *work* of marriage and illustrate that the work is ongoing and self-reinforcing. These are powerful psycho-educational tools for therapists to use when helping patients transition from Margaret’s position of “I mean I thought we were

perfect” to the acceptance that Dianne describes when she stated “there are certain things I can expect and certain things I can’t”.

Interventions

Pinsoff and Wynne (2000) found that therapists are becoming increasingly eclectic and integrative in their practice. This has been in response to the failure of any particular modality in treating the majority of patients and to the increasing diversity in the US of families and family structures. The trend towards integrative practice fits well with the findings of this study. The findings indicate that each marriage is complex and constantly evolving and that conflict can only be understood contextually.

Psychodynamic interventions might be the most effective in facilitating grief work by helping patients to understand what it means for them to have experienced disappointment with their partners and with their expectations of marriage. As in Dianne’s situation, these feelings need to be made conscious so that the grieving can occur, opening up the possibility of acceptance. Other couples in this study reported great benefit from learning basic communication techniques, CBT interventions and psycho-education.

Fincham, Stanley and Beach (2007) suggested that the marriage researcher focus on the strengths, coping, and meaning making in couples. Clinicians should share this focus. The emphasis in couples treatment should be to ascertain where the couple is in the fluid process of repair/ resilience building and customize interventions accordingly.

When considering the clinical implications of the findings in this research study, it is important to note that these couples are “healthy” couples who identify as married

individuals who are satisfied with their relationships. . With one exception, the scores on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale were consistent with the subjects' self-reports of marital satisfaction. The work they have done in their relationships, as mentioned above, is possible because they have the ability to self reflect and they do a minimum of externalizing and projecting. When working with couples who are locked into patterns of projective identification, the work of the therapist is more difficult and the outcome of therapy less predictable. However, with the framework provided by the dimensions of repair and the elements of relational resilience, the therapist may be able gain some traction in at least assessing whether the marriage does indeed have some signs of resilience. Working from a strengths perspective, the therapist can then work with the couple to reinforce those aspects of their relationship that provide some satisfaction. It is important to remember that relational resilience is not static. Elements of relational resilience both make repair possible and result from repair. This gives the therapist a place to start.

Implications for clinical social work education

Viewing the person-in-situation is a core tenet of clinical social work practice (Simpson, Williams & Segall, 2007). Clinical social work theory and practice have historically emphasized context and process. "It is not a series of techniques performed on an objectified client" (p. 4). In addition, one of the fundamental goals of clinical social work interventions has been the promotion of wellness, strength and resiliency. It would seem, therefore, that the findings of this study would fit well in the social work curriculum.

The theoretical contributions of this study could be incorporated into the human behavior sequences of an MSW curriculum while the clinical implications could enhance the practice sequence. Social workers are no strangers to flexible, integrative approaches to understanding and responding to the problems of individuals and families.

Future research

A myriad of questions remain to be asked and answered regarding adult intimate relationships, especially in today's changing social landscape. However the questions in this study appear to tap into some essential elements in modern marriages. A larger subject pool made up of individuals from different racial, ethnic and socio-economic groups and individuals in same sex committed relationships would yield findings with greater generalizability. Of particular interest in including same sex couples would be to explore the effect, if any, of gender roles in those relationships. The relationship between congruence of perception between spouses and marital satisfaction is another area of interest that deserves future research.

At times the researcher yearned for research colleagues to engage in discourse about the meaning of the findings and their applicability to theory and practice. This research would surely benefit from diversity not only among the subjects, but among researchers analyzing, interpreting and applying the findings.

Limitations

“The findings from a qualitative study are not thought of as facts that are applicable to the population at large, but rather as descriptions, notions, or theories applicable within a specified setting” (Malterud, 2001). The limitations of qualitative research are its strengths. The purpose of this qualitative research study was not to

produce findings that could be broadly applied. Its purpose was to begin to understand a process in some depth.

While the sample of this study was small and homogeneous, some of the findings replicate the findings in other research. This indicates the possibility of some transferability. Several core categories emerged from the data analysis that describe with rich detail the phenomena being studied within the limited context of this small, homogeneous sample. These categories fit the theoretical framework of the study.

However, the findings cannot be generalized to same sex married individuals, minority individuals, individuals in older marriages, individuals in second marriages, or individuals in marriages without children. In addition, the individuals in this study self-identified as being satisfied with their relationships. The findings cannot be generalized to individuals who describe their marriages as unhappy or troubled.

The researcher is an experienced psychotherapist who endeavored to maintain the boundary between the role of therapist and the role of researcher when interviewing subjects. It is possible that those boundaries were at times blurred, which may have affected the findings. In addition, the researcher recruited eighteen of the twenty-two subjects through friends and family members, which may have made it more difficult for subjects to discuss sensitive topics. The researcher had no prior relationship to any of the subjects.

Appendix I

Consent Form

Introduction and Purpose of Interview:

I am a doctoral candidate in the DSW program at the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Policy and Practice. This interview will be part of my research for my doctoral dissertation. Please ask any questions that you have about participating in this project at any time. I want you to have the information you need to make a decision that is best for you.

What is involved?

The interview will last about an hour to an hour and a half. I will make an audio recording of the interview and may take written notes.

I will be asking you questions about your marriage. The questions will cover such areas as whether or not marriage has turned out like you expected it would, whether your relationship to your spouse has changed over the years and how you and your spouse resolve disagreements. At the beginning of the interview I will ask you to fill out a brief background survey that will take about 5 minutes. It is possible that we might forget to cover something important during this interview. In case that happens, I will also ask if I can have permission to call you in the next two weeks to see if there is more you want to add, or in case I have any questions. When I call, depending on how much you have to say, it is possible that I will ask your permission to have a second interview.

Confidentiality:

The information you share will be kept confidential. I will not share information about whether or not you participate in this project with anyone.

Anything with your name on it, such as signed consent forms, and any other documents that could be used to identify you, will be kept in a locked file cabinet, separate from your interview recording and transcripts of those recordings. I am the only person who will be able to listen to the recordings. I will transcribe the entire interview myself, verbatim, into software on my computer. Once it is entered into my software, there will be no record of your name. I will then erase the recording.

Benefits of participating:

Although being interviewed will not help you directly, your answers will be part of a research study that may prove helpful to other couples, marital therapists, and other researchers. You may also find it interesting to share your own story.

Risks of participating:

There are no known risks of participating. If answering some of the questions makes you uncomfortable, please let me know. We can stop the interview for a few moments, or you can decide to stop participating entirely. Should you continue to feel upset in the next few days, please be in touch with me and I will provide some suggestions about resources for talking about your concerns.

Compensation:

If you decide to participate you will receive a \$5.00 gift card from Starbucks as a token of my appreciation for your participation upon completion of the interview. I will also cover any parking expenses if you chose to come to my Center City, Philadelphia office to be interviewed.

If you have questions about the project, please feel free to contact me:

Jane Abrams, L.C.S.W.

The Wellington

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215-564-5188

Your participation is completely voluntary:

You do not have to participate in this project. There will be no negative consequences if you decide not to participate. No one will know whether you participate or not. If you don't participate, it will not affect your job or anything else.

If you do decide to be interviewed today, you can stop the interview at any time. You can also refuse to answer any questions that you don't want to answer.

By signing this consent form, I am indicating that I have had all of my questions about this project answered to my satisfaction and that I have been given a copy of this consent form.

Participant signature: _____

Participant printed name: _____

Date: _____

Interviewer signature: _____

Interviewer printed name: _____

Date: _____

Appendix II

Interview Guide

- I. Orientation to the Interview
 - A. Go over consent form and have subject sign it.
 - B. Have subject fill out brief background survey.
 - C. Answer any remaining questions about the interview.
- II. Background of Marriage (and warm-up)
 - A. How long have you been married?
 - B. Do you have any children? How old are they?
 - C. How did you and your spouse meet?
 - D. How long did you know each other before you were married?
 1. How would describe the time in your relationship when you were just getting to know each other, before you were engaged?
 2. How did you become engaged?
 - E. Did anything change between you and your spouse once you became engaged?
 1. If so, what was different?
 - F. What was your wedding like? Honeymoon?
 - G. Did anything change between you and your spouse once you were married?
 1. If so, what was different?
- III. Current Marital Situation
 - A. Now that you have been married for X years, would you say that your married life is what you expected it to be at this point in time?

1. What is different from what you expected it to be?
2. What is as you expected it to be?

IV. Marital Conflict

A. Tell me about the kinds of serious disagreements you have.

1. Do you disagree over many things, or just a few things?
2. About how often do you disagree?
3. What's it like for you when you and your spouse are in the middle of a disagreement?
4. How do you solve your disagreements?
5. What has been most useful to you and your spouse in resolving your disagreements?
6. Does having disagreements with your spouse change the way you feel about him/her or about yourself? About being married?

B. Has a disagreement or problem between you and your spouse ever felt so serious that you worried that you would not be able to resolve it?

1. If so, can you describe the situation?
 - a. What was the nature of the disagreement?
 - b. Were you worried about your marriage?
 - c. What was it like to feel like you and your spouse might not get through this difficulty?
 - d. What made you want to work things out?
 - e. How did the two of you resolve the conflict - did you get advice from friends, family, clergy? Did you get professional help?
 - f. What do you think was most useful to you in resolving the conflict?
 - g. Has the experience of having a serious disagreement or conflict affected your relationship? If so, how?

- h. Has it affected your feelings about your spouse? About yourself? If so, how?
- i. Do you think that you and your spouse have different ways of solving serious disagreements now than when you were first married?

V. On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the happiest, how would you rate your level of happiness in your marriage?

A. What things make you happiest in your marriage?

VI. Transition/Feedback

A. What was it like for you to talk about your marriage with me?

B. Are there important things that you would like to tell me about your marriage that I didn't ask?

C. Do you have anything to say about marriage that you think might be helpful to other couples?

Appendix III

Demographic Characteristics of Study Subjects

Alan: Alan, age 35, has been married 9 years and has two children. He holds a bachelors degree and is employed full-time.

Ben: Ben, age 35, has been married 10 years and has two children. He holds an advanced degree and is employed full-time.

Carl: Carl, age 39, has been married 8 years and has three children. He holds an advanced degree and is employed full-time.

Cecily: Cecily, age 33, has been married 8 years and has one child. She holds an advanced degree and is employed full-time.

Dianne: Dianne, age 36, has been married 7 years and has two children. She holds an advanced degree and is employed full-time.

Emily: Emily, age 35, has been married 9 years and has two children. She holds a bachelors degree and is a full time homemaker.

Eric: Eric, age 34, has been married 8 years and has one child. He holds a bachelors degree and is employed full-time.

Gail: Gail, age 36, has been married for 9 years and has one child. She holds a bachelors degree and is employed part-time.

Ginny: Ginny, age 32, has been married for 8 years and has two children. She holds a bachelors degree and is a full time homemaker.

Jack: Jack, age 49, has been married 8 years and has two children. He holds an advanced degree and is employed full-time.

James: James, age 36, has been married 7 years and has two children. He holds an advanced degree and is employed full-time.

Judith: Judith, age 44, has been married 10 years and has two children. She holds an advanced degree and is employed part-time.

Joanne: Joanne, age 35, has been married for 9 years and has 2 children. She holds an advanced degree and is employed full-time.

Leslie: Leslie, age 38, has been married 8 years and has two children. She holds an advanced degree and is a full-time homemaker.

Margaret: Margaret, age 31 has been married for 8 years and has two children. She holds a bachelors degree and is a full time homemaker.

Mary Beth: Mary Beth, age 36, has been married for 9 years and has 2 children. She holds an advanced degree and is employed part-time.

Paul: Paul, age 31, has been married 8 years and has two children. He has a bachelors degree and is employed full-time.

Peter: Peter, age 36, has been married for 9 years and has 2 children. He holds an advanced degree and is employed full-time.

Robert: Robert, age 36, has been married for 9 years and has 2 children. He holds an advanced degree and is employed full-time.

Sam: Sam, age 36, has been married for 9 years and has one child. He holds an advanced degree and is employed full-time.

Sarah: Sarah, age 39, has been married 8 years and has three children. She holds an advanced degree and is employed part-time.

Sharon: Sharon, age 43, has been married 8 years and has two children. She holds an advanced degree and is a full time homemaker.

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