"WE'RE JUST FAMILY": AFRICAN AMERICAN STEPFAMILIES' PERSPECTIVES

ON STEPFAMILY LIFE AND THE IMPACT OF INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family to those who are with me and to those who have transitioned, to my mentors, to my dissertation committee, to my clients-past, present and future and to the individuals who participated in this research study. Thank you for your prayers and support, your words of encouragement, for your time and for your vulnerability, all of which have made this research study possible. I hope that my findings help to validate your experiences and provide meaning.

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ABSTRACT

"WE'RE JUST FAMILY": AFRICAN AMERICAN STEPFAMILIES' PERSPECTIVES ON STEPFAMILY LIFE AND THE IMPACT OF INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

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Today, nearly forty percent of Americans are a part of a stepfamily. With a divorce rate at nearly fifty percent for couples in their first marriage and the increasing rate of cohabitation among couples with children, stepfamily structures are more prevalent than ever. Stepfamily couples are under significant stress. With a divorce rate of nearly sixty percent, stepfamily couples are tasked with addressing the stepfamily integration process, parenting and step-parenting concerns, children's wellbeing, and relationship with former partners and financial support to nonresidential children while simultaneously developing and maintaining a marital bond. African American stepfamily couples in particular experience unique challenges that are specific to their experience in the United States.

This dissertation explores the unique challenges and strengths of African American stepfamily couples. Twenty-one semi-structured interviews were conducted using qualitative methods and interpretative phenomenological analysis. The results of this study found that African American stepfamily couples feel stigmatized by their family structure, are less likely to identify with the term stepfamily, generally feel positive about their status as a stepfamily, and they believe that racial and society pressures have an impact on the prevalence and success of African American stepfamilies. This study expands upon literature on stepfamilies by providing specific insight into the familial experience of African American stepfamily couples through the lens of attachment theory and intergenerational trauma, and explores the impact of racial and societal factors. These insights could enable clinicians to better support African American adults within stepfamilies. While several important themes emerged from this qualitative study, additional research is needed to explore the marital bond of stepfamily couples and how they build and maintain their marital relationship and connection.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

Today, nearly forty percent of Americans are a part of a stepfamily (Parker, 2011). With divorce rate at or near fifty percent for couples in their first marriage and the increasing rate of cohabitation among couples with children, stepfamilies structures are more prevalent than ever (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Additionally, half of all marriages are remarriages (Browning & Artlet, 2012), with a significant portion of those leading to the creation of stepfamilies (Visher & Visher, 2003, Alder-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Dupuis, 2007; Browning and Artlet, 2014). With the rise of non-marital births and increased rates of cohabitation, the parameters of what constitutes a stepfamily have expanded (Ganong &Coleman, 2017; Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013; Schramm & Adler-Baeder, 2012; Browning & Artlet, 2012) and researchers are exploring contributing factors to the success or failure of these stepfamilies. Ganong and Coleman (2017) argue that there are many structural typologies of stepfamilies. One factor identified as an essential component to the development of a lasting stepfamily marriage or intimate relationship is marital or intimate partner bonding (Dupuis, 2007; Gold, 2016; Bryant, Wickrama, Bolland, Byrant, Cutrona & Stanikm, 2010). With the stepfamily divorce rate being 60% (10% higher than couples in their first marriage), the marital bond not only benefits the couple, but also the children, ultimately strengthening the stepfamily as a whole and increasing its odds for success (Kim, 2010; Gold, 2016; Bryant et al., 2016).

Stepfamily couples are not exempt from the challenges of first marriages. In fact, stepfamily couples face even greater challenges than couples in their first marriage. Stepfamily couples are forced to negotiate the challenges associated with first marriages in addition to challenges of creating and maintaining a stepfamily. McGoldrick and Carter (2011) suggest that couples in their first marriage are charged with resolving economic issues, communication and

intimacy/bonding, partnership and equity, couple relationship boundaries in relation to others, sexual intimacy, managing household responsibilities, and negotiating leisure/family time versus couple time. Stepfamily couples are tasked with the same relational challenges while simultaneously addressing the stepfamily integration process, parenting and step-parenting concerns, children's wellbeing, and relationship with former partners and financial support to nonresidential children (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Kim 2010; Martin-Uzii & Duval-Tsioles, 2013). In the midst of this, there is limited energy and time left for the development and nurturing of the stepfamily couple relationship or martial bond (Gold, 2016; Martin-Uzzi and Duval-Tsioles, 2013), which can result in marital dissatisfaction and ultimately divorce. In fact, stepfamily couples report greater marital dissatisfaction and marital conflict compared to couples in traditional marriages (Dupuis, 2007; Kim, 2010; Schramm & Adler-Baeder, 2012; Mirechi, Elliot & Schneider, 2013; Alder-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; McCarthy & Ginsberg, 2007). Much of stepfamily research is focused on stepparent/stepchild relationships and children within stepfamilies. Research is limited regarding the ways in which stepfamily couples cultivate their marital and intimate relationship in the midst stepfamily integration (Gold, 2016; Ferrer, 2012; Cartwright, 2010). Stepfamily functioning and stepfamily couples functioning are meticulously linked (Kim, 2010); however, researchers have failed to give marital bonding and stepfamily couples sufficient attention.

Stepfamily structures and challenges exist across cultural and racial demographics. However, it is difficult to truly assess the specific statistics of stepfamilies specifically African American stepfamilies due to how census questioners are constructed (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). African American stepfamilies face unique challenges that impart their familial dynamic and potentially their longevity as a couple. In general, African American couples report higher

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rates of marital dissatisfaction and marital conflict compared to other racial groups (Bulanda & Brown, 2007). When exploring African American couples and stepfamily dynamics in particular, there is a lack of intragroup research on the specific factors that lead to their high rates of divorce and marital dissatisfaction (Bryant et al., 2016; Fine, McKenry, Donnelly & Voydanoff, 1992; Phillips, Wilmoth & Marks, 2012), although it has been suggested that social and economic challenges as a result of systemic racism play an important factor (Boyd-Franklin, 2006; Bulanda & Brown, 2007). Even with high rates of divorce, African Americans with children, from previous relationships, still possess a desire to form loving and supportive relationships (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995; Pinderhughes, 2002), not only for themselves, but for their children as well (Cartwright, 2010). Additionally, African American couples are having more non-marital births and are cohabitating at a greater rate than any other racial group (Bulanda & Brown, 2007; Dixon, 2009; MacDonald & DeMaris, 1995; Boyd- Franklin, 2006; Cherlin, 1998). Research suggests that couples who are cohabitating should also be included in the definition of stepfamilies (Browing, & Artelt, 2012); especially for African American couples who are less likely to marry, more likely to divorce, and less likely to remarry (Raley, Sweeney, Wondra, 2016; Pinderhughes, 2002; Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995).

This research study will specifically focus on African American stepfamily couples who are married and one or both partners has a child from a previous relationship. For the reasons aforementioned, African American stepfamily couples are particularly at high risk for relationship dissolution. It is probable that with the additional stress of stepfamily dynamics, African American stepfamily couples are at even greater risk of divorce and negative impact on partners and the children within the stepfamily.

Purpose of Study

This research study will explore the specific challenges that African American stepfamily couples identify and how they navigate those challenges. The preservation of African American families is essential to the health and the stability of the African American community and society at large. Kelly and Floyd (2006), Dixon (2009), Phillip et al., (2012) and Lataillad (2006) indicate that marriage promotes positive health outcomes for African Americans, specifically, increased physical, emotion, and mental health compared to non-married African Americans. Due to the rise in African American stepfamilies, it is important that clinicians and therapists focus on strengthening the marital bond among African American stepfamily couples as well as an awareness of their unique stressors. The objective of this qualitative research study is to identify the unique challenges and coping strategies among of African American stepfamily couples in order to assist clinicians in formulating effective therapeutic interventions.

Research Questions

What do African American stepfamily couples identify as barriers to creating a marital bond? How do they navigate those challenges in order to create and maintain a marital or intimate partner bond? Do they identify any of these barriers as being unique to African American step-families?

Theoretical Framework

Adult intimate relationships, committed or marital, are often viewed through the lens of attachment theory; specifically the role of internal working models on relationship outcomes. Attachment theory provides a unique insight into the interpersonal and societal challenges experienced by African American couples within stepfamilies. Mary Ainsworth (1979) and John

Bowlby (1979) theorize that attachment is constructed on the idea that early attachment experiences of an infant with its caregiver influences, or in other words becomes a prototype for the attachment style of an infant's future intimate relationships. Bowlby (1979) postulates that the caregiver is tasked with appropriately responding to the infant's basics needs, desires for affection and providing an environment that is safe and secure. Furthermore, Winncott describes this space of safety and security as a holding environment which allows the infant to have it's needs met (Applegate, 1997). The infant-caregiver attachment experience can impact the infant's social, emotional and cognitive development and disruptions or traumatic experiences can have negative and lasting consequences (McLeod, 2009). During these early experiences with primary caregivers, the developing child forms internal working models of attachment, which the child and later the adult carries with them as they form future relationships. The internal working models become mental representations of the relational experiences with primary caregivers (Bowlby, 1979). They also provide expectations or "a set of rules" for how a person will react and respond in intimate relationships (Creasey, 2002, p. 365). There are four types of attachment styles: secure, insecure, anxious, avoidant and anxious-avoidant.

More importantly, when these early attachments and internal working models are coupled with traumatic experiences, the expectations and beliefs about adult intimate relationships are significantly impacted. Trauma theory posits that the impact of trauma "results in a fundamental reorganization of the way mind and body manage perceptions "…[and trauma] changes not only how we think and what we think about, but also our very capacity to think" (Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 21). African American couples and the African American community as whole, carry the legacy of the trauma endured during American chattel slavery. Due to the transmission of intergenerational trauma or traumatic experiences and maladaptive patterns of behavior that are

passed down through generations (DeGruy, 2005), Black families and Black marriages have been adversely impacted. Researchers Bowers and Yehuda (2016) define the transmission of intergenerational trauma and stress as the "effect in offspring as a result of parental exposures and characteristics that is more specific than the generally observed link between parental problems and offspring outcomes" (p.333). The effects are not only manifested behaviorally, but genetically.   It is my hypothesis that the deleterious effects of American slavery are twofold: one, systemic and institutional racism upholds the ethos of slavery and continues to be perpetuated through oppression and violence. The systemic oppression through various channels fosters African Americans' mistrust of American society; and two, the repercussions of the transmission of intergenerational trauma jeopardizes the longevity of African American marriages. In fact, the negative impact is felt in every African American relationship. Van der Kolk (2014) states that "trauma, whether it is the result of something done to you…almost always makes it difficult to engage in intimate relationship" (p. 13). In this dissertation I intend to illuminate how attachment theory and complex trauma theory provide insight into the interpersonal challenges experienced by African Americans couples within stepfamilies. I intend to contextualize how Attachment Theory creates a theoretical context for understanding the challenges experienced by the contemporary Black couples are direct result of American society's inability to be attuned to the needs of African Americans.

It is unorthodox to use attachment theory to contextualize the relationship between a community and the society in which a community lives. However, using attachment theory as one of the organizing theoretical framework helps to conceptualize and to explain the challenges experienced within the African American community. Systems theory is typically used to examine stepfamilies (Dupuis, 2010; Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013), however, this paper

will discuss in detail how internal working models developed during African American's early attachment or experiences in the United States and through intergenerational trauma on a community level have impacted African Americans stepfamily couples. When considering the interpersonal experience and familial dynamics of African American stepfamily couples, attachment theory, complex trauma and intergenerational trauma provide a unique lens with which to better understand their particular stressors or challenges, sources of resiliency and couple bonding process. It is also imperative to understand what African American stepfamily couples perceive as challenges and how they manage and negotiate those challenges.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

<u>History of Marriage in America</u>

What we define as family in the United States has evolved. While the idea of an American family to some is an intact nuclear family that comprised of a heterosexual married couple with 2.5 children, in reality, the image of what constitutes a family has changed. Many Americans still cling to the picture of the intact nuclear family. However, families today consist of single parents, cohabitating parents, same sex parents who have biological children, stepchildren and/or adopted children who are related and others who are not. The family structure is more expansive, flexible and fluid. From family of origin to chosen family, people have redefined what family is and who is included in their familial circle (Cherlin, 2010).

To truly understand family in the United States is it important to understand the origins of marriage in American society. Marriage as an institution has two narratives in American history. One, as a contractual, legal institution to create social order, political responsibility and stability for children, (Cott, 2000) and two, as a unrestricted, personal choice between two people who

love each other and desire to be a publically recognized union. During American colonization, Christian marriage, which implied monogamy, was used as a mirror to reflect the relationship and sense of duty and responsibly men had for their new country. Married men were seen as moral and their marital status afforded them certain rights and privileges protected by Constitutional law. Women on the other hand, were not given these same rights and privileges. Marriage for women provided protection, but only through their husband's proxy. "A wife could not use legal avenues such as suits or contracts, own assets or execute legal documents without her husband's collaboration" (Cott, 2000, p. 11). Additionally, the institution of marriage was restricted from specific groups such as enslaved Africans and African Americans who could not legally marry each other and who, in 1840 were legally restricted from marrying whites despite the sexual relationships and children slave owners had with enslaved women (Cott, 2000).

Cott (2000) illustrates how the private relationship of marriage is actually dictated by the public or the larger society when pointing out that for marriage to be legally recognized it must be witnessed by the public and finalized by the state. During the establishment of the American colonies, a married man had the contractual obligation to provide for his wife and children. Women in turn, were required to serve. Ultimately, the law and the public dictated the duties and responsibilities of men and women.

In the early 19th century, divorce was legalized and remarriage was socially acceptable. Divorces were granted if husbands or wives proved that their partner had dishonored or violated their contractual matrimonial agreement. For example, if a husband moved to another state, a wife could request a divorce, or if a husband accused his wife of not abiding by her wifely duties, he could also request and be granted a divorce. The state's purpose for granting divorces was to protect the image of marriage, especially when marriage and government were so closely linked.

Marriage, similar to the government, provided and required order and service. Local communities supported divorce and remarriage largely to ensure that families, specifically women and children, were supported and financially stable so that they would not be burdened with taking care of those who may end up abandoned (Cott, 2000).

Cott (2000) makes the argument that the laws that governed marriage were analogous to the laws that established and upheld slavery. Similar to enslaved Africans and African Americans, women were denied rights unless they were married to a man. Women had few civil rights, making them dependent on their fathers or husbands. Initially, slavery was justified by the assumption that enslaved Africans were docile and child-like. They needed their owner's guidance, discipline and protection. In many ways, "proslavery ideologues called it their Christian duty" to dominate and perpetuate insubordination of enslaved Africans and African Americans (pp. 59-60). In order to maintain social hierarchy, it was important to link the institutions of slavery and marriage; paralleling the wife/husband relationship to the slave/owner relationship helped to solidify women's roles within marriage, her duty to serve. It is important to note however that although Cott (2000) makes these parallels between slavery and marriage as an institution, she also emphasizes the distinct difference between the two, marriage being voluntary and based on consent, while slavery was not.

Through the years, the purpose and value of marriage to individuals and the larger community has expanded. In the 20th and 21st centuries, the institution of marriage is highly valued by most Americans and it is viewed by many as a status that many individual aspire to achieve (Tucker, Mitchell- Kernan, 1995; Pinderhugher, 2002). Despite its popularity and attractiveness as a status, marriage rates have declined for both White and Black men and women since the 1970's (Dixon, 2007). More significantly, African Americans have experienced

dramatic declines in marriage and higher rates of divorce compared to White Americans and other minority groups. In 1970, only 43% of Black males and 46% of Black females were unmarried compared to 51% and 64% respectively in 1980 (Dixon, 2007). These numbers are even more significant when compared to the 32% of White men and 37% of White females who were unmarried in 1970. The disparity continued to grow as shown in 2000 statistics, when 57% of Black men and 64% of Black females reported being unmarried compared to only 40% of White men and 43% of White females. That same year, 66% of African Americans reported having never been married, divorced, separated or widowed (Dixon, 2009). One major contributing factor to the low rates of Black marriages was the mass incarceration of Black men in the 1970's through 2000 (Dixon, 2009). In the 1970's an estimated 330,000 Americans were incarcerated and by the year 2001 nearly two million Americans were in prisons. With over half of the incarcerated population consisting of African American men (Justice Policy Institute, 2000), African American women had fewer marriageable partners. The crack-cocaine epidemic in the 1980's and early 1990's also consumed the lives of many African American men and women. Notwithstanding, researchers such as Stack (1983), DeGruy (2005) and Dixon (2007) established that the African American community was resilient and thriving during this time even in the face of low marriage rates and high divorce rates. African Americans as a community have shown themselves to be resilient. Prominent examples in history are the victories in American South during the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, the rise of middle class African Americans in the 1980s and 1990's, and the election of the Barak Obama, the first African American President. Additionally, the Black Lives Matter Movement, which has been in response to police officers' use of excessive force towards African Americans particularly African American men, is also a contemporary example of Black activism. All of

these examples indicate a strong sense of community, presence of Black leadership within the African American community, a sense of agency, empowerment, hope and dreams brought to fruition. The crux of these moments in history is that the concept of family was always central in the lives African American. Despite systemic efforts to dismantle (Coates, 2017; Dixon, 2007; DeGruy, 2005; Boyd-Franklin, 2006; Willis, 1990) and then to pathologize (Moynihan, 1965) the Black family, African Americans have maintained and created family despite structural and society barriers.

There are a myriad of factors that have contributed to the overall decline in marriage rates among men and women and across racial and ethnic groups. Dixon (2007) suggests that the sexual revolution and the feminist movement in the 1960's gave young adults permission to forgo marriage and to explore their sexuality. Sex outside of marriage was no longer taboo, creating less incentive for marriages, especially as access to birth control became more widespread (Dixon, 2007). The feminist movement also allowed for women to have greater access to higher paying jobs and the opportunity to achieve financial stability without marriage. Due to career and economic opportunities, African American and White women were more likely to divorce if in unfulfilling marriages, and they now had the opportunity to marry a new partner with the hope of a more satisfying relationship. In addition to increased societal acceptance toward divorce, women having children outside of marriage are also experiencing less social shaming. In fact, as marriage rates have declined, birth rates continue to remain consistent (Dixon, 2007); however, in 2013, the Center for Disease Control reported that birth rates decreased for women under the age of 30 and increased for women over the age of 30. Nonetheless, as these individuals with children marry, remarry or even cohabitate, we now begin to explore the stepfamily.

Stepfamilies in the United States

In the 1960's and 1970's researchers became interested in the stepfamily life. Bossard and Polasky (1955) explored the emotional challenges experienced by stepchildren and Nadler (1978) examined major challenges experienced by stepparents. There was a significant increase in scholarly research regarding remarriage and stepfamily structure in the last two decades of the 20th century. The focus of this research however was primarily on the transition and adjustment of biological children post-divorce and the role of the stepparent-stepchild relationship as contributing factors to high rates of divorce of stepfamily couples. Limited research was conducted on the marital relationship itself, or the importance of marital bonding among stepfamily couples. In addition, research failed to address the intimate relationship of divorced individuals who decided to cohabitate with new partners rather than remarry (Cherlin, 2010).

Stepfamilies are becoming the normative family structure (Visher & Visher, 1994; Visher, Visher, & Pasley, 1997; Visher & Visher, 2003, Gold, 2016). With 40% to 50% of all marriages being remarriages (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Martin & Duval-Tsioles, 2013) and based on Dupuis (2007) 70% of those couples having children, stepfamilies and stepfamily couples are coming together more frequently than not. Stepfamilies consist of family systems where one or both partners have previously been married and have children from a previous relationship, and can be categorized as simple or complex. Simple stepfamilies are those where one partner has a child or children from a previous relationship and a complex stepfamily when both partners have children from previous relationships (Falk & Larson, 2007; Browing, & Artelt, 2012). However, Ganong & Coleman (2017) assert there are variations of stepfamily structure from simple where only one partner has children from a previous relationship to complex where both partners have children from previous relationships. The focus of this

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dissertation is to explore the experience of African American stepfamily couples who are in their first marriage and have a child or children from a previous intimate relationship.

Much of stepfamily research emphasizes the stepparent-stepchild relationship as integral to stepfamily functioning; however, researchers highlight the need to focus on the marital dyad due to the strong link between couple functioning and stepfamily functioning (Kheshgi-Genovese & Genovese, 1997; Dupuis, 2007; Carwright, 2010; Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013; Cartwright, 2010; Olsen, 2014; Gold, 2016). Stepfamily couples' ability to strengthen their marital bond is imperative. Not only does it safeguard the couple against the 60% divorce rate (Dupuis, 2007), but there are positive implications for the entire stepfamily (Kim, 2010; Olsen, 2014). A remarried couple's feelings and attitudes about their relationship and their ability to have a mutually supportive couple relationship is intricately connected to a stepfamily's ability to effectively integrate and it is linked to the marriage's longevity (Alder-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Dupuis, 2007; Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles; 2013; Pasely et al., 2004). Kim (2010) suggests that remarried couples who are unable to have a "stable and satisfying marital life as well as deal with spousal conflict directly contributes to the aggressiveness, behavioral disorders, delinquency, emotional maladjustment, and so on in their children" (p. 193).

Stressors on Stepfamilies

Gold (2016) and McGoldrick and Carter (2011) suggest that couples in their first marriage are charged with resolving economic issues, negotiating communication, creating intimacy, developing partnership, establishing couple relationship boundaries in relation to others, ensuring sexual intimacy, managing household responsibilities, and negotiating personal

time versus couple time. As mentioned above, the relational challenges impacting stepfamily couples are compounded making it not surprising that the rate of separation for stepfamily couples is higher than for those in normative or first time marriages (Slattery, Bruce, Halford & Nicholson, 2011; Dupuis, 2007). Remarried couples often underestimate the stress and conflict that occurs when integrating a stepfamily, which results in the 60% divorce rate among stepfamilies couple (Kim, 2019; Gold, 2016; Bryant et al., 2016). This integration process, specifically related to the stepparent-stepchild relationship, takes time and has implications for how the stepfamily and couple will function and the remarried couple's perceived marital satisfaction. If the above issues are not thoughtfully negotiated and managed, they may in turn decrease marital satisfaction and increase marital conflict (Kim, 2010; Gold, 2016).

Dupuis (2007) critically examines the literature on issues affecting stepfamily couples and the therapeutic implications. The findings suggest that stepfamily or remarried couples are at a disadvantage due unresolved emotional baggage from their previous relationship which can be an factor in being unable to establish a safe haven within their stepfamily i.e. develop a couple bond and stepparent-stepchild conflict. Emotional baggage can manifest itself in a variety of ways. When an intimate relationship or a marriage ends in separation or divorce, there is often a sense of loss, failure, and disappointment because of the inability to sustain a lasting marriage or relationship (Dupuis, 2007). Biological parents can often project beliefs and attitudes about their previous partner onto their new partner and their new marriage. These projections can be negative or positive. For example, the divorced partner might expect their new partner to negotiate conflict in a similar manner or naively perceive their new partner as perfect because they are the antithesis of their former partner. However, whether conscious or not, they can cause

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a strain on the new relationship by placing unrealistic expectations on the new partner as well as the success of the marriage.

Dupuis (2007), Stokes and Wampler (2002) recommend that an emotional divorce must take place in addition to a legal divorce. Partners are emotionally divorced when they are able to have a neutral working relationship with each other. For example, divorced or former partners who have a neutral working relationship are able to co-parent and co-exist in spaces without having intense emotional reactions to their partner or involving their past marital or relational conflict. Other researchers support the idea that the relationship with former spouses should be neutral since highly emotional involvement, positive or negative, impacts the development of the marital relationship and their level of intimacy (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Dupuis, 2007). When individuals fail to emotionally divorce their former partner, they are unable to invest emotionally into their new partner and marital relationship (Stokes & Wampler, 2002). Signs of this may include jealousy or feeling highly emotional toward a former partner or using that former partner as a confidant. Unfortunately, emotional neutrality is difficult when former partners are unamicable. It is challenging to be neutral towards a former partner when you distrust their ability to parent or manage the finances, especially if these were issues surrounding the demise of the relationships. Dupuis (2007) suggest that clinicians or psychotherapists can be instrumental in assisting and gauging a client's emotional neutrality towards their former partner. A clinician can assess the degree of emotion that is expressed about the client's partner and the frequency the client compared the old partner to the new partner. Social work clinicians can be influential in helping ex-partners resolve emotional wounds or unmet expectations from their previous relationship. Social work clinicians can also assist former couples or co-parenting couples to create a business-like relationship where their children are the priority.

As mentioned above, researchers have suggested that the stepparent-child relationship is important to the success of the stepfamily couple (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Kim, 2010.) Stepparent role ambiguity can also threaten the stepparent-stepchildren relationship because both stepparent and stepchild are unsure of the stepparent's role or function with the family system (Adler-Baeder-Higginbotham, 2004; Bryant, Futris, Hicks, Lee, & Oshri, 2016; Kim, 2010). It is important that the role of the stepparent is defined, discussed between the stepfamily couple and then presented to the children. It is important that the stepparent is not a replacement for the biological or resident parent, but a supportive adult figure (Dupuis, Adler-Baeder & Hinngbotham, 2004). Martin-Uzzi and Duval-Tsioles (2013), and Slattery et al. (2011) indicate that children in stepfamilies have loyalty ties with their parent who is no longer in the home, which can also impede the stepparent-stepchild relationship. These researchers suggest that it can take two to five years for a stepfamily to adjust or truly integrate. It is important for social workers and therapist to encourage clients who are a part of stepfamily not to rush the family integration process or rush the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship.

Courtship and Stepfamily Couples

Interestingly, Cartwright (2010) conducted an exploratory study looking at topics stepfamily couples discussed during the courtship, which is a period during the relationship that couples begin to discuss important issues and develop intimate connections. The study focused on stepfamily couples in New Zealand who identified as European, Pacific Islander and Maori, New Zealand's indigenous population. Cartwright (2010) examined the reasons why stepfamily couples decided to recouple and the expectations of stepfamily couples prior to marrying or cohabitating. More specifically, the study assessed if their present realities matched their expectations about stepfamily life.

Findings showed that most of the couples decided to recouple because they desired to have a supportive and loving relationship and hoped that their children would benefit from the exposure of a loving and supportive relationship (Cartwright, 2010; Gold, 2016). Gold (2016) and Long and Young (2007) indicated five reasons why couples remarry: companionship, partnership, sexual relationship, financial stability and to lessen the burden of being single parent. However, the research indicated that these individuals had minimal communication with their children about their decision to marry or cohabitate. Stepfamily couples with more prolonged courtships had more extensive conversations with their children about their decision to marry or cohabitate. The findings also suggested that most stepfamily couples were aware of the challenges associated with being a part of a stepfamily, but avoided conversations about the impact being in a stepfamily would have on their marital relationship. They also had minimal to no communication about the parent and stepparent role expectations.

Stepparents also expressed concern about the impact their partner's conflictual relationship with their ex-partner would have on their current intimate relationship (Cartwright, 2010). As previous studies have mentioned (Kim, 2010; Alder-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Dupuis, 2007; Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles; 2013; Pasely et al., 2004) couple functioning and stepfamily function are intertwined. This study reveals important information about stepfamily couples' courtship. More specifically, it reveals that despite couples' desires to have a loving and supportive relationships, ironically, they do not take the appropriate steps to protect their relationship from the challenges of stepfamily life. Cartwright (2010) surmised that stepfamily couples in this study avoided talking about important issues because they want to protect their new relationship from conflict. This suggests that the lack of communication could be indicative of a lack of awareness or knowledge about stepfamily functioning and roles. In fact, out of 98

responses, only six percent of stepfamily couples reported talking about their relationship as a couple during the process of deciding to marry or cohabite. The generalizability of this study to American stepfamilies is limited; however, it does suggest the need for further research regarding stepfamily couples' attention to their intimate relationship and awareness of the stressors involved in establishing a stepfamily. This area of focus is imperative due to the high rate of divorce among stepfamily couples. It important to highlight this study was conducted in New Zealand and not in the United States. However, Cartwright (2010) highlights potential universal themes for stepfamily couples in the United States.

Marital Bonding Stressors and Solutions

Bryant et al. (2016) found a significant correlation between African American stepfathers' mental health and their marital quality and interactions. The objective of the study was to examine the effects of the stepfather-stepchild relationship on stepfathers' depressive symptoms. The researchers also examined marital quality and marital interactions among African American stepfather families since the literature indicated that marital quality was highly associated with stepparents' adjustment to the new role as a stepparent and overall better mental health and marriage outcomes (Kim, 2010; Shapiro, 2014). Marital quality was measured using five indicators and in the study, "Marital quality is conceptualized as reflecting commitment, trust, passionate and friendship-based love, and happiness. Examining marital commitment during stressful times underscores behavioral patterns that contributed to the success or failure of marital relationships" (Bryant et al., 2016, p.377). Bryant et al. (2016) "proposes that marital quality and positive marital interactions will mediate the association between stepfather - stepchild relationship quality and stepfather depressive symptoms" (p.377). However, after conducting 149 interviews with African American stepfathers who were recruited from the

marriage license application field of a larger study, it was found that there was no association between stepfather-stepchild relationship quality and depressive symptoms. In fact, the study revealed that positive marital interaction was associated with fewer depressive symptoms and there was an association between marital quality and stepfather-stepchild relationship quality.

Ultimately, authors found that there should be an emphasis on the marital relationship within stepfamily couples, specifically African American stepfamilies. The authors suggest that stepfather couples who put an emphasis on the martial relationship and positive couple interaction or couple bonding, for example through shared time together and shared activities as a couple were more equipped to navigate the challenges associated with stepfamily dynamics. Subsequently, it is not surprising that findings support what the literature has established as a correlation between a positive stepparent-stepchildren relationship and marital quality. Furthermore, it was noted that attention to the marital relationship during early marriage was critical since stepfamilies are more vulnerable during this time. Research supports that a strong marital relationship is essential in terms of determining the quality of step-parent-stepchild relationship quality (Kim, 2010; Gold, 2016; Bryant et al., 2016). Researchers have also indicated that divorce is most likely to occur during the first two years of stepfamily life (Saint-Jacques, Robitaille, Godbout, Parent, Drapeau & Gagne, 2011) therefore, it is even more imperative that stepfamily couples focus on the development of their marital relationship. Bryant et al. (2016) agrees that additional research is needed regarding marital bonding for stepfamily couples, especially in relations to African American stepfather families.

In a Canadian, qualitative study by Saint-Jacques et al. (2011), 57 adults from established (n=31) and separated or divorced (n=27) stepfamilies were interviewed to determine the factors that enable stepfamily couples to stay together (5 years ≤) and which factors contributed to the

demise of their relationships . Couples were identified has having three types of approaches toward their stepfamily dynamics: problem solving, emotion oriented and avoidant orientated and their stepfamily challenges were rated as light, moderate and high. Similar to other researcher, Saint-Jacques et al. (2011) found challenges to be inherent to stepfamily life. Both stepfamily couples who stayed together and those who separated encountered challenges related to "parenting issues, relationship difficulties between the two adults or between a stepparent and child, and ambiguous parent or stepparent roles" (p. 552).

Consequently, the success of the stepfamily was dependent on the couples' approach to addressing stepfamily challenges and "the intensity of the strategies put in place to cope with the difficulties" (p. 552). Couples or the participants rated their level of concern regarding a particular issue, such as a stepson's behavior, as *light, moderate or high,* and then they identified the type of approach or intervention (*problem solving-high, emotion-oriented and avoidance-oriented*) they used to address the issue. Participants that rated an issue as a *high level* of difficulty; and used a high level of intensity to solve the problem, meaning they used more than one approach to resolve their concern were a part of an intact or established stepfamily. The majority of the participants who separated and no longer were a part of a stepfamily couple, and identified a problem as high level of difficulty, implemented a *low intensity* response such as avoidant-oriented behaviors (walking away, ignoring a problem) and did not try alternative solutions to remedy their concerns, their relationships ended in divorce or the couple separated.

Similar to other researchers' emphasis on the couple relationship, this qualitative study highlighted that an assertive approach to addressing stepfamily challenges along with a willingness to resolve a concern in strongly link to the success of the stepfamily and the stepfamily couple. Additionally, a stepfamily couples' ability to even identify a concern, create a

plan to address the concern directly, as well as possess the commitment to resolve the concern by implementing alternative approaches, is only possible if the couple bond is strong. A strong couple relationship is influential in effectively addressing difficult issues. In the study, couples who felt loved, connected and supported by their partners identified these characteristics as buffers to the challenges they experienced (Saint-Jacques et al., 2011). Ultimately, couples' intimate connection empowers them work together as a team. Couples with these qualities then feel confident in their ability to work in unison to address their concerns.

Effective communication skills were also cited as a prominent factor for stepfamily stability. Saint-Jacque et al. (2011) suggested that during the early years of the stepfamily, if at least one partner had good communication skills, it aided the couples' ability to effectively navigate stepfamily challenges. Even more significant, poor communication skills were labeled as "detrimental to the relationship" (p. 555). Couples who avoided conflict or used aggressive or negative language to address difficult situations, "it appeared to amplify, conflict, couple dissatisfaction, and stepfamily inability" (p. 555). One participant in the study underlined this point by explaining, that if their communication was better, they would still be together. Similar to Cartwright (2010), this study was not conducted in the United States. However, the findings suggest universal themes for stepfamilies.

Other factors, such as cohabitating too quickly, the couple being in different life stages, negative cognitions about relationships, and conflicting beliefs and values also impacted stepfamily stability. Conversely, stepfamily couples identified personal characteristics such as respect, maturity, being nonjudgmental, and sharing similar values and beliefs as solidifying the foundation of the couple relationship. Ultimately, the results from this study found that there was not one single factor that contributes to the stability of a stepfamily (Saint-Jacques et al., 2011).

This study is significant because it explores the intragroup dynamics of stepfamilies. Research focused on comparing stepfamilies to nuclear families can be limiting because it only identifies the differences between the two family structures. Information regarding how stepfamily couples develop intimate connections in the midst a complex family system or how they navigate challenges is lost. It is well established that stepfamilies experience more challenges, but Saint-Jacques et al. (2011) were able to illuminate the interpersonal dynamics and the "interactions of factors" that contribute to the success or failure of stepfamily couples (p.557). Even though Saint-Jacques et al. (2011) established that a strong couple or marital relationship and personal characteristics like maturity, good communication skills, and the ability to compromise were essential to stepfamilies' stability, the study failed to explore how stepfamily couples developed a strong couple bond. Other studies such as Falke and Larson (2007) suggest when stepfamily couples have satisfying and fulfilling relationships, they are better able to negotiate stepfamily challenges. Examining the specific skills and behaviors stepfamily couples use to strengthen their relationship is linked to their ability to navigate the expected challenges of stepfamily life. Therefore, the skills and behaviors to recreate and maintain a couple's bond within stepfamily couple are essential.

Marital Bonding Stressors & Solutions

Despite the inherent trails of stepfamily life, research identifies explicit solutions for a successful stepfamily, several of which have been previously stated. In addition to having an emotionally neutral or non-reactive relation to one's former partner (Dupuis, 2007; Stokes & Wampler, 2002) and having a strong marital bond (Dupis, 2007; Slattery et al., 2011) as well as addressing stepfamily concerns directly and relentlessly, (Saint-Jacque et al., 2011) Schrodt, 2011) found that positive communication is instrumental in the success of a stepfamily,

specifically when navigating the coparenting relationship. Schrodt (2011) suggested that communication positively impacts quality of the couple relationship. Communication in a simple or complex stepfamily system is important in stepfamily functioning. However, positive and productive communication can be difficult when ex-partners or spouses still harbor feelings of mistrust or betrayal. Effective communication between ex-partners or nonresidential parents and new stepparents can initially be difficult due to the "awkwardness and tension associated with having had a common relational partner" (p. 984). Schrodt (2011) investigated the effects of coparenting communication between stepparents, both residential and nonresidential, on relationship satisfaction. Residential parents are parents whose child's primary residence is with that parent. In other words, the child spends more than fifty percent of their time a parent's residence. Conversely, a non-residential parent is a parent whose child's primary residence is with the other parent. Schrodt (2011) hypothesized that stepparents who supported the nonresidential parents by using supportive and non-antagonistic communication would positively affect their coparenting relationship satisfaction. Schrodt's (2011) study collected through non-probability sampling at a Midwest and Southwest university. The sample consisted of 40 residential stepparents and 40 nonresidential parents. The majority of the sample (N=80) was Caucasian and included 25 stepfathers and 15 stepmothers who were remarried, the effects were even greater when the nonresidential parent used positive communication (i.e. supportive and non-antagonistic) toward the stepparent. Schrodt (2011) discussed the importance of positive communication between nonresidential parents and stepparents because it mitigated feelings of stress, fear, and ambivalence they both may experience as they (re)negotiate their new (parental) roles with residential parents and children" (p.998). When nonresidential parents felt affirmed,

their fears of being replaced by the stepparent were also decreased and their coparenting relationship satisfaction was increased.

Even though Schrodt (2011) is able to prove a direct relationship between positive communication and satisfaction in coparenting relationship between the residential and non-residential parents, the study does not explore the process or the experience each parent had in transitioning to more positive and affirming communication with the stepparent or residential parent. This aspect is important because it would provide insight into the cognitive and emotional process that initiated the change in behavior. For example, it would be beneficial for therapists, social workers and even stepfamily couples to understand the emotional and/or cognitive process residential and non-residential parents' and stepparents embraced in order to forget the past so that they could focus coparenting. More importantly, how were participants able to ignore negative behaviors or negative communication and focus on co-parenting? Or, how were they able to transition from a place of mistrust to trust or from insecurity and fear to confidence and feeling self-assured when communicating with their former partner? Researchers (Dupuis, 2007; Stokes & Wampler, 2002) suggest emotional baggage is a major barrier to stepfamily integration and functioning. Having an internal perspective into their transition process would have beneficial. Additionally, it is unlikely that the results of the study are generalizable to non-white stepfamilies. The participants were 80% Caucasian and the demographics for the remaining 20% were not identified. This lack of data suggests that it is imperative to explore the specific experience of American stepfamily couples.

Lack of Societal Norms for Stepfamilies

Dupuis (2007) challenges the notion that the stepparent-stepchild relationship is the measure of health for the stepfamily couple (Kim, 2010; Visher & Visher, 1994; Pasely et al., 1993). Dupuis (2007) asserts the fragility of stepfamilies is exacerbated by the "lack of societal norms and institutional supports for stepfamilies" (p. 99). Society does not have social norms for stepfamilies (Ganang & Colman, 2017; Ganong & Colemna, 1997). In fact, media perpetuates the idea of evil stepparents, especially evil stepmothers (Christian, 2005). Stepmothers are approximately 15% of the stepfamily population and stepfathers account for 85% of the stepfamily populations (Gold, 2016). Despite the prevalence of stepfamilies, society fails to institutionalize stepfamilies as a normative family structure with expected challenges, successes and benefits. In turn, society used media to depict stepfamilies as challenging, and indirectly a family structure to avoid. This is most commonly communicated by society's emphasis on the success of first time marriage.

In addition to clarifying the stepparent's role, it is important for couples within stepfamilies to create a safe haven within their stepfamily, so that they can bond. Dupuis (2007) suggests that competition for attention and time can occur between the stepparent and the stepchildren creating a slowly developing tension between the stepparent and children. As mentioned, remarried couples, when at least one member of the couple has a child from a previous relationship, start their marital relationship with the duties and responsibilities of raising children, which can result in minimal time for emotional and physical intimacy or ability to establish a safe haven within the stepfamily. Hence, Dupuis (2007) emphasizes the importance of marital bonding for couples in stepfamilies. It is suggested that couples designate time for each subsystem. For example, it is essential that the biological parent and child have established

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quality time together just as it is equally important for the couple to create dedicated time together as a couple. If the emotional needs of the stepfamily's subsystems are met, the family has a whole will function better. As mentioned, the couple's functioning in tightly linked to the stepfamily functioning. Dupuis (2007) and other researchers such as Visher and Visher (2003) advocate for increased societal norms and institutional supports, so that stepfamily dynamics are normalized, allowing for increased acceptance and understanding that the challenges are universal and potentially temporary. For examples, media programing for children could incorporate scenarios that depict alternative or stepfamily structure and challenges. Schools, hospitals and other institutions could adopt language that is more inclusive, so that stepfamily or even extended family members feel welcomed.

Effects of Institutional Racism on African American Marriage

As mentioned above, stepfamily couples encounter a myriad of challenges and they are at an even greater risk for divorce. African Americans couples are at similar risk with the divorce rate among Black couples in their first marriage hovering at 70% (Raley & Bumpass, 2003; Kim, 2012) which in part has been explained as the result of racism in the U.S. This dissertation will focus on the experience of African American stepfamilies and explore if they experience greater stress and risk of divorce due to racism in the U.S.

In order to truly understand how institutional racism has impacted African American marriages, it is important to explore the fundamental experience of African Americans in this country. *"Slavery, more than any other single factor or event, shaped the mentality of modern day African Americans."* (Clark, 1972, p. 139). "Slavery should be viewed as the starting point for understanding the African American psyche…" (Akbar, 1984, p.8). The residual effects of

slavery have impacted the institution of marriage within the African American community, the role of African American men in the family, the interpersonal relationships between African American men and women contributing to a systemic instability within African American marriages (Dixon, 2007; Boyd-Franklin, 2006; DeGruy, 2005; Taylor, 1990; Willis, 1990).

The structure of life on slave plantations was organized around the abuse of power, creating conflict and division between enslaved Africans; these conflicts ranged from denial of the right to protect their family members to being denied the right to marry. Enslaved African Americans lived environments that created interpersonal conflict between men and women that some researchers claim is evident today (Willis, 1990; DeGruy, 2005; Dixon, 2007).

The West African slave trade, also known as the *Maafa*, a Kiswahili word meaning "great disaster" (DeGruy, 2005; Boyd-Franklin, 2006) was described by Kambon (1998) as the African holocaust which lasted over 400 hundred years. The enslavement of Africans and African Americans in the United States persisted for over 240 years, while the Transatlantic Slave Trade separated and slaughtered millions of Africans before they reached their final destination in North America (DeGruy, 2005). The living conditions on the slave ships were such that many of the enslaved threw themselves overboard in fear of what was to come after the voyage. Of those who survived the voyage, most were severely emotionally and psychologically traumatized.

Slave owners destined for the United States appeared to be keenly aware of the culture of community that existed among African tribes as well as the strength they derived from being a part of a collective society. Historically, African cultures were based on community or tribal connections that provided additional emotional and economic support to the nuclear family system. Moreover, Nobles (in press, cited in Boyd-Franklin, 2006) emphasizes that Africans had

a collectivistic culture in which the tribe "transcended the concerns of the individual, the nuclear family or even the extended family" (p. 20), and this is still present within the African American community today (Boyd-Franklin, 2006). However, the African collectivistic philosophy was in many ways the antithesis of the individualistic ideology of the United States.

Systemic Family Deconstruction of Enslaved Africans

Slave owners were keenly aware of the strong family connections held by African slaves. Upon the arrival of slave ships to North America, families were systematically separated at slave auctions. Care was taken to prevent an intact slave family from being sold to the same slave owner. Men, woman, and children were sold to various slave owners. After his or her initial auction, "A slave stood a 30 percent chance of being sold again in his or her life time. Twenty-five percent of interstate [slave] trades destroyed a first marriage and half of them destroyed a nuclear family" (Coates, 2017, p.183). Slave owners acting upon their knowledge of the strong familial bonds and connections of the enslaved Africans established the first step in deconstruction of these familial bonds.

Upon arrival onto the plantations, enslaved Africans were strictly prohibited from speaking their native languages and practicing their religion and customs were strictly prohibited. Men who were accustomed to protecting and providing for their families were abruptly unable to do so (Dixon, 2007; Willis, 1990). They were beaten and referred to as "boys", while forced to refer to the slave owners as master resulting in diminution of their sense of manhood, dignity and self-worth. These tactics served to maintain control, create division (Willis, 1990), and ultimately deconstruct Black male hood.

Like men in the Euro-American culture, men within the African culture were dominating figures within their family systems and larger tribal communities. They were the providers, protectors, and hunters. As enslaved men, they were unable to embody the roles that defined their manhood (Dixon, 2007). The dismantling process, along with other divisive acts, caused self-hatred, insecurity, mistrust and lack of self-respect within enslaved African-Americans, both consciously and unconsciously (Willis, 1990).

Another manifestation of the deconstruction process is that married and unmarried slave owners had the freedom to have sex with their enslaved men and women and the freedom to sexually abuse their enslaved children. Slave owners used physical and sexual abuse, not only to dominate and control enslaved Africans. They used physical abuse to enhance labor to produce more goods and they used the sexual abuse for breeding of a future workforce.

A particularly egregious manifestation of familial deconstruction tactics was when female slaves were sexually assaulted by their slave masters in the presence of the female slave's spouse. This was done to emphasize powerlessness of enslaved men to protect their women and to demonstrate the slave owner's total control over the slave (Dixon, 2007; DeGruy, 2005; Boyd-Franklin, 2006; Willis, 1990). These systematic acts of abuse and trauma caused psychological and emotional chasms between enslaved men and women, emasculated men and engendered a sense of betrayal between enslaved men and women. Cott (2000) suggests that these violations of the bodies and minds of enslaved men and women not only undermined the institution of marriage but the entire Black family system. Dixon (2007) and Willis (1990) propose that enslaved men were helpless and powerless in their ability to protect their loved ones for fear of death. They knew if they attempted to physically protect their loved ones from the slave owner's physical or sexual abuse, they would be killed. Concurrently, enslaved men also felt anger

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toward and betrayal by their female counterparts who did not resist the slave owner's sexual advances.

Enslaved women experienced a similar conundrum. Out of fear for their own lives, these female slaves did not resist their slave owner's advances thus, reinforcing this sense of betrayal felt by their male counterparts. The women, however, experienced their own sense of betrayal. Despite knowing it would place their male counterparts' lives in jeopardy, the women felt resentful that they were not being protected (Dixon, 2007). The profound ambivalence created by these dichotomous experiences created a foundation of interpersonal mistrust and breaks in attachment between enslaved African men and women. This break in attachment or the creation of an anxious or insecure attachment is conscious and unconsciously transmitted through societal messaging and intergenerationally. Willis (1990) states that:

> This phenomenon alone had a devastating effect upon the relationship between the male and female which lasted to modern times. The female had not felt that she could rely on her man to protect her, and the male had felt that his woman, in part, conspired with the white man to undo him. These kinds of issues have led the woman to question the man's "manhood." Though all were aware of the powerlessness, it still affected the psyches of those involved, generating a great deal of mistrust between males and females (p.141).

Viewing this male-female dynamic as the epicenter of enslaved African men and women's experience of intimate relationships in the United States, lays the foundation for an insecure or event anxious attachment to exist between African American men and women.

To compound the familial deconstruction process, when children were born into slavery, it was routine practice to only list the name of the enslaved mother and the slave owner on the birth certificate. Such institutional practices were further attempts to emasculate enslaved African American men and to invalidate their biological, emotional, and even social existence as father figures and as spouses in the African American family (DeGruy, 2005; Dixon, 2007;

Pinderhughes, 1999; Stevenson, 1995). Patterson (1998) suggests that this was an "ethnocidal assault of [African American] gender roles, especially those of father and husband, leaving deep scars in relations between Afro-American men and women" (p.25). Dixon (2007) posits that these pernicious acts were also intended to reverse gender roles and parenting practices among enslaved men and women. Since these acts were purposely committed in the presence of one another, enslaved women would not look to men for protection or view them as providers. Slave owners would attempt to elevate the woman's position within the family system by doing things such as appointing them to be the distributor of goods. Women learned to teach their children to be submissive, but specifically to teach their sons to be docile in order to protect their bodies. As mentioned, enslaved men and women shared more of an egalitarian relationship since they worked alongside one another in the fields; however, the psychological and emotional shifts caused by the systematic violations and assaults were detrimental to their interpersonal relationships.

Slave owners also used other enslaved African Americans to foster discord within the slave community. Slave owners would "promote" several slaves to oversee or keep other slaves under control. The overseers would adopt the behaviors, language, and attitudes of the slave owner. Freire (1970) suggests that oppressed groups often embrace the oppressive acts of their oppressor when given the opportunity. Overseers were caught in a conundrum not totally dissimilar from that of the male slave who was forced to watch his wife sexually assaulted by the "master". The overseers could not refuse to execute their new duties due to fear of severe consequences. They had no reasonable choice but to be a strong handed authority figure to the friends and family they worked alongside in the fields the prior day.

Discord within the slave community was augmented when slave masters rewarded the overseers' harsh treatment of their friends and family members. The overseers and their families received "favorable" treatment that was intentionally visible to other slaves, engendering tension, physical separation, emotional separation, and mistrust. It is possible that this tactic was used to redirect anger away from the slave owner and toward other slaves in order to perpetuate the culture of division and to undermine any remnant of community amongst the slaves. Moreover, this dynamic forced enslaved African Americans to contend with their feelings and/or beliefs regarding trust of self and trust in their community (Dixon, 2007; DeGruy, 2005).

Much of slave owners' efforts were to break down the power, influence and relevance of the males within their families and the slave community. In turn, the slave owner becomes the prototype for a father figure within slave communities. DeGruy (2005) suggests that the descendants of slavery still embody the psychological trauma of slavery. Rodriguez (2015) illustrates how epigenetic research on descendants of Holocaust survivors shows they have greater emotional and physical health concerns due to trauma their parents and grandparents endured, thus suggesting it is inevitable that present descendants of enslaved African Americans continue to struggle with the systematic traumas of their ancestors.

Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome & African Americans

DeGruy (2005) proposes that Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) encapsulates the deleterious effects that American chattel slavery had on enslaved Africans and their African American descendants. She likens PTSS to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a diagnosis created in 1980 to understand the debilitating symptoms experienced by war veterans. DeGruy (2005) contends that due to the trauma experienced by enslaved Africans over multiple generations and also in part due to the impact of intergenerational trauma, African Americans

today also suffer from PTSS. PTSS contextualizes the condition of the African American community. It helps to explain behaviors, relationship patterns and even the state of mental and physical health among African Americans today and how those tendencies are linked to American slavery (Dixon, 2007; DeGruy 2005). Behaviors such as a parent minimizing a child's attributes to deter a slave owner from selling their child for profit were adaptive, necessary for survival and a desperate attempt to keep one's family intact on a plantation during slavery. Unfortunately, this behavior is maladaptive today and it continues to be pervasive within the African American community (DeGruy, 2005). An inability to relish in a child's aptitude prevents a parent's privilege to publically take pride in their child's accomplishments and their own parental successes. It also prevents the opportunity to build their child's self-esteem. Even with an awareness of maladaptive behaviors and African Americans' knowledge of their connection to traumatic events such as slavery, institutional racism and racialized socialization experiences like the one previously mentioned compounds past traumas and perpetuate new traumatic experiences.

Another illustration of how PTSS impacts African Americans is evident in their parenting styles, which mimic the parenting behaviors of enslaved Africans, with a clear example being that African American parents often teach their children to be submissive or passive in the presence of White people. In the past, this passivity was essential for survival in the antebellum South and Post Reconstruction. This same parenting message of submissiveness can appear maladaptive in today's society. It can be interpreted as low self-esteem because it creates missed opportunities for self-advocacy. However, there is caveat. It is imperative for African American children, especially African American boys and men, to follow strict obedience in the presence of police officers due to the historical and ever present threat of police brutality and fatal

shootings of African American men and women (Dixon, 2005). Ultimately, the messages are mixed. For instance, African American men are inundated with messages of hyper-masculinity similar to White American men; however, African American men are then penalized for adopting the behavior or characterizes of masculinity and they are labeled as an "angry Black man." African Americans are mandated to navigate the covert and overt social norms of American society, many of which are counterproductive and detrimental to the African American community. All of this is in play while African Americans are trying to create and nurture satisfying intimate relationships.

PTTS is also evident in African Americans' familial structures and interpersonal relationships. As previously mentioned, slavery bred a sense of fear of familial separation and a fear of death among enslaved African and African Americans (Coates, 2017; Dixon, 2007; DeGruy, 2005). Post slavery, the fear was internalized, and psychologically, some African Americans began to embody the fragility of familial and intimate relationships by not fully investing in the family or relationship or starting new families, since so many families where killed, separated or sold during slavery. It is possible the high rates of divorce and the decreased likelihood for marriage among African American ((Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995; Pinderhughes, 2002) is partly due to the internalized fear of familial separation or the demise of a family member. A fear, that one's family and one's self could be killed at any time. A fear that was prevalent during slavery, during Jim Crow and today, where African Americans are more likely to be killed by police officers. Conversely, Coates (2017) begs the notion that many African Americans internalized those same feelings and clung to their families for the same reasons.

As a community, African Americans families have higher rates of single parent households, grandparents raising grandchildren, the highest rate of divorce, the lowest rate of marriage and one of the highest rates of children born outside of marriage compared to other racial groups in the United States (Dixon, 2007). I submit that these statics are the result of African Americans struggling to adapt in a society and an environment which are designed for their destruction.

Attachment & Intimate Bonding among African American Men and Women

Carrere, Buehlman, Gottman, Coan & Ruckstuhl (2000) define couple bonding as a high fondness, expansiveness, and "we-ness" or a sense of being a couple rather than being "I" , which are essential components to a couple's relationship. The presence of these factors or the lack there- of can predict couple longevity (Carrere et al, 2000; Slattery, Bruce, Halford, & Nickolson, 2011). Moreover, research further suggests that couple bond factors and previously identified stepfamily issues such as stepparent-stepchild relationship, are critical to the success of couples within stepfamilies (Slattery et al., 2011). Men, women, fathers and mothers are the epicenter of strength, stability, security, love and safety within a family system. Without these two essential pillars, it can be challenging for African American families and communities to thrive and flourish. When African American men and women form partnerships, is it imperative that they have a sense of safety and security to create emotionally intimate relationships. However, the feeling of safety and security is fleeting when African Americans exist in a society that does not guarantee safety of their bodies or the security of their finances or aspirations. Gottman and Silver (2015), and Gottman and DeClair (2002) believe relationships that are grounded in friendship, trust, enduring selfless and affectionate love and commitment are beneficial to longevity and satisfaction in an intimate relationship. This type of bonding can be a

reparative experience for African American men and women from the historical and societal

trauma, and subsequently reparative and healing for their children, and ultimately the African

American community as a whole.

Education, communication and time are fundamental to creating this type of bond, which

can be elusive, even for the most emotionally and psychologically mature person. Intimate

partner bonding is beneficial to all African American couples. It is a continuous process. Ideally,

a couple is able to establish a foundation or have a period of time they are able to bond before

having children. It can be challenging to develop a secure intimate or couple bond when one or

both partners have children (Slattery et al, 2011) since a significant amount of a parent's

attention is focused on their children, especially when the child is young.

Due to low rates of marriage, but sustained birth rates within the African American

community, African American couples are more likely to be a part of stepfamilies compared to

other racial groups. Research on couple bonding for stepfamily couple is limited (Slattery et al.,

2011) and research is especially scarce regarding African American stepfamily couple bonding

(Bryant et al, 2016). More importantly, why is research on this topic so scant? It is possible that

the term stepfamily is not as widely used or applicable to African American families because of

the negative connotation of the title "stepfamily," stepmother" and "stepfather" (Ganong &

Coleman, 2017). It is also possible that due to the strong kinship ties that are ever present within

the African American community (Dixon, 2007; Boyd-Franklin, 2006; DeGruy, 2005) being a

part of a stepfamily is not view as maladaptive, but in the range of normative among African

American families . Furthermore, literature (Slattery et al, 2011; Gold; 2016) suggests that due to

the fragility caused by slavery and institutional racism coupled with African American families'

tendency to adopt and care for children within and outside of their bloodline, African Africans

are more likely to use the term "family or children" to depict their stepfamily, stepparent or stepchildren. Therefore, this dissertation will also explore the experience of African American stepfamily couples through the lens of attachment and complex trauma.

<u>Insecure Community Attachment and Complex Trauma</u>

When slavery ended in 1863, The Emancipation Proclamation provided freed slaves the illusion of freedom, justice and the pursuit of happiness. African Americans were given the illusion of equality, inclusion, prosperity, and the civil rights and liberties of the American Dream. In reality, what they experienced was far from freedom or equality. African Americans in the late 19th and early to mid-20th century persevered through share cropping, Black Codes, lynching, Jim Crow, segregation, housing and loan restrictions and a general absence of the civil rights afforded to White Americans (Dixon, 2007; DeGruy, 2005; Coates, 2017). Additionally, when slavery ended, American society, which was undergirded by white supremacy, was appointed as the new patriarch. Similar to slave owners, American society via institutional racism and racial socialization, continued to perpetuate new versions of oppression, violence and discrimination among African Americans vis-a-vis the examples provided above.

Ideologically, America was colonized for freedom and for endless opportunities. As inhabitants and later citizens, African Americans, similar to Native Americans, have not secured the same civil liberties as White Americans. The United States of America has been the homeland or motherland to African Americans for nearly four centuries and continues to be the motherland for people from a plethora of backgrounds. However, the United States of America has privileged its White American children and immigrants over its other citizens and it has neglected to meet the basic needs of African Americans most specifically. Parallel to a mother or

caretaker who is charged with meeting the basic needs of an infant (Bowlby, 1979), the United States was colonized to meet the colonizers' desires for freedom. It was a country that promised to be a land of security and freedom; nonetheless, it has been a home of insecurity, bondage and oppression for African Americans.

As a community, African Americans have come to know American society to be hostile, unpredictable and unreliable and it has failed to meet their basic social and political needs. There are concrete examples of American society making good faith efforts to uplift the African American community with Brown vs Board of Education, the Civil Right Movement and the Voting Act; however, systemic racism has undermined these advancements. Prime examples of America's failure to meet the basic needs of African Americans are the housing restrictions that were implemented to restrict African Americans to poor neighborhoods and multiple forms of discrimination resulting low and under employment and generational poverty (Coates, 2017).

Because of these unmet needs, African Americans have developed an insecure attachment to American society as its community provider. Analogous to Bowlby's (1979) theory of attachment, African American families have internalized this lack of attachment to their needs resulting in an insecure attachment not only on a community level, but it is possible that a part of the individual insecure attachment is evidenced in low marriage rates and high divorce rates among African American couples. Coates (2017) proposes that "[a]n honest assessment of America's relationship to the Black family reveals the country to be not its nurturer, but its destroyer. And this destruction did not end with slavery" (p. 201). Cotts (2000) even states that slave owners considered slaves to be child-like in order to justify slavery as a means of providing guidance and discipline. American society continues to fail to nurturer the African American community. In fact, American society did just the opposite. It compounded

the trauma it had inflicted during slavery by creating institutional racism and other barriers that prevented access to basic needs of the Black community, the Black family and Black men and women. Courtois and Ford (2016) assert that these compounded violations or complex traumas, destroys the natural and universal expectation that caregivers will protect and nurturer their children. The violation of trust impacts the child's biological, psychological and mental development. When a child experiences complex trauma, the child adopts a constant belief that the worst will happen. The child is constantly in survival mode and behavior is based on surviving threat without any assistance or help from others. Mentally and psychologically, living in a constant state of survival becomes ingrained. Individuals with complex trauma histories feel like outsiders. They struggle with feelings of "anger, grief, alienation, distrust, confusion, low-self-esteem …shame and self-loathing" (p.4). It is also not surprising there is a relational component to complex trauma. Many of the feelings described above can prevent a person from relating to others or even developing healthy intimate relationships.

The impact complex trauma has on child development and attachment in relationships coupled with Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome and intergenerational trauma, African Americans appear to be tasked with overcoming insurmountable obstacles to having satisfying, intimate relationships and yet they do. African American stepfamily couples have the desire to have fulfilling and satisfying relationship. However, society and familial patterns of behavior and of relating do not provide the essential tools hence the high divorce rate among African Americans and stepfamilies in general in the United States. As social work clinicians we need to learn more about their experience and about what tools we could provide as social workers. Additionally, we need to know more about the impact of these patterns that have been influences by their

experience of trauma and racism in order to effective work with African American stepfamilies couples and African American couples in general.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS

Research Questions

The paucity of the literature demands more research to better understand, intervene and support African American stepfamily couples. This research study will explore the following questions: What do African American stepfamily couples identify as barriers to creating a marital bond? How do they navigate those challenges in order to create and maintain a marital or intimate partner bond? Do they identify any of these barriers as being unique to African American step-families?

Problem Statement

This study is a qualitative exploratory study investigating the ways in which married African American stepfamily couples, where one or both partners have a child from a previous intimate relationship, perceive particular stressors related to their stepfamily functioning and the impact of those stressors on their spousal subsystem. This study will also explore to which if the identified stressors are unique to their African American identity. Participants will be provided a consent form that will inform the participants about the study. Participates will be interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. Interviews will be recorded, analyzed and categorized into coding schemes.

All documentation such as field notes, participants' identifying information and audio recordings will be labeled with a corresponding numeric code. A record of the assigned codes will be maintained in an electronic Word document that is passcode protected, and only the

researcher will have access. All digital recordings Word documents of the transcription will be stored on a password protected hard drive and a backup version stored on an external password protected hard drive.

<u>Research Design</u>

Nineteen participants were interviewed individually. Two participants were interviewed jointly by request. The study consent form was sent and signed before the interview date. To start the interview, the researcher reviewed the premise of the study, which was listed on the IRB approved flyer. The researcher also restated the confidential statement and reminded participants that they could stop the interview at any time or decline to answer questions. The researcher administered a self-designed, semi-structure interview that lasted approximately one hour. The interview started with a few demographic questions about age, education level, type of current marriage (first, second, third, etc.), number of biological children and stepchildren and the amount of time each child lived in the home. After the demographic information was obtained, the first eight participants were first asked about their family of origin related to the direct and indirect messages they received about marriage and the roles of men and women within marriage. Afterwards, questions addressed how the participants met their partners, when they decided to marry and how they prepared for marriage/stepfamily life. Lastly, questions were asked pertaining to marital bonding and intimacy and their perceptions of the impact racism on their marriage.

Several iterations of the interview questions emerged as the researcher assessed how participants responded to questions asked. For interview nine through twenty-one, the researcher adjusted the order of the questions to create a more fluid conversation and more seamless transition from macro to micro questions. Several questions were rearranged and rephrased to

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garner in depth response from participants. For example, instead of asking participants about messages received regarding marriage after the demographic questions, the researcher asked participants about their reactions to the term stepfamily, which was initially later in the interview. Additionally, instead of asking, how does racism impact your marriage? The question was rephrased as, Are there any racial or social stressors that impact your marriage??

Setting

Three interviews were conducted in person in a private office. Five interviews were conducted via Zoom, which is a HIPPA video conference approved online platform. The researcher and the participant had private spaces to talk. The remaining thirteen interviews were conducted over the phone. The researcher and participants had private spaces to talk.

Sample Size

Twenty-one (n=21) participants were recruited for this qualitative study. The researcher distributed the IRB approved flyer to the Pennsylvania Society of Clinical Workers (PSCW) listserv, the University of Pennsylvania's Doctoral of Clinical Social Work (DSW) listserv and posted the approved flyer in a local, predominately African American church's weekly bulletin for two months. Two participants responded to the recruitment flyer sent to the Pennsylvania Society of Clinical Social Workers and only one of the two inquiries materialized into an interview. Two participants responded to flyer posted on Penn's DSW listserv and four participants responded to the recruitment flyer listed in a local Baptist church's weekly bulletin. However, only two inquiries from the church bulletin materialized into interviews. The remaining sixteen interviews were through snowball sampling. Four couples were recruited for

the study and each member of the couple was interviewed individually, except one couple, who requested to be interviewed jointly.

Inclusion and Exclusionary Criteria

Participants identified as heterosexual, they were married for at least five years and they or their partner have a child from a previous relationship. The participants and their current spouse identified as African American and were satisfied in their marriage. Only participants who met these criteria above were interviewed for the study.

Analysis

All interviews were recorded with a digital recorder. Digital interviews were uploaded to a secure, password protected site call Penn Box. Only first names were used during the interviews per the participants' permission. The researcher hired a transcriptionist to transcribe the first 8 interviews. The remaining 13 interviews were transcribed by an online transcription service called Rev.com.

After each interview, the researcher wrote a one page summary to capture reflections and themes from the interview. The researcher coded each interview line by line, which totaled over 600 pages of data. Themes and subthemes or codes emerged and reached saturation by interview fourteen. The researcher consulted with the dissertation committee and it was recommended that themes be revised to be more direct. The dissertation committee also recommended to collapse similar codes to generate more significance.

<u>Participant Compensation</u>

Each participant was given or mailed a $10 Target gift card for their participation in the study.

<u>Data Management</u>

Consent forms and all identifying information were kept in a locked file cabinet. The transcriptionist securely deleted all files related to each participant and all recordings will be securely erased at the completion of this study.

<u>Risk and Benefit Assessment</u>

There was minimal risk to participating in this study. In the consent form, participants were informed that they could decline answering questions that caused discomfort. They were also informed that they could end the interview at any time. Participants were given community resources if they were triggered by the questions and needed additional support after the interview. One participant was very tearful during the interview. The researcher stopped the interview several times, provided support and asked if the participant wanted to end the interview. The participant continued and stated the questions triggered memories and emotions related to his stepmother that he had not thought of in many years. Several participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to share their experience. Gratitude was also expressed that academic research was being focused on the experience of African American stepfamilies. One participant communicated that reflecting upon her experience made her realize how much progress she and her partner had made.

<u>Human Subjects</u>

Participants were given a consent form before the interview that informed them of the risk and benefits. Before conducting each interview as well as at the conclusion of the interview, the researcher reassured participants that their identities and personal information would be kept confidential. Participants were also informed that the results would be de-identified. This study was approved by the Internal Review Board at the University of Pennsylvania

<u>Research Participant Statistics</u>

The mean age for participants was 44.7 years. The mean years of marriage was 10.5 years. Five participants were married for 5 years, two participants were married for 6 years, one participant was married 7 years, five participants were married 8 years, one participant was married 11 years and another for 14 years, two participants were married 18 years, one participant was married 21 years, one participant was married 26 years and one participant was married 28 years. A total of 18 participants were in their first marriage, 2 participants were in their second marriage and one participant was in their third marriage. Six participants identified as biological parents only and 14 participants identified as both stepparents and biological parents. Two participants had high school diplomas, 1 participant had some undergraduate coursework, 3 participants had bachelor degrees, 1 participant had some graduate coursework, 7 participants had Master degrees and 7 participants had MD, JD or PhD.

<u>Reflexivity Statement</u>

Gabriel (2015) suggests that reflexivity in qualitative research requires the researcher to examine and question their preconceived ideas, assumptions and even the hypothesis regarding the topic of research. In essence, it is in good practice for qualitative researchers to reflect on

how their personal and even professional experiences influence their opinion about, their approach to and analysis of their area of research. However, Gabriel (2015) further suggests that this practice does not "guarantee high quality research" (p. 332). Nonetheless, it is important to question if the researcher can objectively approach and analyze the data, especially if the researcher has a personal connection to the area research, hence a reflexivity statement.

As a child, the concept of a stepfamily or blended family was never a term that was used to describe my immediate family, my extended family members or even African American families in my local community. After my parents divorced, my father had two sons. The term "blended family" was never used to describe our family composition, nor was *stepmother* used to describe my brothers' mother. They were my brothers. I referred to my brothers' mother by her first name. In public, she referred to me as her daughter. I witnessed the challenges my family experienced due to the structure of our "nontraditional" family, but I also observed an authentic feeling of support and unity.

Other than media and the occasional movie about divorced parents remarrying, it was not until high school that I came into contact with peers who identified their families as stepfamilies. The parental relationships my peers described were divorced parents having family dinners with new spouses that include children from their previous relationships and children from their new relationships. This type of family dynamic was foreign to me, but it was also intriguing. I was genuinely curious how these adults were able to co-exist and even more function as a traditional family.

Additionally, I have been married for five years and my marriage created a stepfamily. My husband and I are in our first marriage. During our formative years, neither one of us had

significant roles models for marriage. If we ascribed to the technical definition, we both had blended families, but the degree of contact with our nonresidential parent and siblings who lived outside of our permanent residence was varied and inconsistent. Nonetheless, the concept of having a stepfamily or blended family was not out of the realm of possibility due to our familial and community upbringing.

As a clinical social worker, I worked in several community agencies with predominately African American women who were single mothers. Many of those women have children from more than one previous relationship. I also worked in a private group practice where the majority of clients paid out of pocket for therapeutic services and the clients' socioeconomic and racial backgrounds were more diverse. A significant number of my African American clients were young professionals preparing for marriage or in their first marriage. A portion of those clients were entering their first marriages and one or both of the clients had a child from a previous relationship. They all appeared to have similar concerns and were experiencing similar challenges with establishing themselves as couples and as blended families. They all struggled with integrating their traditional images and ideals of marriage and family and the reality of their newly forming family structures- stepfamilies or blended families. The clients not only wanted to know how they should establish boundaries and what roles the new stepparent would play, but I did as well. What were the conditions that allowed a new marriage to succeed with the all the challenges that come with having a partner with children from a previous relationship? Traditionally, a couple has time before marriage and often a period of time after marriage to build the marital relationship, and then later focus on children. However, couples in my group practice were attempting to do both simultaneously, and they appeared to be experiencing more interpersonal conflict and challenges than couple in traditional marriages.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The results of this study are derived from a line by line content analysis of each of the 21, semi-structured interviews. The purpose of this qualitative study is to better understand the unique experience African American couples within stepfamily systems from a social-historical perspective and through the lens of attachment. The goal of the study is also to identify? what couples identify as challenges and how they navigate those challenges. The goal of the interview questions was to capture the family and interpersonal experience of individuals within a stepfamily marriage. The term *stepfamily* and *blended family* are used interchangeably in the study. Biological parents refer to parents who had children prior to marriage. Stepparents are parents who became parents to their partner's child after marriage.

The results are categorized into 14 sections. The first section explores participants' reactions to the term *stepfamily* and explores how participants' identify with the term *stepfamily*. Participants also discuss society's perception of African American stepfamilies, which participants connect to the socio-historical experience of African Americans. The second section discusses participants' reactions to becoming a stepfamily. Section three explores how participants' family of origin and their lack of marriage role models influenced their perception of marriage. Sections four explores how participants approach marriage/stepfamily life. Section five discusses challenges identified by stepparent challenges. Section six describes the techniques participants implemented to resolve conflict related to their stepfamilies. Section seven illustrates how the family's ability to integrate with one another after marriage. Section eight explores biological parents' efforts to avoid conflict and keep peace. Section nine explores the relationships between the bio-parent and stepparent and the former partners. Section ten discusses validation and appreciation and conflict within the family system. Section eleven

explores how an understanding of family of origin and empathy and vulnerability resolve marital conflict. Sections twelve, thirteen and fourteen explore stepfamily strengths, marriage as a safe haven and advice for future stepfamilies from current stepfamilies. Additional examples to support each theme can be found in Appendix 1.

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Section 1

Family of Origin Influenced Marriage

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Participants indicated that their family of origin had significant influence on their expectations about marriage and their role within marriage.

> I wanted to be in a relationship that was a give and take, that I wasn't doing all the giving but I wasn't doing all the taking, that we got along with each other, that we were really friends and that – because I think being friends is really, really important. Participant 2, p. 10.How does this relate to family of origin?

> There are things that I do try to consciously do differently [than my parents] but I do think that, again, my parents definitely served as a foundation. My husband and I are similar in a sense that we have fluid gender roles. My parents probably hid a lot. They probably shielded me from a lot. I do believe is necessary but I do wish that I would have been a little bit more emotionally in tune to what was going on with my parents. I do believe in shielding your children from things because they are children but I do feel like we are a little bit more emotionally open around our kids and not, like, if we're in the midst or arguing, like not just stopping arguing because one of them walks in the room. Participant 5, p. 3-4.

> Like, for me I know I didn't see my parents, like, work through their issues, I saw them deal with them until they couldn't. Um, I never saw them take steps to be, like, to recognize wrong doings on any- on either one of their parts or to acknowledge faults. For me, I try to first, just for my own- I kind of like to, like, do a self-diagnosis kind of thing, And, like, what's really my issue here. Like, is my issue really that I have- that I, that I'm, um, watching, you know, my stepson's brother or is it that, is my issue really that I feel unappreciated. Participant 17, p. 37.

> I think that the bigger influence on me than what I observed was what I lacked. So, I think that who I am and how I am is more a function of what I wish I had, more so than what I saw. So I wanted my father to be active. I wanted him to be present. I wanted to be able to talk to him about things. I wanted to be able to learn things directly from him. Participant 9, p. 4.

Participants also discussed how their family of origin helped them to model their own marriages and helped them to create aspects of married and family life they lack in their family of origin.

Family of origin also influenced how participants prepared for stepfamily life as well as how

they functioned as a stepparent.

> [My mom didn't prepare me about my stepdad]. He just showed up with bags. He showed up
> with bags and boxes and it was like, okay, he's going to be staying with us. [my stepdad] is still
> there, 38 years later. Yeah, so, that may be my model for how I went into it. Yeah, I didn't – no,
> there wasn't a whole lot of conversation beforehand about what it would look like or how do you
> feel about it. I just made some grand assumptions, be them wrong or be them right, like, hey,
> these are my kids, right?... And, it's gonna work, right? So, there was an introduction, you know.
> No real conversation about which direction our relationship was heading in. Participant 1, p. 11.

> So my mom came into the marriage with my dad, with a son already. Like, my dad was, like a
> horrible stepfather in the terms of, like, he wasn't bad towards him, he was just indifferent
> towards him. but he was just always, like, just indifferent towards, um, towards my brother, and I
> know for me that was one thing that I felt like I never wanted [my stepson] to feel like.
> Participant 17, p. 13-14.

Section 2

Marriage Role Models in the African American Community

Sixty-six percent (14 out 21) of participants agreed that stepfamilies or blended families

are more prevalent in the black community. Participants explained that higher rates of blended

family structures were due to the lack of black marriage role models in their families, their

immediate communities and the larger African American community. Participants also attributed

higher prevalence to historical events and polices that targeted African American families.

I think that society plays a role, but I think for more present day, it's something that's really honestly that's
been modeled in some way. I think women have been so used to in some ways being the primary
caretaker and taking on running the household overall, and I've even heard men say I'm the mother and
the father, so they're doing both roles that, um, it really in some ways becomes the norm. Some women
just feel like okay, if the guy doesn't want to be here with me, he doesn't have to be, like things will be
fine. I think that this is more present in the Black community than it is within other cultural groups.
Participant 21, p. 25.

Because I didn't grow up with a frame of reference, so – my mom's never been married. My
grandmother has had several marriages. My aunt had a bad marriage. I didn't have something right in my
immediate family or where I can actually reach out and talk or see these are the things that marriage go
through. I remember getting married and, maybe, a year after the marriage I was sitting on the edge of the
bed and I was just sitting there and I was like, this is marriage. And, [my spouse] was looking at me, like,
what's wrong? I said, this crap's horrid. I had this thought in my mind from everything I ever read and

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I'm one of the people who love romantic movies and used to read all romantic books – something is gonna sweep me off my feet and we're gonna have sex all the time – Participant 2, p. 5.

But then as I got older, I really didn't see too many marriages… And then as I was getting older, I started to see, in the 90s, started to see less and less of people actually getting married. More so, I think probably my age or a little older, everything's just the whole playboy or having multiple women, you gotta settle down. Participant 11, p.3-4.

[Generally speaking, African Americans are not] raised with the tools of making the marriage work, and there- or even, or like a serious, or a long-term relationship, and I think... we [don't have those types of conversations with our kids]. I feel like it's not seen as anything if you have a child even out of wedlock to begin with. If that relationship ends, you're more likely- you're going to end up with a blended family. Participant 17, p. 36.

Yes, if you look historically. There were certain policies that were put in place to, you know, um, in some ways tear apart the Black family. So if you implement this federal policy where the- the Black men cannot be in a household with the wife or with the girlfriend or whomever because they, and it, because that will result in them losing their welfare or some sort of government assistance. Um, I think that that definitely contributes to why certain families don't stay together, and if that family doesn't stay together then yeah, they're gonna branch out and start other families. For people current day, they're, I think that what they're affected by is just like more of this model behavior. So it's like, "Okay, my grandmother didn't have my grandfather in the household," and then it's like mom has followed suit, and it just becomes like the norm in some sense. Participant 21, p. 24.

Participants consistently reported the lack African American role models negatively impacted their priority for marriage and their expectations in marriage. The majority of participants linked these failures to socio-historical events.

Section 3

Reactions to the Term Stepfamily

The way participants identified as a family was significant. Ninety percent (19 out 21) of participants did not use the word *stepfamily* to describe their family. Even though participants agreed that the technical definition of stepfamily defined their family structure and their roles within their families, participants were reluctant to use the term.

No. No. No, I don't use it, I just clarify. It's offensive to me. Yeah. The whole stepparent. You know what I mean? It's putting a ... it's signifying something, like it's basically a parent, but not really. Like it's fake. When you say step in front of it- I have a lot of friends who will refer to their stepmom, but it's not in a good ... it's meant harsh, like, "Yeah, my father's wife or whatever. That's my stepmom. Yeah, the feeling of it is like they're less than, or the significance is not as- Participant 1, p. 6.

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I don't [use the word stepdaughter]. My daughter, my stepdaughter, I have never referred to her as my stepdaughter. She's my daughter, from day one… I used to introduce her, even in the beginning, it was my daughter. This is my daughter, this is my son. I didn't want her to feel isolated, I didn't want her to feel the separation when you say this is my stepchild or this is my stepdaughter. I didn't want her to have to feel that isolation basically. So I would never use it, it was always my daughter. Participant 10, p. 6.

Well, I don't use those words. People have used them to me. I say to people all the time, "I raised him. That's my son, period." Participant 8, p. 7.

Overall, participants had negative reactions to the term stepfamily and stepchild. Participants felt the term stepfamily has negative connotations, which made participants even more averse to using the term. Participants cited that term *stepfamily* or *stepchild* indicated separatism.

Well, it was just the, the, the phrase itself, just, uh, separatism. It's, it's almost like, you know, she is therefore that child is different because she's not, or he's not my child, but you know that's after a certain amount of time it becomes okay, this is, you know, my child or whatever the case. Participant 16, p.3.

And since, since I became, you know? A blended family, um, like that actually, blended, I, I never, I never got comfortable with that term. That is why I never, ever used that term. It's not a good connotation when I hear blended family. Kind of like, kind of like not like the real family. This is the blended family. Participant 13, p. 3.

I think when somebody is saying like, "Oh, that's my stepfather or my stepmother," they're making this distinction that they don't completely belong to that person. I understand it from a biological perspective, um, but as far as having the family really feel unified, um, I think the term is a little bit jarring and can stop you from reaching this overall goal of being, you know, just this united family. Participant 21, p.5.

Additionally, participants reported that the term stepfamily was not applicable to the African American community as a whole. Participants were not aware of other African American families with similar family structures that referred to themselves as a stepfamily. Participants also commented that the rejection of the word stepfamily could be attributed to the term's Eurocentric origins.

Um, so I think that, you know, to answer your question more directly, that, um, you know, sometimes there are these concepts that are developed, um, and in many ways maintained by the White community that we sometimes are just resistant to, um, taking on just because it's- it's their thing, you know. I think, you know, we have a lot of pride in wanting to come up with our own concepts and terms. Participant 21, p.4-5.

Actually, I think, the [black families] that I know who have blended families actually, they actually don't use the term. I think people were like, whoever it was just assuming the role and it wasn't, I can't recall a distinction being made. Participant 17, p. 21.

In certain situations and among certain company, participants did use the term stepfamily to describe their family. The closeness of the relationship was a determining factor if participant decided to use terms such as stepfamily or stepchild.

Um, it's, ah ... it depends. A lot of times I just say "I have three, three boys." Um, sometimes I get into it, sometimes I don't… So it just ... it depends on who I'm talking to and how in depth I want to get into my family relationship. Participant 18, p. 4-5.

Because of the separation, or because of the, you know, the restricted ... that I spoke about earlier, and the controls from my mother-in-law. I didn't feel like he was mine. I didn't feel like he was my, you know ... I didn't feel comfortable enough to call him my son, and so I would just say "my step-son", or "my husband's son". Participant 12, p. 13.

Section 4

Stigma and the African American Stepfamily

Participants also reported they were less likely to tell inform Caucasians they had stepchildren or a stepfamily. Generally, participants felt judged by society and more specifically, their white counterparts. Participants felt stigmatized for having a stepfamily, and more importantly, they felt that stigma was compounded by identifying as an African American stepfamily.

Participant 17, p. 35: Um, so it's kind of hard to... to tell. I know I feel like there's, like, perhaps maybe certain stereotypes where, like, you know, with, with black families sometimes, like, people may think or assume that you're a step parent but the biological parent isn't around.

Participant 18, p.6-7 Like I don't always tell, I don't like to always tell white people (I have stepchildren). You get uh, you get, I feel more judged. I guess I feel like, there's this whole maybe second hand embarrassment kind of thing. I guess I wanna not have certain stigmas. I think it's around, you know, even though I don't think it's true that black fathers are absent- They're finding that black fathers are actually way more involved than people think.

Participant, 7, p. 20: So, there's just all these ideas that are rooted in this concept that we have sex and we can't control ourselves and we can't – you know, the men can't control themselves and the women can't stop getting pregnant but all these different men make all these bad life choices.

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Participants perceived a negative narrative existed regarding African American stepfamilies and that black stepfamily couples were judged more harshly by society. Participants believed that historical stereotypes about African Americans such as hypersexual women and absentee fathers were believed to be the reason for the creation of African American stepfamilies.

> Participant 18, p. 42: And they [society] look at black step families in a more dysfunctional way… And I think there's ... even though obviously white folks do the same things. I think there's ... they assume that there's more dysfunction.

> Participant 7, p. 20: I think the challenge of – I think we get stigmatized more when we have blended families than they do. I think when they have blended families, oh, it was a divorce. Oh, it was a mistake, you know. When we have blended families, it's oh, she couldn't – she just had to have all those men. We're never given the – out of a failed marriage or failed relationship. It's always something that person had to do that resulted in them having all these kids by different dads.

> Participant 6, p. 12: I'm not sure I can relate to being a blended family -- what challenges would be unique to an African American blended family. I guess, I would say, I think when a blended family is black is judged more harshly – from the outside

Section 5

Reactions to Becoming a Stepfamily

Fifty-three percent (8 out 15) of participants who identified as stepparents were uncertain or felt negatively about becoming a stepparent. One of the fifteen stepparents, who was also a parent prior to marriage, also expressed negative feelings about becoming a stepparent. However, the majority (80%) of stepparents felt they had an easy time developing a relationship with their stepchildren. They described their stepchildren as "good kids."

> Participant 21, p. 6: it's interesting because I told him in the very beginning that I was never really open to dating somebody that had a child and I don't know, even as I say it now I don't know if that's hypocritical [because I have a child]…. I just knew from my friends like girlfriends who were dating other, dating men and dating men with children, they just ran into a lot of issues, not necessarily with the man or the child, but with the child's mother.

> Honestly, [when I think about the word stepfamily] the first word that came to my mind is complicated. Participant 9, p 7

> Having a stepfamily is compromise. There's a lot of work involved, but I also think there's a lot of you know, like good times, and just, um, just learning. Like learning one another. I think it's just

like, a work in progress, like, you know there's always something to learn, and you try to build, try to build relationships with your step children and ...make sure my biological son and stepsons have a good relationship. Participant 18, p. 3-4

Much of the apprehension was due to perceived conflict, whether real or not, with their spouse's former partner. There were less negative feelings directed at the child as opposed to negative perceptions of stepparents, however, participants reported general concerns about raising non-biological children. Participants reported that having a stepfamily was more challenging than having a traditional family.

> It was like, I don't want to be a stepparent and I don't want no step-kids because it's a whole lot that comes with that…So, we talked about marriage. We talked about kids and I told him my apprehension about going out with a guy with kids. I don't feel like the baby mama drama and I don't want to take care of anybody else's kids. I said that's a lot of work for one person and you got all that stuff that comes with it. In my mind, I really didn't want to marry anyone with kids. I just – not that I grew up with a stepdad but I had my own thoughts and feelings about stepparents and stepchildren. Participant 2, p. 11.

> I absolutely didn't want it. I never wanted to marry a man with kids. I wouldn't even date guys with kids. I have such a bias against that because I didn't want those issues which a mother – the child – so my friends tell me that like, you must really like this guy because I never would date guys with kids, ever. Participant 3, p. 14.

In addition to stepparents wanting to avoid potential conflict, biological parents felt protective of their children before and after marriage.

> We we're just dating, you know, so I need to be comfortable that, you know, this relationship won't have an adverse effect on my son because she could decide she didn't want to be a mom. Participant 4, p. 9.

> Because, again, because he's my biological son, I feel responsible to do all these things – Participant 6. P. 9.

The sense of responsibility for biological children prior to marriage was pervasive. Biological parents appeared reluctant to impose on their partners. Several participants who identified as biological parents before marriage still identified as single parents after marriage.

> I do [feel like a single father]. Which is very strange. I mean, I didn't think about it that way. In many ways I do feel like it when there are situations where the kids. Participant 1, p. 20.

Um, I think it's universal for the biological parents who sometimes feel like they have to be the primary caretaker of their child. And it might bring up some issues with that partner coming into the picture and saying, "Okay, well, how do I fit? How do- how do I assist in raising this child?" Participant 21, p. 35.

And so, [after being a nine -year relationship with someone that was not my child's father it led to me being protective at times. [When dating my spouse] I walked in with that mindset of that like I'm his primary caretaker, I make the decisions, I'm completely in charge of him, I don't need any sort of outside help or guidance or input. Participant 21, p.6.

A juxtaposition to the negative reactions, several participants felt neutral to positive to becoming a stepfamily. Several participants identified their families of origin as step/blended family. Fifty-two percent of participants (11 out 21) identified their family of origin as blended families or themselves having a stepparent, being raised by a stepparent, or one of their biological parents was a stepparent to one of their siblings. These participants felt neutral to positive about being a stepparent and/or being a part of a stepfamily. Participants expressed that the idea of a blended family was normal since it was their family of origin experience. One participant (#16) felt that becoming a stepparent was a part of the package of being in a relationship with their partner and were therefore accepting of the role.

I was smitten with her and I knew that, you know, a child would come along with it, then. I mean, I, I can't really ask for a better daughter to be quite honest. She's awesome." Participant 16, p. 6.

[Becoming a stepmother or stepfamily] just happened naturally and, and if, I see, I believe that I, I think the difference or the thing that made it easy because she had her own mother. So I didn't have to like assume a role of a parent… So all that pressure, that pressure was off of me. And you know? She has a father. She has a mother. And I, I respected. And I kept that delineation. Participant 13, p. 6.

[Being a part of a blended family] feels normal to me. Like I said, I grew up in one. I had an abundance of brothers and sisters, so that's all pretty much all I know. And I know as far as being married into one, I know what it feels like. I know what these kids are looking for. I know not to mistreat them and love them and nurture 'em, opposed to people that haven't had my experience, or been brought up like I was. Probably wouldn't even date a girl if she had two kids. But most of 'em, "They ain't my kids. I'm dating you," and they just tell 'em. Participant 11, p. 8.

I've always been a part of a blended family system when I was growing up. I guess I have to look at it as being a norm. Participant 10, p. 12.

Seeing [husband] being a, actually a great father [before we married] was more attractive. You know? Just knowing that, you know? I have a chance that, you know? He'll be a great dad to my kids. You know? Just to see it, just to see it up front. So I was like, "Okay. I see this before we get married." So I already know that I'm going to have like a great father, um, so that kind of was reassuring actually. Participant 13, p. 4.

I'm kind of, I mean, I don't know if honored is, like, too, like, um, but I think that's the only way that I could kind of, um, the word that I have for, like, best accurately describes it. I mean, I almost kind of feel honored to do it because I think, you know, it's one thing, um, we can't choose our parents, right? Participant 17, p. 22.

Participants who felt positive to neutral about having a stepfamily were able to identify more positives about their families and reported less conflict.

Section 6

Preparing for Stepfamily life

Very few couples engaged in premarital counseling. Eighty percent of participants (17 out 21) reported that during their courtships prior to marriage they did not talk about their feelings or expectations related to having a stepfamily or the role of stepparent within the family.

There wasn't a whole lot of prep work done – how do you feel about it or what's your take on it and what role do you want to play? There wasn't a lot of that. Participant 1, p.11.

[Our family or stepfamily] [n]ever came into conversation. [We] talked about money, talked about kids, but never really talked about the role of the stepparent. We talked about a lot of stuff but that's something that we didn't talk about. Participant 2, p.14.

We didn't have conversations [about becoming a blended family], we just sorta moved through it. Participant 15, p. 2.

It took me a while to kind of figure out, you know, like, what kind of, like, kind of like adult role I wanted to play in his life in terms of like, am I like, the disciplinarian mom, or am I, like, the cool aunt. Participant 17, p. 14.

I don't think [we] needed [to have a direct conversation about blended family life] because one of the things that made our relationship, one of the things that our relationship was contingent on was how not only we treat each other but how we treat each other's children, you know, like each other's child. Participant 21, p. 10.

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The fourteen percent (3 out 17) of participants who did not discuss expectations regarding stepparent roles prior to marriage were both biological parents and a stepparents. These participants felt that since the progression of their relationships were predicated on the relationship their partner had with their child prior to marriage, they did not feel it was necessary to have an additional conversation about roles and expectations. Ultimately, they felt the conversation about creating a stepfamily was implied. The lack of role definition prevented stepparents from fully integrating into the family system after marriage. Stepparents felt unsure of their roles. At times the lack of role definition caused conflict and resulted in stepparents feeling resentful.

One participant (#2) who engaged in premarital counseling stated that the idea of becoming a stepfamily was not a topic of conversation. However, three participants did engage in spiritually based counseling and stated that becoming a stepfamily was a part of the discussion. One participant's stepchild was even invited into a session, which the participant stated was helpful in understanding the close dynamic of their spouse and stepchild.

> [The counselor] gave us the handout, and the handout was about my [spouse]. You're in the middle of these two [loved ones]. You've got a [child] that you have loved for ten years and who loves you. Then you got [your spouse] that met you who loves you, so you're in the middle of two loves, but they don't have the same relationship with each other that you have with both of them. Participant 8 pt2, p.4.

Participants who engaged in premarital conversation felt they were able to integrate into their family system with more ease.

Section 7

Stepparent and Family Integration and Stepparent Challenges

Participants who identified as stepparents felt that role ambiguity as a stepparent, the age

and sex of their stepchild and their mother- in- laws impacted their ability to integrate into the

family system. Participants communicated that it felt easier to integrate into the family and to

relate to their stepchild when the child was younger (i.e. less than 6 years old).

> Um, as well, so, and talking to them, their relationship has been different because the kids were, like, older, um, so, whereas with [my stepson] he was six years old- five or six years old, their kids are now, they're coming into these relationships, being parents of teenagers, and, you know. Participant 17, p. 41.

> The child was with her mother, and she's being introduced to a man, around the age of 12, and that child is more so looking at the man that's coming in, this stranger. So she's very protective, and he pretty much has to win her trust also. A young child, that's all they know. And you know, you grow together. Opposed to a 12 -year -old that's not set in their ways, but just maturing from a tender age. Participant 11, p. 15.

Several participants communicated that it was more challenging to integrate into the family

system and develop a relationship with their stepchild due to their mother –in- law.

> I feel like my mother- in -law had a lot ... He had ... I don't feel like he did ... She had a lot of influence, um, over, a lot of control over, um, what happened- With our relationship, I felt like restrictive. I felt like she had such a hold on him, and it was like, I don't know. She felt like I was going to try to take him away, but she was very controlling as to what he did, where he went, who he spent time with. Participant: 12, p. 9.

> I think what contributed to [our good relationship] is that when he got older he was able to, um, talk to me for himself. Like, there was nobody in the middle. So, you know, this was my son, and that, you know, I wanted to have and cultivate a relationship with him, but I felt like outside influences hindered that. And so, we just are starting to really get into the groove of our relationship. Participant 12, p. 8.

> Um, so, and for a long time it was my mother- in -law kind of helping my husband out with a lot [with my stepson],…. I'm like, and admittedly at first, I was just like, "hey guys, I'm over here," like, "I can do stuff too." Like, I can, you know, help? Um, because obviously like, as my mother-in- law being,… [a huge help before I can into the picture], but it did take a few years for them to both be like, you can include me. I didn't immediately feel at first that it was just, like, I wasn't

really part of, like, they would make decisions for him and then I was just left there to execute. Participant 17, p. 8.

They attributed this phenomena to the fact their mothers- in- law were accustomed to helping their son or daughter with childcare. They did not view their mother- in- law's involvement as intrusive or intentionally preventing a relationship from forming between them and their stepchild. However, stepparent felt excluded in the decision- making process and with caretaking responsibilities.

> Yes, yeah I didn't immediately feel at first that it was just, like, I wasn't really part of, like, they would make decisions for him and then I was just left there to execute. Participant 17, p. 8.

Stepparents acknowledged that during the dating or courtship period of the relationship, it was appropriate for the bio-parents to make decisions collectively. However, several participants, specifically stepmothers, wanted to be included in decisions that impact them.

Additionally, participants communicated that the sex of their stepchild impacted the relationships with their stepchild.

> Just take the kids. My daughter, she's 18, she's older and everything now, so she knew that she had her father. So you go through the periods of, "You're not my father," and a little resentment, and then also just parenting styles. And that has, 'cause that's more of a delicate situation. Plus it was girls. My son is totally different because I can be rough with him. Girls, it's stressful. You have to be very, very careful. Participant 11, p. 11.

> I really wouldn't play with her like a father would normally do with their daughter. Bounce them on your knee. That part I didn't wanna do because I didn't wanna- any suspicion, any speculation. So, I kinda kept [my stepdaughter], when I look back, at arm's length. Participant 10, p. 16.

Stepfathers were concerned with stereotypes of stepfather sexual abuse and therefore, kept their distance or adjusted their behavior when interacting with their stepdaughters. If is very possible that this awareness is rooted in racism and racist beliefs that perceives African American men as sexual predators. Overall, stepmothers communicated less tension with

stepsons. Stepfathers communicated more tension with stepsons and less tension with

stepdaughters. None of the participants who identified as stepmothers had stepdaughters.

Section 8

Bio-parent Keeping Peace-not Addressing Issues to Avoid Conflict

Participants who identified as the biological parent within the couple system

communicated that they often acted or reacted in situations involving their child and their former

partner in a manner that maintained peace within the family. Generally, biological fathers had a

desire to maintain peace and avoid conflict.

> I would say with regard to the child support issue, I was more concerned with keeping peace with my son's mother then keeping peace in my home. I think that that was a mistake… But I probably could have just pushed back a little. Participant 9, p.10.

> He does not like confrontation. He would have been great at non-violence movements. He does not like confrontation, so, he really struggled initially with setting those boundaries because she's like, she's challenging him, like, you're changing. You're letting this new girl come in and create all this. Participant 3, p.5.

> My husband would say, I don't understand, I'm trying to keep peace, you know, because he has a relationship with her family, too. Participant 3, p. 9.

> I mean, besides the obvious one, being a father, I guess, you can say that my role is sort of a conduit, I guess. And, at times, peacemaker. Participant 6, p.7.

> And, maybe I (as the biological father I was afraid of the conflict (between my daughter and wife) and, like, I don't want to deal with it – all these possibilities. Participant 1, p.21.

The desire to avoid conflict with the former partners had the potential to create conflict within

the marriage. It was important to biological fathers that their children experience or be exposed

to the least amount of conflict.

Section 9

Bio-parent and Stepparent Relationship with Former Partner

Fifty-seven percent (12 out 21) of participants identified having a neutral to positive relationship with their former partners or their stepchild's biological parents.

> Once I became settled, the relationship with my daughter's mother, improve tremendously. Right now we can communicate about anything. Participant 11, p. 18.

> It's not been in the courts or anything, yeah, it's not through the courts. None of it has ever been to the courts, not any sort of, any, I'm calling it child support payments but they're not, like, court mandated child support payments. But any, any, like, any financial support or the schedule, none of it has ever been through the courts. The schedule's always been pretty flexible, um, if, you know, we have to, for whatever reason do four weekends in a row, that'd be fine. Participate 17, p. 31.

> [My husband's former partner and I are] very cordial. Like, I don't, I don't, you know, when we see each other we embrace, we talk a little. Um, we've gone and hung out together. Um, like, we went to movies and to dinner, and stuff like that, together, um, a few times. we're very cordial, and, um, even when, [my stepson] was having some problems back in his early teens, um, and we had a family meeting. Participant 12, p. 10.

> Like, there's no awkwardness. We can talk… when I pick, [my stepson] up and her and I will start chatting and we'll be there for an hour…I think it helped that, she had moved on because she had another child, so I think that definitely helped that- in terms of, like, when I, by the time I came into the picture, um, and my, my husband had had a previous, like, he's never been married before but he had another long term relationship before me, whatever might have been there, had been resolved. Participant 17, p. 30.

Having a neutral to positive relationship allowed biological parents and stepparents to have more flexibility with the custody/visitation schedule, avoid the family court system and avoid the "stressful situations" described by other participants. Participants who used the family court system to manage custody and child support payments felt negatively towards the family court system. Several participants had negative interaction with their spouse's former partners, which created conflict within the marriage.

> There's not much of a relationship but we are cordial to each other now. She was God-awful to me in the beginning. She was just mean and petty and lied and created all kinds of drama from – I mean, would just make up stuff. I can go on. It was bad. It was really, really bad. And, you know, definitely, on several occasions I thought about leaving because this is not what I signed up for. Participant 5, p. 10.

> I felt very disrespected. My stepson's mother kept coming to our house. We were preparing for this life together, we had to keep circling back and I was refusing to marry him until he put firm boundaries with her. And, I told him we were going to sell that house because that house was in his name and I did not want to be in a house that she had that much? Participant 3, p. 7.

Ultimately, negative interactions with the former partner caused stress and conflict for the married couple.

Section 10

Appreciation and the Lack Thereof, and Need for Validation

Participants who identified as stepparents felt varying levels of stress due to being a stepparent. Both stepmothers and stepfathers discussed the stress associated with raising non-biological children. Stepparents felt unappreciated, which caused tension in their marriages.

> Absolutely. I always say that being a step parent is the hardest job. It's harder than being a parent. Because you're always worrying. Because you have more dynamics to worry about. Participant 18, p. 37.

> That's the stressful part, when it's not your biological child, it just adds more to it. But then it takes to the ... just can't be. And the fathers and the wife have to be on the same accord. Participant 11, p. 11.

> You know, that no one cares about the stepparents. No one thinks that – it's like we don't have feelings. Like, no one is thinking about that person. Everyone feels bad for the stepchild. You haven't eaten? Evil stepmom or what have you and everyone's like they feel for the single parent kind of thing, even when the single parent isn't really single. And, but it's like – there's a complete shadow over the stepparent and I'm, like, hello, it's challenging for us, too. There's no rule book for marriages. There is certainly no rule book for, you know, being a stepparent. Participant 5, p. 20.

> I think being a blended mom – I mean with the dad is him being very – in that you are expected to perform as though you are this person's first parent but you're rarely given the respect or appreciation for those activities and people often judge you saying you're being too hard on them and they use the excuse, it's because you're not their real parent. Even my pediatrician said to me before, you know, the stepmom's can be a little rough on the kids. And, I'm like, well, that might be true but I do the same thing I do now if it were a child I gave birth to. The only difference is the child I gave birth to would not do this because they know I wouldn't accept it from the beginning. Participant 7, p. 9.

> But I just remember no one expressing any appreciation… And, I was like, he is not my kid and no one cares that I, you know, I spent all this time doing [getting him into a really great school] …. It just really left like a sour taste in my mouth and really had me again, add a layer of resentment and made me feel very used to be perfectly honest and not just with her but also from my husband. And, so, that – I think that was something that I kind of walked around being upset about for a while. Participant 5, p. 18.

Stepparents were willing to help their partners and their stepchildren in a variety of situations. However, they want to feel or see some type of gesture, particular from their partners that demonstrated their efforts and time were appreciated.

<div align="center">Section 11</div>

Communication, Vulnerability and Awareness and Understanding of Partner's Family of Origin Facilitated Conflict Resolution

Participants who addressed stepfamily and marital issues directly and with vulnerability were able to resolve issues with more ease. Participants who had a deeper understanding of their spouse's family of origin, past wounds and/or triggers were also able to resolve challenges without conflict.

> So there weren't a ton of arguments or blow ups. But there would be silent treatment. There would be coldness. There would just be space. It was undeniable, it just wasn't addressed. Oh yeah. Or worse in many instances because it was a familiar pattern because my mother and I never had a lot of conversations. I would experience that same sort of dynamic, especially as I got older and we disagreed on a lot more things. Instead of talking it out, there would be distance. Participant 9, p. 11.

> Instead of putting up a defense mechanism to actually just say, I'm hurt and I feel like you chose her in this moment and I'm not comfortable with this. It was way more powerful. It was like you disarmed whatever type of barrier that would have been created by me if I just had a defense mechanism. Participant 3, p 12.

> And we don't come from, you know, that, um, that place of being hurt. So, that childhood injury that triggers something as an adult, we just don't talk from that place. It's just... I actually rather than become defensive and more confrontational, I begin to empathize. Participant 21, p.23.

> I was immature (when we first got married),…I would do things like not talk to him if he didn't do something that I didn't like, or he didn't do something that I wanted to do. Like, I would have given the silent treatment. And, um, not knowing that his mother did the same thing to him growing up. And, because he explained it to me, I don't want to be associated with that type of mistreatment of him. And so, now, I would never mistreat him like that. Because I know that that's what he came from. Participant 12, p. 23.

> And it was really more about me talking to my husband and saying, like, "hey, you need to stop going to your mom for these things," like, he would say like, granted my mother- in -law helps with all three kids when him and I can't do it, but I was like, "no, like, if you can't get to it, I can take him to the appointment, now when I can't get to it either, then we'll go out for outside help, but you need to come to me first." He admitted that that was something that he was just used to doing. Um, so they kind of started to, that started to get better. Participant 17, p. 9.

Participants who engaged in couples counseling felt they had a greater ability to resolve challenges. Direct communication, self-awareness and an awareness of family of origin triggers enabled participants or couples to be more resilient in their marriages.

Section 12

Stepfamily Strengths

Ninety-five percent (20 out 21) of participants identified strengths of being a stepfamily. One of the main strengths is that participants felt that they had a sense of connection and a sense of community within their families.

> We identify as a family, like, you know, we identify as this is our house. There is a good sense – despite of all of that – it's a really good sense of we. Well, at least that's the way I feel, like, you know, to a good degree there's a sense of we. I mean, there's still moments when, you know, everybody's individuals, but I believe that we identify as the [Joneses]. We are that family. Participant 1, p.22.

> I enjoy being part of a big family and I probably would have more kids if I could have because I think I enjoy being part of a big family and so being a blended family allowed me to be part of a big family but I don't think I – you know, the fact that you can't tell that we're a blended family, that's my ?-- Participant 7, p. 12.

> So, I think one of the strengths is like we've learned to, like, work as a team. Participant 3, p. 15.

> And, I think, hearing my reflection on it has been interesting, as well, because it does remind me that we have come a long way. Participant 5, p. 22.

Despite having challenges and initial apprehensions about becoming stepfamilies, specifically for stepparents, most participants felt positively. They were optimistic about their family systems. In sharing their experiences, participants expressed gratitude and appreciation for how far their family had come since initially becoming a stepfamily. Only 4.7 percent (1 out 21) of participants felt that their family lacked cohesion.

> I think or feel that we kinda just exist as a unit, not really thrive as a unit but exist as a unit. But then when we come together, we just kinda exist. We don't really thrive. Like, we go on vacation together. We did maybe a couple vacations but we took Lauren with us. And, even with

that, it just still was – it just exists. We kinda gravitate toward each other. It was not like a unit, all three of us. It's like them two and me. It could be my own perception but that's what I feel like. Participant 2, p. 15-16.

<center>Section 13</center>

<center>Marriage as Safe Haven from Societal/ Racial Challenges</center>

Several participants reported their marriages were sources of emotional support or safe havens from micro-aggressions they experienced in society. Participants used their partners to discuss racialized challenges and to escape from them.

> [My husband] like the lead engineer and he's always questioned. He's always being told on whenever he has to execute or initiate some sort of decision, people are always questioning, are you – you know sure about your decision. It frustrates him. He calls me and we talk about. It does bring us closer. Participant 3, p. 17.

> We both know how to shut the world out when it gets too much. And then recognize when each one of us need to talk about it, when something is going or something is being said or did, we need to talk about it. Then knowing each other really well enough to know that, at this moment, it's not a good time to talk about it. That he can recognize my cues and I can recognize his. Participant 2, p. 26.

> Negative impact – it's kinda hard to define the impact. It's one of those things, it's like the elephant in the room. It's there, but, sometimes it's really hard to define the impact that it has. I mean, I think we function well in spite of, like – Participant 1, p. 24-25.

<center>Section 14</center>

<center>Advice for Future Stepfamilies</center>

Participants who did not broach the conversation about preparing for stepfamily life and participants who felt they had overcome most of the stepfamily challenges shared advice for new stepfamily/blended families. They hoped that future couples could avoid some of their pitfalls and setbacks.

> I would tell couples [in new blended families] to embrace the challenges, like – embrace the challenges and embrace the uniqueness that's going to come from the challenges. The challenges aren't good or bad. They're just the challenges.   So – and it's going to look unique. It doesn't have to look one way. It doesn't have to be scratching and clawing outside –or – having

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Thanksgiving together, right. It doesn't have to be that. It's unique like with any family. Unique is what you guys have and what works best and, you know, what enables these beautiful children to grow as normal as possible, given the circumstances. Participant 1, p. 27.

What [our family] going to look like? How people feel about it. What the expectations are. What the fears are. You know, what the stress could be. Have that conversation early. Live with the uncomfortableness – as opposed to later because later it's less uncomfortable and it's probably more resentment. Get ride of all those insecurities. Ain't no other man gonna raise my children. No other woman gonna take care of my kids. Well, yes, they are. They are going to play a part in it, yes, they are, whether you like it or not..They live in that person's house. There's automatically gonna be an impact living in that person's house, right? Participant 1, p. 28-29.

And, in hindsight, I probably would have had a more comprehensive conversation about it. Maybe how many kids we wanted. How we would raise them. Who would stay home? Who would go to work? I think in terms of values and what we want our kids to do and be and how we would like them to act, you know, we really have a lot of similarities there, so, I don't -- I never find my husband and I actually arguing about our kids. Participant 7, p. 7.

CHATPER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the individual experiences of marital bonding of African American couples with stepfamilies and the impact of their identity as African Americans. The literature revealed a gap in illustrating the experience of African American couples with stepfamilies. The divorce rate for African Americans is higher than the national average (Kim, 2012; Raley & Bumpass, 2003). The divorce rate for stepfamily couples is also above the national average, which insinuates that African American couples with stepfamilies are at a greater risk for divorce (Bryant et al., 2016; Gold, 2016; Kim, 2010). From slavery, the Jim Crow South, employment and housing discrimination to mass incarceration and over policing, African Americans are significantly impacted by systemic and institutional oppression, all of which adversely affect marriage outcomes. Increasing understanding about the specific experiences, challenges and successes of African American couples with stepfamilies not only fills a gap in the literature, but it is beneficial to clinicians and social work practitioners.

The findings in this study illuminate the nuanced challenges and successes of black couples with stepfamilies. The following discussion describes how the study findings can be understood in the context of the relevant literature and theory. This chapter will also address implications for theory and practice. Limitations and suggestions for future research will also be discussed.

Attachment Theory & African American Couples with Stepfamilies

The founding principle of attachment theory is that a person's ability to create relationships and the quality of those relationships is predicated on early attachments or a person's relationship with a primary or significant caregiver. Participants in this study were asked questions related to their respective families of origins, their perceptions of their parents' marital or intimate relationships and to what extent these factors influenced their current marital relationships. Overwhelmingly, participants in this study spoke positively about their marriages and stepfamily dynamics, which indicated a positive sense of attachment. They also reflected on their dating relationships and how their relationships evolved into a marital bonds. Their families of origin significantly influenced how participants viewed their own marital relationships. Participants internalized the relational experiences from their families of origins and utilized them as prototypes for what they expected and desired in their own marriages as well as for what they lacked or perceived as missing in their families of origin. Attachment theory refers to these prototypes as internal working models (Bowlby, 1979). The majority of participants applied this concept to their communities as well. Participants felt that they carried direct and indirect messages from their families of origins as well as the larger African American community with them. Those familial and community internal working models were influential in shaping their perceptions of marriage and self.

<u>The Impact of American Society on African American Stepfamily & Attachment</u>

Structurally, participants in this study had flexible definitions of what they considered family due to their own families of origin experiences. Fifty-two percent of participants were raised in stepfamilies, and eventually, they had stepfamilies of their own, which illustrates a positive attachment to their family of origin. However, Eurocentric societal messages, which have historically stated that first marriages with no children are not only the "traditional marriage," but the "ideal marriage," challenged participants' lived experiences of being raised in blended or stepfamilies. This dichotomous messaging was most evident when participants expressed feeling negatively about being a stepparent or stepparent family life even though they were raised in stepfamilies or were aware that stepfamilies were prevalent in the African American community.

Additionally, both participants who were raised in traditional or two-bio parent households and blended families of origin stated that the lack of African American marriage role models adversely impacted their perceptions of marriage. Furthermore, participants who had children prior to marriage communicated that the lack of African American marriage role models communicated to them that marriage was not a priority even though they desired to marry in the future. The concept of African American marriage role models will also be discussed later in this chapter. One could describe African Americans' attachment to the institution of marriage as mixed due to conflicting messages from their families of origins and from American society.

<u>American Society As A Holding Environment</u>

Family of origin and American society are both holding environments for African Americans. Winnicott's (1971b) concept of the holding environment or mother/caregiver is

where the needs of an infant or individual are met to achieve healthy development. In this study, American society is viewed as a metaphor for the holding environment of African American community. Due to America's founding principles of individualism and its meritocracy, racism and institutional oppression, the African American family system endured generations of psychosocial stressors such as targeted physical and sexual assaults, over policing, mass incarceration, employment and housing discrimination and health disparities. Generations of families and individuals living in these conditions created learned behaviors and mentalities that were transmitted from generation to generation even post emancipation. Some may argue that African Americans have acquired financial stability and success and thus are no longer impacted by institutional racism or racism at all. However, all African Americans live in a society were institutional racism was and continues to be the norm. In sum, American society has been less than a good enough parent or holding environment for the African American community. Participants in this study affirmed the idea that African American stepfamilies and blended family systems are a consequence of and the adaption to the social and emotional environment African Americans have lived in since slavery. Overall, the effects of an insufficient holding environment have had deleterious effects on the black family and the African American community. However, since slavery African Americans have adapted. They recreate and maintain familial bonds that were destroyed and systematically attacked. Additionally, since participants in this study considered the stepfamily structure within the African American as normal and adaptive, the majority of participants in this study did not identify with the terminology *stepfamily,* which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Marriage and Communication

Despite experiencing the residual effects of institutional and societal oppression and racism, participants felt that their marriages were safe havens from societal and racial stressors. The marital relationship was where participants felt safe, secure, and able to be vulnerable. There was an expressed desire to have equal partnerships that were fulfilling and where home and financial responsibilities were shared. Even with these aspirations, most participants experienced conflict related to their stepfamily dynamics. Communication was repeatedly cited an area of concern for participants. Lack of communication and passive aggressive behavior typically caused more conflict and no resolution, which was supported by Saint-Jacque et al. (2011). Participants agreed that conflict resolution was best resolved with direct and empathic communication and it was important not to allow feelings of resentment to fester. Participants also felt their stepfamilies were cohesive, connected and team oriented. Generally, most participants who identified as stepparents also created attachments and bonded with their stepchildren.

Prevalence of African American Stepfamilies

Research on stepfamilies dates back to the mid-19th century (Bossard & Polasky, 1955). Historically, the black family has been researched from a deficit perspective, with the majority of research examining the experience of Caucasian stepfamilies. Substantial factors for the deficit perspective include the institutional, systemic racism, economic deprivation, mass incarceration, internalized racism, etc. that have adversely affected African Americans, not only individually, but also the institution of the black family. The combination of racism and Eurocentric ideals imposed on African American families has resulted in the pathologizing of the black family. African American stepfamilies, which have been historically referred to as "broken families" in American society, have actually been a normal and established family structures within the

African American community. Since slavery, African Americans have expanded on the Eurocentric definition of family by reorganizing, regrouping and adapting to the personal and systemic assaults that have impacted the black family system (Dixon, 2007; Boyd-Franklin, 2006; DeGruy, 2005).

Presently, African American stepfamilies are as common as or even more common than traditional families for a myriad of reasons (Parker, 2011). This study's exploration into African American stepfamily life has revealed that the lack of marriage role models and institutional racism have increased the number African American stepfamilies. In this study, all participants thought highly of marriage, which aligns with the research of Pinderhughes (2002) and Tucker & Mitchell- Kernan (1995). Participants in this study felt that marriage was a natural progression in a relationship and something they aspired to as young adults. However, the lack of African American marriage role models indirectly communicated a message to participants, especially those who had children prior to marriage, that marriage was not a priority. Having a child prior to marriage was not as taboo as it was in previous decades and participants felt that having a child before marriage was not shunned in their community. The priority was to be a responsible and present parent, and not necessarily a married parent. Additionally, participants communicated that the lack of black marriage role models made them less prepared for marriage/married life. Participants reported that their expectations about marriage were distorted or unclear, and with minimal reference points. Being married without a point of reference can make couples more prone to divorce. The national divorce rate for the stepfamily is nearly sixty percent and even higher for African American couples (Bryant et al., 2016; Gold, 2016; Kim, 2010).

A number of participants in this study were raised in two parent households where one parent was their stepparent or one of their parents was a stepparent to their siblings. These participants suggested that the stepfamily structure was normal, and because of this, having a marriage of their own that created a stepfamily was also normal and more in the realm possibility, mainly due to the familiarity of the concepts and of the family experience. Interestingly, these participants also rejected the term *stepfamily*. They simply referred to their current families without distinction and called them *family*. Participants who were not raised by two parents felt that examples of marriage in their extended families were not ideal, and therefore their examples of marriage were not relationships they sought.

Societal factors and African American Stepfamilies

In addition to the lack of community or familial role models, participants in this study noted governmental policies and societal messages of single motherhood as contributing factors to the prevalence of African American stepfamilies. Interestingly, research suggested that the prevalence of stepfamilies was mainly due to remarriage and cohabitation (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). There was minimal to no reference in the literature pertaining to stepfamilies that cited racism or societal factors as the cause for the increase in stepfamily structures. Participants suggested that racism and institutional oppression are to blame. The concept of *single black mothers* is commonly portrayed in media. In the 1960's, government welfare policies such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children were geared toward single mothers, specifically in the black community. In 1965, the controversial and widely publicized Moynihan Report (Moyinhan, 1965; Taylor, 2016) argued that *ghetto culture* and the increase of single black mother led households was the reason for the lack of economic mobility and the cause of broken black families with no mention of economic deprivation, discriminatory job hiring practices or

the lack resources in predominantly African American schools. Ultimately, the message was that African Americans were solely responsible for their lack of advancement within American society, when in fact, institutional oppression and internalized racism were at fault. Internalized racism has manifested itself in the repetition of self-destructive behaviors and attitudes of African Americans across generations. The transmission of intergenerational behaviors or trauma is significant in understanding of the familiar dynamics of African Americans. Society has reinforced images of the single black mother and black family dysfunction while promoting images and narratives of intact Caucasian families. The themes that emerged from this project appear to speak to the intergenerational behaviors and possibly the internalized messages. For example, several participants normalized single motherhood and having children before marriage. Over fifty percent of individuals in the study were raised in stepfamilies or blended families. Participants believed that in terms of stepfamily dynamics, there were no differences between the challenges experienced by White stepfamilies and African American stepfamilies. However, the belief was that

> …[society] looks at black step families in a more dysfunctional way… And I think there's ... even though obviously white folks do the same things. I think there's ... they assume that there's more. Participant 18, p. 42.

More importantly, participants internalized those images of white stepfamilies. They believed that white stepfamilies are given more freedom to have failed relationships and start new ones.

> I think the challenges [between white and black stepfamilies] are the same – I think we get stigmatized more when we have blended families than they do. I think when they have blended families, oh, it was a divorce. Oh, it was a mistake, you know. When we have blended families, it's oh, she couldn't – she just had to have all those men. We're never given the – out of a failed marriage or failed relationship. It's always something that person had to do that resulted in them having all these kids by different dads. So, there's just all these ideas that are rooted in this concept that we have sex and we can't control ourselves and we can't – you know, the men can't control themselves and the women can't stop getting pregnant but all these different men make all these bad life choices. Participant, 7, p. 20.

The impact of this institutional oppression and bias is that African American stepfamilies feel stigmatized and unfairly judged, which could cause stress over time.

Stepfamily Terminology & Stigma Associated with African American Stepfamilies

From an identity and familial perspective, participants in this study rejected the term *stepfamily* due to the negative connotations associated with the term. The majority of participants were unaware of other African American families who used the term *stepfamily* to describe their family's structure. Participants merely used the term *family* as their descriptor. The feeling from participants was that the term *stepfamily* or *stepchild* signified separateness or a less than or not as authentic status within the family system. Historically, the term stepfamily, even within European or American culture has had a negative undertone. This infamous history of the term *stepfamily* further supports African Americans' refusal to use the term. Participants felt that the stigma associated with their stepfamily was multifaceted due to their identity as a *black family* and then as a *black stepfamily*. Participants in this study were protective of their stepfamilies. They were selective who they informed about configuration of their family. Many felt it was unnecessary to explain or make the distinction that their son or daughter was their step-son or step-daughter. The protectiveness was due to feeling stigmatized as stepfamily and as Black stepfamily. The stigma was compounded by negative societal stereotypes about dysfunctional and broken African American families where black fathers were absent in their children's lives. This significant finding was not present in the literature. Participants felt a desire to disprove this stereotype by not highlighting the details of their family dynamic. These findings contributed to the literature. As a community, there is an awareness of the term and recognition that the term defines many families within the black community, however, participants in this study were

unwilling to use the term for the reasons stated above. It is important for clinicians working with African Americans with stepfamilies to understanding the new finding.

In addition to the stigma associated with the term *stepfamily,* there is stigma associated with having a stepfamily and being a stepparent. Negative images and messaging about stepparents, the challenges of raising non-biological children, and potential conflict with the former partners are rampant (Christian, 2005). Participants in this study expressed similar concerns before becoming stepparents or having a stepfamily, with fifty-three percent of participants indicating that they were unsure about becoming a stepparent. Despite this, the fifty-three percent of participants that were raised in blended families felt that becoming a stepparent or having a stepfamily was normal.

Positive societal images of African American stepparents and stepfamilies are imperative for the success of African Americans, especially since African American stepfamilies are so prevalent. In this project biological parents and stepparents alike identified positive aspects of having a stepfamily. Participants enjoyed being a part of a large family, working as a team and feeling like a traditional family. Interestingly, individuals in the study were proud that their family did not resemble a stepfamily, but felt similar to any other family. The conceptualization that stepparents are chosen versus the biological parent-biological child relationship, one participant in the study felt that it was "an honor" to be a stepparent. These reflections signify that positive images and messaging about African American stepfamilies is not only important, but essential and mirrors the reality of black families. Due to the limited research on African American stepfamilies, these findings were not reflected in the literature

<u>Preparing for Stepfamily Life/Marriage</u>

Despite the familiarity of stepfamily structure within the African American community, African American couples are not necessarily equipped with the tools needed to create a foundation for a successful marriage, specifically one that creates a stepfamily. Even for those individual participants who were raised in two parent households, the lack of black marriage role models and the lack of intentional conversations before marriage are just two factors that place married individuals with stepfamilies at risk for marital conflict. It is important to note that eighty-five percent of African American couples within stepfamilies in this study were in their first marriage.

Couples in their first marriages have a host of challenges adjusting to newlywed life. Only twenty percent of individuals in this study engaged in conversations about their expectations for marriage and the role of their new spouse as a stepparents in their new family structures. Interestingly, participants where both partners were biological parents before marriage and became stepparents after marriage, were more intentional in discussing and preparing for stepfamily life. The progression of those relationship was predicated on the stepparent-child relationship and role of the stepparent/partner within the relationship. The literature did not specifically discuss the role of premarital counseling; however, Gold (2016) and Long and Young (2007) recommend that stepfamily couples have conversations with one another and their children to prepare for stepfamily life. Setting clear expectation can ameliorate the family's transition and integration process not only for the children, but for the couple as well.

Stepfamily Challenges, Conflict and Role Ambiguity

Premarital conversations regarding marriage expectations and the role of the stepparent are critical factors that precipitated or mitigated stepfamily challenges and ultimately marital challenges (Gold, 2016; Long & Young, 2007). It is important for couples within stepfamilies to have direct and open conversations about their marriage expectations and the role of the stepparent within the family. Similarly, stepparents in this study were uncertain of their role and vacillated between adopting a parental role, a mentor role or even the role of *cool aunt,* which was cited as a preferred role for one of the participants who identifies as a stepmother in the study. The role that the stepparent decides to takes ultimately dictates how involved they will be in the caretaking of the children. In this study, stepparents said they wanted to have a co-parenting relationship with their new spouses while others wanted to support their spouses' parenting responsibilities. Still, other stepparents saw themselves as another adult figure in their stepchildren's lives and made it clear that they did not want to replace their stepchildren's biological parent. Bryant et. al., (2016), Adler-Baeder-Higginbotham (2004) and Kim (2010) confirmed that stepparent role ambiguity can jeopardize the stepparent- stepchild relationship, which can ultimately impact the marital relationship. .

Confusion, uncertainty and ultimately conflict develop when the stepparent and spouse or biological parent do not communicate about the stepparents' role, regardless of the level of the stepparent's involvement. When communication is not open, ongoing, and flexible throughout the marriage, conflict can ensue. Additionally, when stepparents in this study were excluded from parenting decisions, especially those that impact the entire family system, they felt less a part of the family unit. Role ambiguity caused stepparents to feel that their parenting efforts were unappreciated.

Biological Parent Identifying as Single Parent

Another pitfall found in the study was that biological parents within stepfamilies, both mothers and fathers, still identified as single parents after marriage. Overall, biological parents felt responsible for their children and did not want to impose on their new spouse. Typically, biological fathers in this study continued to use their child's paternal grandmother as sources of support after marriage, which often caused stepmothers to feel excluded and less able to integrate into the family system. The reason for this was twofold. Typically, biological fathers still identified as single parents and they did not want to impose childcare responsibilities on their new spouses, allowing them to continue to rely on their child's paternal grandmother. However, stepparents, specifically stepmothers in these situations, wanted to support their spouses by sharing some of the childcare responsibilities, which ultimately made them feel a part of the family system. It is important to note that when stepmothers assumed childcare duties without an intentional conversation about their role, they often felt their parenting efforts were unappreciated. This topic is addressed in more detail in the following sections.

Child Support & Family Court System

Child support through the family court system can also be a source of marital conflict. Overall, biological and stepparents wanted to provide financial support for their children, however most participants believed that the family court system, which is an arm of the American judicial system, is biased against African American fathers. Historically, the black community has had a justified mistrust of the American judicial system. African Americans, in particular African American men, have been unfairly criminalized by this system since slavery. The criminalization of black men has resulted in systemic lynching in the American South

particularly in the early to mid-19th century, the use of excessive force by police when they encounter black men, death by police shootings, and mass incarceration (Dixon, 2009). These and other factors have contributed to feelings of bias and injustice within the African American community, specifically biological fathers utilizing the family court system.

Participants who utilized the family court system also reported more conflict with the former partner as well as increased marital conflict typically related to the financial pressures the couple felt in relation to child support payments. However, individuals whose families were more financially stable did not find child support payments to be problematic. Marital conflict was also caused when the couple felt that child support was not being used appropriately by the former partners. Biological fathers were reluctant or refused to address the issues with their former partners in order to maintain peace or to avoid conflict, and this desire to not address this issue ultimately created conflict with their spouses who wanted them to be more direct and confrontational? Those participants without family court involvement reported less marital conflict, and notably, reported having neutral to positive relationships with the former partners. This is the most advantageous scenario for African American stepfamily couples, as these positive relationships also allowed for more flexibility with visitation arrangements which is helpful for both parents and children. The literature did not address the impact of family court or custody arrangements. These findings also filled a gap in the literature.

Relationship with Former Partner

As mentioned, the relationship dynamics between the biological parent and their former partner can positively or negatively impact the marital couple relationship and ultimately the entire stepfamily system. Fifty-seven percent of participants identified having neutral to positive

relationships with their former partners or their stepchild's biological parents. There are several

benefits to having a neutral to positive relationship with the former partner. It allows the

biological parents and stepparents to have more flexibility with the custody/visitation schedule

and it can prevent parents from having to utilize the family court system and avoid the "stressful

situations" described by other participants. Several participants stated that their concerns about

becoming a stepparent were related to possible conflict with their spouse's former partner, which

Cartwright's (2010) study confirmed as a concern for most stepparents.

Stepparent- Stepchild Relationship

Another theme that emerged from the study that aligned with the literature (Adler-Baeder

& Higginbotham, 2004; Kim, 2010) is that participants were focused on the development of the

stepparent-stepchild relationship, which is integral to the stepfamily integration process (Kim,

2010; Gold, 2016). Biological parents in this study felt protective of their biological children. It

was important to biological parents and to stepparents to have a positive relationships with their

bio-children and stepchildren. Less than positive relationships resulted in lack of family

cohesiveness and marital conflict. In this study, more stepfathers than stepmothers reported

challenges with their children, specifically with stepsons. It's important for stepfathers to be

cognizant and be intentional about developing a relationship with their stepchildren, especially

stepsons. However, overall, eighty percent of participants reported having *good kids* as

stepchildren, making their transition to stepparent life easier. Results showed that biological

parents were more protective of their children, which manifested itself in several ways. Some

biological parents maintained their identities as *single parents* after marriage which impeded the

stepparent-stepchild relationship. As previously mentioned, biological spouses who maintained a

single parent mentality caused stepmothers to feel excluded, inhibiting family cohesion.

Secondly, biological parents felt their partners or the stepparent was overly critical or treated their biological children unfairly, which caused marital conflict. And lastly, biological parents only entertained the idea of marriage if the relationship between their child and potential spouse was positive. Literature emphasizes that the stepparent-stepchild relationship is influential in the success of the couple relationship and ultimately the success of the stepfamily as a unit (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Kim, 2010). Overall, stepparents and biological parents were positive about the stepparent-stepchild relationships.

Age & Sex of Stepchild and Stepparent-stepchild Relationship

The age and sex of a stepchild should also be taken into consideration for couples with stepfamilies. Stepparents had an easier time building a relationship with younger children in comparison to adolescents. Older children were more aware of family dynamics and resistant to the new stepparent. Also, stepparents did not want to infringe on the relationship their stepchildren had with their biological parents, often to the determent of their relationship with their stepchildren.

> So, um, it's been- it's been a little bit- bit of a challenge, you know, being, um, uh, completely, I don't know if present is the right way to describe it, but it's been hard to really show up and be the mother I am to my son, um, to him as well. I feel in some ways, um, not that I've necessarily been restricted or I've been told that I can't do certain things, I just think that I try to be mindful and considerate of the fact that he does have his mother. Participant 21, p. 16.

Generally, stepfathers reported more challenges with stepsons in comparison to stepmothers with stepsons, possibly due to them adopting a more authoritative parenting style. Only one participant who identified as a stepmother had a stepdaughter and overall, the stepparent-stepchildren relationship for this participant was unstable due to the presence of several of the listed challenges which ultimately resulted in less familial cohesion. Stepfather-stepdaughter relationships developed slowly. African American stepfathers had to manage internal and

external concerns about stepfather sexual abuse. Unfortunately, this racist stereotype is so pervasive that it has been internalized. Historically, African American men have been characterized as hypersexualized and therefore must be careful not to draw attention to interactions that could be viewed as inappropriate. However, there is evidence that supports that child sexual abuse often occurs with a known family member. In this example, the fear of being labeled inhibited this particular participant's ability to develop a connection with his stepdaughter. Moreover, this participant valued his role as a stepfather because it gave him an opportunity to be the father he could not be to his older, biological daughters from two previous relationships. The literature did not specifically discuss how sex and age of stepchildren could impact the stepparent-stepchild relationships.

Communication: Family of Origin, Intergenerational Patterns & Marriage

Saint-Jacques et al. (2011) determined that challenges are inherent to stepfamily life. However, stepfamily couples who felt they had a strong bond, which was true for the majority of participants in this study, and used effective communication skills such as addressing concerns directly versus passive aggressively, and worked as a team had better marriage outcomes. In this study participants' families of origin were used as models for how to address conflict and how to not address conflict. Therefore, the transmission of intergenerational behaviors and patterns is important. African Americans as a community have lived in a system of oppression for over two centuries. Living within an oppressive society, African Americans adapted to their environment in order to survive. Mentalities and behaviors that enhanced survival over time have become self-defeating and detrimental in modern society, even in covert racist conditions (DeGruy, 2005). When probed, African American stepfamily couples were aware of their parents' interpersonal dynamics. When they perceived their parent's marital relationship positively,

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couples wanted to replicate aspects of those dynamics in their marriage. When they perceived

their parent's marital relationships negatively, participants filled the gaps and created what their

parents lacked in their own marriages. Fifty-two percent of participants reported replicating the

family structure in which they were raised. Participants who reported conflict or lack of

communication due to conflict in their parents' marriages, reported more challenges than couples

who did not. However, individuals who engaged in premarital or couples counseling gained an

awareness of their own and their partner's familial experiences and perspectives. This insight

allowed individuals to use skills such as direct communication, empathy, and vulnerability to

navigate challenges related to their stepfamily with more ease.

<u>Stepfamily Strengths & Marriage as a Safe Haven</u>

Marriage and families of all structures experience challenges. Research supports that

married people live longer and are generally happier than their non-married counterparts,

specifically African Americans (Kelly & Floyd, 2006; Dixon, 2009; Phillip, Wilmoth &

Marks, 2012; Lataillad, 2006). Historically, enslaved Africans have felt and subsequently,

African Americans have continued to feel strong sense of community (Coates, 2017; Dixon,

2007; DeGruy, 2005; Boyd-Franklin, 2006), despite the historical traumas and systematic

attacked against the African American family system. Similarly, participants in this study

confirmed that regardless the structure of their families or how dissimilar their families were

from Eurocentric nuclear families structures they still felt a sense of connection and felt their

family structure was normal within the African American community. Additionally,

participants were able to identify strengths, positives about their stepfamilies and feel a sense

of togetherness even though they experienced challenges as a result of their stepfamily

structure.

One participant reflected how far her stepfamily had come since she and her partner married. African American couples with stepfamilies are aware of the universal intrinsic challenges that put their marriages at risk. Despite some ambivalence about the institution of marriage, being married is still viewed as desirable and valuable. Therefore, couples with stepfamilies are dedicated to making their marriages fulfilling, satisfying, and making their families succeed. African American stepfamily couples identified their families as the same as traditional families, operating like a team and having love and connection, which were identified as strengths. Flexibility, communal support and shared childcare were also strengths of being a part of stepfamily. Participants had to adjust to changing schedules and dynamics within their homes. They relied on extended family as well as their spouse's former partner for childcare.

Additionally, couples viewed their marriages as a safe haven from the societal and racial stressors that are specific to the African American experience, and as a place to find validation and reassurance about micro aggressive experiences, such as workplace challenges. They all used their marriages as a place to retreat to and a respite from confronting societal challenges.

Implications for Social Work Practice

It is important for social work practitioners and clinicians to have inclusive language when working with African American couples, which is actually dependent on the family and their preference. This study found that African American couples do not identify with the term *stepfamily*, therefore, a clinician may neglect to ask specific questions about family dynamics because the couple did not respond to or identity with the terminology. The lack of inclusive language could account for the gap in literature regarding African American stepfamilies. Participants in this study preferred the term *family* to describe their stepfamily structure;

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however, they were comfortable explaining the details of their stepfamily structure to people they trusted, when there was not fear of judgement and when they felt an ability to be vulnerable. Therefore, clinicians' and social worker practitioners' ability to create a safe space or holding environment where African Americans with stepfamilies feel comfortable, they can then inquire about the specific family dynamics.

Furthermore, it is essential that clinicians have the awareness that, for African Americans with stepfamilies, the feeling of stigma associated with not having a traditional, Eurocentric, two parent and biological children household is pervasive. Even though African American couples in this study knew that stepfamilies were common, and more than half were raised in stepfamilies, they still felt judged by their white counterparts and by society as a whole. For couples who engage in therapeutic services, clinicians need to normalize the African American family structure in relation to larger society and be able to validate the historical stigma that exists regarding the African American family as an institution.

Additionally, it is imperative that social work practitioners and clinicians assist African American individuals with stepfamilies identify their marriage expectations and the expectations of the stepparent. This study illustrated that the lack of awareness of these two important factors caused marital conflict, which, research confirmed, increases the risk for conflict, marital dissatisfaction and ultimately divorce (Dupuis, 2007; Kim, 2010; Schramm & Adler-Baeder, 2012; Mirechi, Elliot & Schneider, 2013; Alder-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; McCarthy & Ginsberg, 2007.) Also, this study suggests that African American stepfamily couples are less likely to engage in premarital counseling and or have intentional conversation about marriage as well as how the stepparent will function within the family system. This finding was highlighted in the literature, but it was not specific to African American couples.

For African Americans with stepfamilies who engage in premarital counseling or psychotherapy in general, it is important for clinicians to help individuals identify and discuss their expectations for marriage and stepfamily life. This study also found that there are advantages to understanding how individuals construct their expectations for marriage by exploring the direct and indirect messages from their families of origin, which can illuminate generational patterns. Ultimately, expectations should be a continuous conversation throughout the life cycle of the marriage and the life cycle of the stepfamily. Dupuis (2007) and this study support clinicians highlighting the benefits of flexibility and neutral to positive working relationships with former partners. Additionally, it is important to normalize that marital conflict related to stepfamily dynamic will occur. This study illustrated that stepmothers in particular appreciate acknowledgement and validation for their parenting efforts. Additionally, direct communication rooted in empathy, vulnerability and with awareness of partner's trigger can help individuals resolve marital conflict.

Limitations & Study Challenges

An integral goal of this qualitative study was to assess the marital bond of African American couples with stepfamilies. Marital bonding is essential for the success of the stepfamily and a review of the literature identified that a gap within the research on stepfamilies existed and additional research was needed (Bryant et al., 2016; Saint-Jacques et al., 2011). The questions did not garner responses that truly assessed individuals' level of bonding. Attachment styles were also difficult to assess. The choice to not use the Adult Attachment Inventory was also a limitation. A tested scale that assesses attachment would have provided more information about the participants' attachment styles. Having insight into participants' specific attachment styles would have provided additional information regarding the relationship, if any between the

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stressors of having a stepfamily structure and participants' ability to have secure attachments in their current marriage. As previous mentioned, literature is lacking regarding marital bonding among couples with stepfamilies (Gold, 2016; Ferrer, 2012; Cartwright, 2010; Cherlin, 2010; Kim, 2010).

Despite providing insight into the experience of African American couples with stepfamilies, due to an N=21, the finding are not generalizable to all African American stepfamily couples. There was a lack diversity, not only regionally, but participants' education backgrounds were not diverse. More than fifty percent of participants earned Master degrees or doctorate degrees. However, it is important to note that the majority of research conducted on African Americans is focused on individuals in low socioeconomic communities.

Recommendations for Future Research

As the scarcity of research on the topic of African American couples with step families indicates, this is an area that is ripe for further research. This study pointed to some particular directions for future research. . The participants in this study represented a narrow and fairly homogeneous sample with regard to geographic location and educational background. Future studies that include a broader geographical population with more diverse education and socioeconomic background would add to and broaden understanding of African American couples with step families. Research on this topic that included the Adult Attachment Inventory would be beneficial in understanding the specific attachment styles of African Americans stepfamily couples. Additionally, the use of Critical Race Theory as a framework for future research would be beneficial, since many of the challenges African Americans as a community

encounter or have encountered can be connected to the inherent system of oppression and racism in American society.

CHAPTER 6: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

African American couple with stepfamilies experience similar issues, challenges and concerns, such as preparing for stepfamily life and navigating the stepfamily integration process, relationship and co-parenting with former partner, and the role of stepparent. However, the participants in this study revealed that in addition to expected stepfamily challenges, they experienced additional challenges that are specific and unique to their experience and identity as African Americans within American society.

My interest in this topic was influenced by my professional interest and the lack of research on the topic, as well as personal experience. As a clinician, I met with numerous individuals, couples and families from various socioeconomic backgrounds who struggled with navigating stepfamily dynamics. The literature on stepfamilies is well researched, but a significant gap exists in the literature regarding African American stepfamilies. The purpose of this qualitative study was to fill a research gap that exists with regard to the family and couples experience of African American couples with stepfamilies. Research on this population has important implications for social work practice since many African Americans have a stepfamily structure, and this structure often comes with specific challenges that are important for clinicians to understand when working with these couples and/or families. I used attachment theory in an unorthodox framework to conceptualize the experience of the African American community and their relationship or attachment to American society. Participants in this study were aware of the systemic challenges that impacted the African American community

and their family structure and they were still able to create strong attachment within their families.

In summary, the findings from this study illuminate the nuanced challenges and successes of black couples with stepfamilies. This study suggests pathways by which clinicians can implement explicit and appropriate perspectives and interventions, rather than simply applying perspectives and interventions from stepfamily literature that is overtly focused on the experience of Caucasian families. Furthermore, the findings of this study also illustrate how attachment styles, generational patterns and institutional oppression affect the quality of African American couples' marital relationships and their stepfamily dynamics. An understanding of how these dynamics can play out in the lived experience of African American couples within stepfamilies provides important context and grounding for the couples to understand and make sense of their experiences.

APPENDIX I: ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

Section 2

Marriage Role Models in the African American Community

I mean, I think, in general, the black experience, as you compare it to, say, our white counterparts, we're just not as used to marriage. So, if you are [an African American] who just has very little experience with marriage and then you add in, okay, you know, a whole blended family, I just think it's layers of dynamics that you have no experience with. Participant 5, p. 21.

[Not having point of reference]…it can lead to, you know, chaos and just all kinds of other issues because you just don't have a reference. So, I would say, it's probably even more difficult in the black culture than it is in my black culture because, again, just the foundation of, you know, two-parent households is unknown to so many people. Participant 5, p. 22.

Section 3

Reactions to the term stepfamily

We really don't use that term. I mean – well, for me, it's my family. I don't know what terms my wife uses because, for me, it's not blended or step because both children are my children. Participant 6, p. 4.

I use the term stepson, but it depends on the context and who I'm talking to. To strangers, I would say, my oldest runs track. Participant 17, p 3-4.

Um, uh, no, I just kind of refer to it as family. With my stepson, I do- I do refer to him obviously as my stepson. Um, it also depends on like who I'm talking to… a lot of people know that I have my own child, so if I say like my other son, they'll look at me kind of strange like, "Oh, when did you have a second kid?" So, in some conversations I will make the distinction. Participant 21, p. 3.

Section 4

Stigma and the African American Stepfamily

There's different narratives that get supported and I don't always know what came first, the chicken or the egg, but, I do know the egg is out there and the egg is being sold to us like, you guys are dysfunctional and you guys can't do it. Participant 1, p. 26

Black step families are being sold dysfunction. Like, you know, most of what you see in the media is – you have like the family unit with the children blended in and there's always the outside force, right? The outside force is always not up to any good – always scratching and clawing and pulling it apart and that's kind of what we promote – we don't get to see the promotion of these cohesive units and, again, I don't know what comes first with that, but I know what gets promoted the most. .Participant 1, p. 27.

Our families (black families) have a lot ... most of our family structures are like this (blended). It's a norm for us, but in society, my thought is that they feed us the dream of two parents, two kids, and that's it. Participant 11, p. 22.

Section 5

Reactions to Becoming a Stepfamily

It wasn't a replacement in the sense of a replacement, but [being a stepfather] gave me the opportunity to be that father I wasn't to my oldest daughters. Participant 10, p. 10.

Like I said, I've never dated someone with a child before, but they definitely did away with all the, any stereotypes that I may have had, About, you know, like, that, you know, quote-on-quote, "baby mama drama". Participant 17, p. 31.

[As stepmom] I was always invited and included in everything, and decision-making, you know, when it came to something big. Participant 12, p. 11.

So, we were taught that we were all brothers and sisters whether we had the same parents or not and that we weren't going to treat each other any differently. We were also taught that the parent that was your parent how you treat them the same. Participant 7, p. 4.

I was very open and, and welcoming, because I didn't have any children of my own- Participant 12, p. 8.

Little arguments. A lot of arguments. One was the amount of maturity to let me do this, like I know what I'm doing. And then her pushback, "Well I'm his mother." And that feeling that if something happened to him, she could never forgive herself. So that was a couple months. Participant 11, p. 13.

Section 9

Bio-parent and stepparent relationship with former partner

When [my step daughter's mother] became pregnant with her other child… Maybe she, I feel like he, she, like I earned her trust. I earned her trust. Like she saw, like she [saw her oldest daughter] was thriving [when she was with my husband and I]. Participant 13p. 16.

And we actually babysit each other's kids. You know? If we want to go out. Yeah. So we definitely come to, like, yeah. Like you, and then they actually get along. You know? She has a daughter the same age as my daughter. "Watch our kids? I'll watch you, I'll watch yours next week you want to go out and not have to pay someone." So, it's actually a plus. Participant 13, p. 15.

[My stepson's brother] spends weekends sometimes with us as well… My stepson's mom, um, well she started, first started asking, um, she, it started with like a work schedule. the first time it happened I was fine, I was like, "oh my god, yeah, totally, like, fine,"..but it has caused some issues. Participant 17, p. 24-25.

Our relationship is kind of a non-relationship. It's cordial, it's pleasant but it's not really deep. There is very little past the surface… It hasn't impact my relationship with my husband only because they don't have a relationship. [My stepson's mother] probably for some years was communicating with me more than him. Participant 7, p.12.

Section 11

Communication, Vulnerability and Awareness and Understanding of Partner's Family of Facilitated Conflict Resolution

I don't think things linger for [my spouse]. [My spouse] is very forgiving… He's big on apologies, like you really sincerely apologized, then in two seconds, he's ready to do something else and move on and be friendly… I just think he thinks certain things with me are a recurring issue, [especially with having his back when it comes to disciplining the boys]. So then he brings it back up and says see? You're doing it again and I really hate that. So if you're sincerely apologetic, then you would want to change, because it bothers me. Participant 18, p. 24.

We're currently in couples' counseling…it's amazing. It's just about staying in dialogue… in the past it probably would've led to an argument because I would've been on the defense, but rather than like become offensive when he makes a comment, it's like okay, let's dialogue about this. , you just walk away each- each person feeling defeated and it'd not constructive. But I think with Imago it really gives you this tool to talk about almost anything but more importantly, the difficult conversations. . And it's so fascinating that over the courses that we're doing, when we took it two years ago, I mean it was this repetitive argument that we were always in, and when we started to really delve into our childhood and why that issue was bothering us- Participant 21, P.21-22.

So, I think that we learned that about each other. We also have learned to appreciate the – we did this in therapy. We did the commonalities. We go and see an African American psychologist for – we call it maintenance therapy. We still go to therapy once a month. And, one thing we do is the commonalities of our narratives. We didn't realize how much growing up – our narratives are the same, even though I'm adopted. And, so, identifying those commonalities opened up a very vulnerable and sacred place in us of connection and intimacy and, I think, it feeds the energy and the power in our marriage. Participant 3, p. 15.

I think it was only that, I think it was only difficult for him because of how I was feeling about it, and how like, my frustrations kind of, like, manifested themselves in the marriage and stuff like that, but, eventually I just think, um, we did speak on it and, in terms of just me feeling like I just, like I was just kind of, in this, doing it by myself so to speak. Um, so, you know, we made some changes in terms of, like, his work schedule, um, we talked about just, me speaking up more, You know, before things got really bad, just being more vocal about it [helped]. Participant 17, p. 12.

So even in our hard work, it's like okay, so you guys are in conflict about this or you're disagreeing on this. All right, let's talk about not only why you're disagreeing about on it about it as far as, you know, being adult. Let's talk about how this connects to your childhood. And it's so fascinating that over the courses that we're doing, when we took it two years ago, I mean it was this repetitive argument that we were always in, and when we started to really delve into our childhood and why that issue was bothering us- Participant 21, p. 23.

APPENDIX 2: RECRUITMENT FLYER

<div align="center">

University of Pennsylvania
Doctoral Research Study
Participant Recruitment
African American Stepfamilies

</div>

This study seeks to explore the marital experience of African American couples within stepfamilies. Participants will be asked questions regarding what makes their marriage work, what challenges they experience being a stepfamily, how they resolve their challenges and remain emotionally close. Participants will be interviewed for about one hour in person, by phone or via an online platform. Each member of the couple will be interviewed individually and it is not necessary for both members of a couple to agree to participate in the study.. Please feel forward this to anyone you know who may be interested.

You may participate if:

- You and your spouse identify as African American
- You are involved in a heterosexual marriage
- You have been married for at least 5 years
- Your marriage created a stepfamily or blended family
- You are satisfied with your marital relationship

You will be compensated $10 gift card to Target for participating.

Email to the Pennsylvania Society of Clinical Social Workers

Dear Colleagues,

I am a clinical social worker and a doctoral candidate at the University of Pennsylvania. I am

studying and exploring the experience of African American couples within stepfamilies and how

they maintain their connection to each other in their marital relationship. I am interested in

interviewing individuals who are married, a part of a stepfamily and who are satisfied with their

marital relationship. Interviews will be with individuals. Each member of the couple will be

interviewed individually and it is not necessary for both members of a couple to agree to

participate in the study. Please feel forward this to anyone you know who may be interested.

Findings from this study will help to fill a gap in the social work literature regarding the experience of African American stepfamily couples. In addition, the results will increase the knowledge base informing clinical interventions by social workers and therapists working with and treating African American stepfamilies. The study seeks to enroll 20 participants. The interview will be about one hour to one hour and half. Interviews will take place in person, via Zoom-an online video platform or by telephone and arranged at your convenience.

There is no risk associated with participating in the interview. Participants will receive a $10 gift card to Target. Interviews will be recorded and I may take notes. All information will be kept confidential and no identifying information will be used in the study results. Participants can end the study interview at any time if they become uncomfortable. Please contact me at 215-490-4551 if you would like to participate in the study or if you have any further questions.

Thank you for your time and your participation in advance. This study is approved by the IRB at the University of Pennsylvania.

Jennifer J. Clinkscales, MSW, LCSW

University of Pennsylvania

School of Social Policy & Practice

215-490-4551

jonesjen@upenn.edu

APPENDIX 3: CONSENT FORM

Introduction and Purpose of Interview

My name is Jennifer Clinkscales and I am a doctoral of clinical social work (DSW) candidate at the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Policy & Practice. The interview is a part of my dissertation which is a requirement of my doctoral program. The purpose of this interview is to explore the experience of African American couples within stepfamilies.

What is involved?

The interview will last about an hour to an hour and half. I will ask you questions about your marriage and the benefits and challenges of being a black stepfamily. You will be asked questions regarding what makes your marriage work, what challenges you experience being a stepfamily, how you resolve challenges and remain emotionally close to your spouse.

During the interview I will use an audio recorder to record our conversation. I may also write or type notes as you are responding to questions. I will use the information from participant interviews as data in my dissertation project.

Confidentiality

Your participation in the interview is confidential. Everything that is discussed in the interview will be used in aggregate with other interviews or in quotes that will not be specifically attributed to you. Your identity will only be known by the researcher. All paperwork with identifying information will be kept in a locked cabinet and only the researcher will have access to these documents. Recordings will be de-identified and will be transcribed by a confidential and secure transcription company called Rev.com. After the data is coded, the transcriptions and other research related paperwork will be shredded or erased by the researcher.

Benefits of Participating

There is no direct benefit to participate in the interview. However, due to the nature of my dissertation, your story might help researchers, social workers or therapists work with African American stepfamilies to better meet their clinical needs. It also might be beneficial to share your story. You might find it interesting or satisfying to share your story.

Risks of Participating

There is minimal risk to participating in the interview. If I ask you a question that makes you uncomfortable you do not have to answer it. You can stop the interview completely or we can move to other questions. If you continue to feel upset, brief emotional support will be provided and a referral to community resources will be provided if necessary.

Compensation

Participants will receive a $10 Target gift card for completing the interview

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

Jennifer J. Clinkscales, MSW, LCSW

3701 Locust Walk-Caster Building

Philadelphia, PA 19027

jonesjen@upenn.edu

215-490-4551

Your participation is completely voluntary

If you do not want to be interviewed today, you do not have to participate. There are no consequences for not participating. By signing your name below you are agreeing to participate

in the interview process and confirming that I have answered all of your questions. You will receive a copy of this consent form.

Participant Signature:_____

Participant printed Name:_____

Date:_____

Interviewers Signature: _____

Interviewer's printed name:_____

Date:_____

APPENDIX 4: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Before we begin I want to thank you again for taking the time to meet/talk with me about your experience being a part of stepfamily. My research is focused on exploring the experience of Black stepfamily couples and what they identify as challenges and how they navigate those challenges in order to remain emotionally close or connected in their marital relationship. I'm also curious how their challenges are specific to their experience of being Black in this country. The interview will be about an hour to an hour and half. Everything we talk about is confidential. I will record or type what we discuss. Your identity will not be linked to the comments used in this research study. Do you have any questions for me?

Go over the consent form and have them sign it -unless we're meeting remotely. Consent form will be sent and signed before the session.

Background of Marriage

1. How long have you been married?

2. Which marriage is this for you? First? Second? Third?

3. How many biological children do you have? What percentage of the time do your children live with you?

4. How many stepchildren do you have? What percentage of the time do your children live with you?

5. Can you tell me about the messages you received either directly or indirectly from your family about marriage?

6. Did you receive any messages, either directly or indirectly, about the role of men and women within marriage?

7. How did you and your spouse meet?

Focus on Stepfamilies

1. How would you describe your role or title in your stepfamily?

2. How would you define the term "stepfamily"?

3. What comes to mind when you hear the word stepfamily? Is there another word you would use?

4. How did you or your family feel about you being a part of a stepfamily system?

5. Can you tell me about your relationship with your former partner or your spouse's former partner? Has it changed over time? How has that relationship impacted your marital relationship?

6. Please tell me what you enjoy most about being a part of a stepfamily?

7. What are your strengths as a family?

8. What are three areas of concern related to your stepfamily dynamic?

9. Can you tell me a story about a time when you experienced a challenge with your partner/ spouse that you think was specific to being a stepfamily?

10. How did the challenge impact your marital relationship or marital bond or sense of closeness to your partner/spouse?

11. Can you tell me a story about how you and your partner/spouse resolved the challenge or concern?

12. How did resolving the concern or challenge impact your marital relationship or the bond you felt towards your partner/spouse?

Focus on Black stepfamilies

1. To what extent do black stepfamilies and white stepfamilies share the same challenges?

2. Are there challenges specific to black stepfamilies that might not be recognizable to non-black stepfamilies?

3. To what extent does racism impact your stepfamily or your marital relationship?

APPENDIX 5: DEMOGRAPHICS CHARACTERISTICS

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

_____

Characteristics	n	%

_____

Sex

Male	10	47.6
Female	11	52.3

Age

30-34	1	4.7
35-40	10	38.0
41-45	3	14.2
46-50	3	14.2
51-55	1	4.7
56-60	2	9.5
61+	1	4.7

Years Married

5-8	13	61.9
9-12	1	4.7
13-16	1	4.7
17-20	2	9.5
21+	4	9.5

Type of Marriage

First	18	85.7
Second	2	9.5
Third	1	4.7

Number of Biological Children

0-1	9	42.8
2-3	10	47.6
4-5	2	9.5

Number of Stepchildren

0	7	28.5
1-2	14	66.6

Highest Level of Education

High School Diploma	2	9.5
Some College	1	4.7
Bachelor's Degree	3	14.2
Some Graduate Work	1	4.7
Master Degree	7	33.3
Doctorate Degree (JD, MD, PhD)	7	33.3

Biological Parents Only   6   28.5

Stepparent Only   1   4.7

Stepparent and Biological Parent   14   66.6

Stepparent with child(ren) after marriage	9	42.8
Both partners had children prior to marriage	5	23.8
Participants' FOO Stepfamily/Blended	11	52.3

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