
Antonius Delvecco Skipper

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS COPING IN THE MARITAL STABILITY OF STRONG, AFRICAN AMERICAN COUPLES: A STRENGTHS-FOCUSED APPROACH

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in

The School of Social Work

by
Antonius Delvecco Skipper
B.S., Georgia State University, 2007
M.A., Georgia State University, 2012
M.A., Louisiana State University, 2016
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ABSTRACT

Relatively few studies have examined the strengths of the African American family, while several have highlighted social issues that have affected the African American family such as divorce, single-parent households, and absentee fathers. This focus on deficit and dysfunction contributes to a research-based gap in understanding the African American marital dyad. Given that religion influences the lives of many African American couples, it is important to understand the impact that religious coping can have on marital stability in the African American community. The purpose of this study is to explore the underlying processes of religious coping for those African American couples that identify as highly religious and happily married. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the two following questions: 1) How do highly religious, happily married African American couples use religion as a coping resource for common stressors that impact the marriage?, and 2) How are the three approaches to religious coping, identified as self-directed, deferred, and collaborative, used to contribute to the marital stability of highly religious, happily married African American couples? In-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted with 35 African American couples, married for at least 7-years and highly involved with an Abrahamic (Christian, Jewish, Mormon, and Muslim) faith. Grounded theory methods and a Numeric Content Analysis were used to analyze the narrative data. Three a priori themes related to the variations of religious coping were presented: 1) Often, We Can Manage Our Stress, 2) I’ve Laid My Burdens Down, and 3) Dear God, Help Us to Help Us. Emergent subthemes related to each of these a priori topics were also presented. Implications, related to theory, policy, and practice, that consider the intersections of religion and marriage for African American families are also discussed.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

‘A paradise of inward tranquility’ seems to be faith's usual result; and it is easy, even without being religious one's self, to understand this...indeed, how can it possibly fail to steady the nerves, to cool the fever, and appease the fret, if one be sensibly conscious that, no matter what one's difficulties for the moment may appear to be, one's life as a whole is in the keeping of a power whom one can absolutely trust? In deeply religious men the abandonment of self to this power is passionate. Whoever not only says, but feels, ‘God's will be done,’ is mailed against every weakness.


Over the past several decades, issues such as poverty, crime, unemployment, and incarceration have affected many African American families (Dixon, 2009). While the recognition of these issues are needed before solutions to solve them can be proposed, the over-emphasis on such dilemmas dominates the existing literature on African American families (Cherlin, 1998). This deficit perspective highlights the many reasons African American families may fail, while rarely noting the ways these families prevail (Bernard & Thomas, 2016; Connor & White, 2006; DeFrain, 1999; Walsh, 2015). Further, by focusing on dysfunction, often excluded from the studies of African Americans are happily married African American couples (Marks et al., 2008).

As noted by DeFrain and Asay (2007), “strong marriages are the center of many strong families” (p. 6). Research suggests that married Blacks, henceforth used interchangeably with African Americans, enjoy marital benefits that include economic advantage (Blackman, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colon, & Roberts, 2005), better parenting experiences (McLeod, Kruttschnitt, & Dornfeld, 1994), and increased psychological well-being (Blackman et al., 2005; Luoma & Pearson, 2002). Also, in comparison to their divorced and separated peers, married African Americans better cope with common stressors such illness, racism, and financial strain (Koball, Moiduddin, Henderson, Goesling, & Besculides, 2010). Chatters and colleagues (1999)
expressed a belief that this increased ability to cope is, at least in part, mediated by the tendency of many married Blacks to remain highly engaged in religious practices (Chatters, Taylor, & Lincoln, 1999).

Religious coping can be complex, but often studies on Blacks attempt to capture the influence of religion with simple measures of church attendance and denominational affiliation (Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). While these global indices of religion help establish positive and negative outcomes associated with religiosity, they do little to explain how and why religious coping is used in different ways (Pargament & Raiya, 2007). As a result, limited research addresses the influence of religious coping on common stressors in the Black family. Further, this “lack of qualitative, process-oriented data on Black families is particularly unfortunate given the centrality of religion in African American life” (Marks, Tanner, Nesteruk, Chaney, & Baumgartner, 2012, p. 697).

In response to the call for more strength-focused studies on Black families (Marks & Chaney, 2006) and more in-depth examinations of religious involvement (Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012; Dollahite & Marks, 2009, Marks & Dollahite, 2011), the purpose of this study is twofold. First, this study aims to qualitatively explore the use of religion as a coping resource for common stressors that impact the marriages of African American couples. Second, this study seeks to examine how various forms of religious coping contribute to the marital stability of highly religious, happily married African American couples. Given these goals, this study moves beyond the deficit-focused identification of stressors for Black families and considers the strength-focused religious responses to these stressors, along with their positive impact on marriage. Prior to the overview of relevant literature for this study, some guiding frameworks
are presented. These include the following: (1) the Family Strengths Model for researching strong families, and (2) the variations of religious coping.

The Family Strengths Model

Scholars in family studies use strong to describe those families that believe they are functioning well as a unit, while also happy with their roles and relationships with each other (DeFrain, 1999; Marks et al., 2008; Stinnett & DeFrain, 1985). Prior to the 1970s, research on the strengths of strong families was nearly non-existent. Further, even since that time, most studies have focused on weaknesses and problems within family systems (Stinnett, 1983). As Marks and colleagues pointed out in relation to African Americans, those studies that focus on individual and community dysfunction outnumber those that examine the strengths of the Black family (Marks et al., 2012). Therefore, as a strengths-based perspective grounded in research from over 21,000 family members from various ethnic backgrounds (Asay & DeFrain, 2012), the Family Strengths Model helps to justify the focus of this study on strong African American couples.

Within the Family Strengths Model are six general qualities, including commitment, appreciation and affection, positive familial communication, togetherness, spiritual well-being, and coping ability (Stinnett & DeFrain, 1985). Commitment is the display of loyalty towards each family member (Silberberg, 2001). In this regard, those within strong families are dedicated to one another, and place familial well-being before work and individual leisure (DeFrain, 1999). Further, Stinnett and DeFrain (1985) found that married couples often discussed commitment in terms of sexual fidelity and connected this quality to the positive displays of affection also recognized in strong families. Those within strong families openly and frequently display love, care, concern, and respect for their fellow family members. They also
attempt to understand and value the differences and unique characteristics of others through
effective communication (Sliberberg, 2001). A strong family does not always agree with one
another. However, strong families communicate in an open, positive manner that is neither
hostile nor critical (DeFrain, 1999). Further, studies of strong families find the ability to be an
attentive listener to be one of the most important aspects of positive communication (Wuerffel,
DeFrain, & Stinnett, 1990). While these initial strengths (commitment, appreciation and
affection and positive familial communication) help to highlight the unique traits of strong
families, the remaining characteristics are essential to the religion and coping aspects of this
study.

Silberberg (2001) described the togetherness of strong families as the invisible glue that
bonds the family. While strong families often spend a considerable amount of time together,
other important parts of togetherness are mutual values and beliefs (DeFrain, 1999). In relation
to religion, studies of religious homogamy have frequently found that these shared beliefs can
positively impact familial and marital stability (Curtis & Ellison, 2002; Dollahite & Marks,
2006). For example, Marks and colleagues interviewed religious, strong African American
families and found that marital enhancers frequently included shared religious practices (Marks
et al., 2008). Similarly, both Marks et al. (2008) and Stinnett and DeFrain (1985) recognized
that strong families often describe their love for one another as sacred. Strong families maintain
a deep spiritual connection with one another, and they frequently relied on this spiritual
cohesiveness to look past day-to-day stressors and focus on that which they viewed as sacred in
the family (DeFrain, 1999).

Stress can be just as common for strong families as it is for troubled families. However,
with the use of the Family Strengths Model, Stinnett and DeFrain (1985) found that strong
families are better able to cope with stress. A strengths-focused perspective does not ignore the problems or stressors within a family. Instead, a strengths-focused perspective recognizes that strong families use all of the aforementioned traits to adapt to change and effectively navigate difficult situations together (Silberberg, 2001). This facet of the Family Strengths Model has direct relevance to this study. More specifically, this study seeks to interview the rarely sampled, strong Black families that emerged from their encounters with stress as a collective, resilient unit. Giving particular attention to the use of religious coping by these strong families, this study builds on Silberberg’s (2001) notion that “a [religious] value system [can] strengthen [the] family and help them cope with adversities and challenges” (p. 56).

**Variations of Religious Coping**

As previously mentioned, infrequently studied in the social sciences are the underlying processes of religious involvement. Therefore, Pargament and Raiya (2007) called for more in-depth explorations of religious phenomena such as religious coping. Religious coping is directly related to a specific stressful circumstance. Also, in comparison to global religious attributes, religious coping is more dependable in predicting outcomes (Nooney & Woodrum, 2002; Pargament & Raiya, 2007; Roesch & Ano, 2003).

Pargament (1997) identified three religious-oriented approaches to coping: (1) the self-directed approach, wherein individuals assume all control in the coping process without the assistance of a higher power, (2) the deferred approach, in which individuals rely solely on the higher power to cope with the stressor, and (3) the collaborative approach, characterized by a partnership in which the individual and the higher power are both active in the coping process. Several studies have measured the variations of religious coping against psychological well-being, and with rare exceptions (Harris & Spilka, 1990), have consistently revealed self-directed
coping to be more related to increased stress and depression, in comparison to deferred and collaborative approaches (Bickle et al., 1998; Koenig et al., 2012; Ross, Handal, Clark, & Wal, 2009). These findings are believed to be often associated with the intrapsychic reframing of highly stressful situations. More specifically, when one feels that they have a higher power in which they can confide and rely during times of need, they may be less likely to view the stressor as insurmountable (Gillum & Griffith, 2010; Koenig et al., 2012).

In relation to African Americans, the majority of studies considering the three approaches to religious coping were health-related (Johnson, Elbert-Avila, & Tulsky, 2005; Weathers et al., 2009). Further, only one study considered these approaches in the Black family (Molock & Barksdale, 2013), and no known studies have explored these variations of religious coping in African American marriages. With the salience of religion in the lives of many African American couples, attention to self-directed, deferred, and collaborative religious coping strategies could provide valuable insight into the use of these mechanisms during stressful times. This study will address this existing gap in literature by examining the three variations of religious coping in the unexplored Black marital dyad. Further, with a qualitative approach, this study will also respond to the recognized need for more in-depth explorations of religious coping (Pargament & Raiya, 2007).

This study will be guided by the following research question: (1) How do highly religious, happily married African American couples use religion as a coping resource for common stressors that impact the marriage?, and (2) How are the three approaches to religious coping, identified by Pargament (1997) as self-directed, deferred, and collaborative, used to contribute to the marital stability of highly religious, happily married African American couples? With these questions, this study aims to counter the deficit perspectives of African American
families by exploring those coping habits that have served as contributors to strength and stability in African American marriages. However, prior to exploring these underlying processes of religious coping, a review of relevant literature is presented in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Blacks need to recognize that they still have choices. They need to challenge the awful myth that Black men and women cannot get along. The statistics do not have to be strong indicators of the future unless Blacks allow them to be – Blacks must strive toward empowerment.


According to Hill (2003), “Perhaps the most popular variant of blaming the victim is to talk about the weakness of black families” (p.xiii). The marital dyad is a valuable unit within the African American family. Further, while the underlying values that guide both marriage and religious commitment are similar, poorly measured religious variables and the deficit approach to exploring African American marriages limit what is known about the intersection of these constructs (Connor & White, 2006; Taylor et al., 2004). Although the focus on marital instability and dissolution continue to dominate the scholarly literature on marriage (Brown, Orbuch, & Bauermeister, 2008), these studies warrant review. Such attention will further emphasize the need for strengths-based research on the coping and resilience of strong, African American marriages.

This review examines previous literature that highlights the intersections of religion, coping, marriage, and race. First noted will be the nature of the issue, before turning to those studies that recognize the role of religion in marriage. Reviewed next are studies that examine the role of religion in the lives of African Americans. Finally, studies on general religious coping and, more specifically, African Americans and religious coping will be reviewed in depth. This review will close by acknowledging existing gaps in the examined literature, with the remaining chapters helping to address these gaps.
Nature of the Issue

Although 64% of adult African Americans were married in 1970, that percentage drastically declined to near 32% by the year 2004 (McAdoo, 2007; U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Further, the U.S. Census Bureau (2007) recognized that the growing divorce rate, partnered with the increasing likelihood of African Americans to never marry, contributed to Blacks being the most un-partnered racial/ethnic group in America. This is of concern because, if married, African Americans might achieve a level of success that exceeds educational success. Further, in a broader context, the largest recognized gap in self-rated perceptions of well-being exists between married Americans and all others (Blackman et al., 2005; Staples, 1999).

Structural and systemic factors within the African American community make marriage and marital stability more evasive. More specifically, the unusually high mortality and incarceration rates of African American males limit the number of available partners for African American females (Alexander, 2012; Dixon, 2009; Marable, 2015; Reiman & Leighton, 2015; U.S. Department of Justice, 2006). Also, the persistent unemployment, underemployment, and sporadic employment of African American men, often due to structural racism, reduce the perceptions regarding African American males as being of marriage quality (Staples, 1999). Several researchers have recognized that the likelihood of African American men to desire marriage at a much lower rate than their female counterparts further compounds this issue (Chadiha, 1992; Wilson, 1996).

Undoubtedly, the statistics surrounding marriage in African American families is disheartening, and the focus on divorce, instability, and single-parent households further distorts the knowledge base of strong African American marriages (Connor & White, 2006). However, a small but growing body of literature has noted that religion can have a significant buffering
effect for many types of families encountering unique stressors (Brown et al., 2008; Ellison, 1997; Furdyna, Tucker, & James, 2008; Lu, Marks, Nesteruk, Goodman, & Apavaloaie, 2013; Marks et al., 2008; Phillips, Wilmoth, & Marks, 2012). Stinnett (1983) realized that strength-focused studies around family were needed to balance the overused problem-centered model. Further, with the slow growth of this type of research over the past 30 years, there remains much to be learned about African American families and their use of religion. Prior to exploring the role of religion in family, it is first appropriate to examine previous studies noting the use of religion in marriage.

**The Role of Religion in Marital Stability**

Although some studies report no significant correlation between religious involvement and relationship stability (Booth, Johnson, Branaman, & Sica, 1995), the majority of research has found the unity of religiously involved couples to be strengthened by their beliefs and practices (Call & Heaton, 1997). The following subsections will discuss positive and negative aspects of religion in relation to marital stability. Studies noting the impact of religion in deterring divorce are reviewed first. Next, the unique role of religious homogamy in relationship quality will be shared. Last, this review highlights those studies exploring marital satisfaction as a function of religion.

**Religion as a divorce deterrent.** Several researchers have considered the relationship between religious variables and outcomes relative to marital stability. Arguably, divorce is one of the most studied outcomes measured against religious variables. There exists between a 40 to 50% chance that a newly married couple today will seek a divorce at some point, and divorce has been rated just after the loss of a child as the most devastating event an individual can face in their lifetime (Everett & Everett, 1994; Popenoe, 2010). Further, the consequences of divorce
can be severe and far-reaching. Previous studies have found that divorced individuals are more depressed (Amato, 2000; Cano & O’Leary, 2000; Hope, Power, & Rodgers, 1999), more socially isolated (Marks, 1996; Peters & Leifbroer, 1997), and more likely to engage in negative behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse (Power, Rodgers, & Hope 1999). Nonetheless, several studies have recognized that religious beliefs and practices can serve as protective factors against divorce.

In a meta-analytic review of studies on religion, marriage, and parenting, Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, and Swank (2001) concluded that greater religiosity, captured by varying religious measures, was associated with a decreased risk of divorce. Several individual studies further support these findings. In an examination of the interrelationships between religion and marriage spanning over a 17-year period, Clydesdale (1997) found that regular church attendees were less likely to get a divorce, in comparison to those that did not attend church as frequently. More specifically, the researcher discovered that individuals that did not attend church were 2.5 times more likely to also report that they had been divorced, in comparison to religious respondents. Also, Call and Heaton (1997) used a nationally representative sample of 4,587 couples from the National Survey of Families and Households to examine marital stability over a 5-year period. The researchers concluded that religious attendance was the single most influential factor in marital stability, and divorce was least likely for those couples that had shared patterns of religious attendance.

In a more recent exploration of divorce and marriage, Brown et al. (2008) used the General Social Survey to longitudinally compare racial differences in marital stability for Black American and White American couples. These researchers tracked behaviors over a 7-year period and found that, for both Black and White couples, greater religious service attendance
predicted martial stability. Similarly, Vaaler, Ellison, and Powers (2009) noted that divorce was less likely when couples shared a religious marriage ceremony and when the wife was a frequent church attendee. Although the control of baseline measures dampened the strength of this relationship, the researchers concluded that religion served as a buffer against divorce. Finally, a study that followed 2,676 married adults from the years 1965 to 1994 found that the likelihood of divorce during a twenty-eight year follow-up was 49 percent lower for those that attended church weekly, in comparison to those that attended church less than once a week. As the reviewed literature of Call and Heaton (1997), Vaaler et al. (2009) and others (Lu et al., 2012; Williams, Ulm, & Banker, 2013) has recognized, a key factor of religion in discouraging divorce lies within the shared religious practices and beliefs of both the husband and wife. This religious homogamy has also been frequently examined as an independent variable in studies considering marital instability as an outcome measure, as discussed next.

**Religious homogamy.** In previous research, religious homogamy captured a number of related characteristics that include denominational similarity, joint church attendance, and shared religious authority, or what researchers have described as equally yoked (Marks et al., 2008; Myers, 2006). Further, researchers have long documented the relationship between religious homogamy in marriage and marital instability. In a 1999 study of over 4,600 participants, Ellison, Bartkowski, and Anderson examined the National Survey of Families and Households in efforts to establish the relationship, if any, between denominational homogamy and domestic violence. The researchers found that denominational heterogamy, or dissimilarity between spousal denominations, was associated with an increased risk of domestic abuse within the marriage. These findings of heightened conflict resonated with later research. Curtis and Ellison (2002) found that in a sample of 2,945 first-time married couples, marital conflict,
operationalized as arguments, was greater when either spouse attended church more than the other. Although the aforementioned studies of religious homogamy did not use divorce as an outcome measure, previous research found significant linkages between domestic disagreements and divorce (Ellis & Stuckless, 2006; Warrener, Koivunen, & Postmus, 2013), providing the basis to state that the reviewed independent measures can contribute to divorce.

Some literature specifically examines the divorce rates of religiously homogenous couples, and findings consistently revealed that couples with varying religious beliefs are more likely to seek a divorce (Center for Marriage and Family, 1999; Heaton and Pratt, 1990; Kalmijn, de Graaf, & Janssen, 2005). In an examination of data from the 1987-1988 National Survey of Families and Households, Lehrer and Chiswick (1993) found that couples with a shared denomination were significantly less likely to get a divorce in comparison to interfaith couples—a finding that held across several different denominations but with variation in differences (i.e., LDS-to-LDS marriages were most stable, but interfaith LDS marriages were three times more likely to end in divorce than same faith; see Dollahite & Marks, 2006). These findings relate to the earlier work of Call and Heaton (1997) in which the researchers concluded that not only was church attendance important in marital stability, but similarity and shared experiences in church attendance was the key to marital stability. Further, the risk of divorce rose when one spouse was more engaged in church than the other. Such research has valuable implications for married men as they emphasize that although women are typically more religious and spiritual (Waite & Lehrer, 2003), religious homogamy, shared denomination, and attending church with a spouse foster similar views, shared family values, and a strengthened marriage (Sherkat, 2004). Recently, researchers moved beyond the descriptive and relational evaluations of religious heterogamy and tested interventive methods to strengthen the relationships of interfaith couples.
Williams, Ulm, and Banker (2013) organized *Two Churches, One Marriage*, a web-based program designed to help couples recognize religious differences while strengthening their marriage and religious bond. The program was divided into a four-part training that addressed the following areas: (1) communication in discussing religious differences, (2) views on marriage and the role of religion in marriage, (3) issues heavily influenced by religion, such as gender roles, and (4) an application portion that allowed couples to begin accepting the religious views of their partner while strategizing ways to build a cohesive, religious family. Following the rating of the program as extremely or very helpful by 21 marriage educators, 49 married, cohabitating, or engaged individuals were surveyed to examine the perceived helpfulness of the program. The sample consisted of a variety of individuals from various denominations, family structures, and races, and nearly two-thirds of the participants reported that the program was either extremely helpful or very helpful. Further, nearly 75% of the participants said that they would either definitely recommend or probably recommend the program to another interfaith couple. Although the findings of this study are potentially limited by the geographic region of the conveniently sampled participants, programs such as Two Churches, One Marriage are essential in alleviating religious discord in interfaith marriages. Along with the exploration of interventions for interfaith couples, research efforts in religious homogamy also encompass marital satisfaction. Further, researchers have noted that religion is a significant contributor to marital satisfaction (Brandt, 2004).

**Religion as a contributor to marital satisfaction.** Religion can play an interesting role in marital satisfaction. As illustrated by a longitudinal study of 1,008 adults, not only can religious involvement increase marital satisfaction and stability, marital satisfaction can also increase religious involvement (Booth et al., 1995). In one study of sanctity (described as the
“degree to which partners believe their marriage is a manifestation of their beliefs or experiences with God and their religious faith,” cf. Mahoney et al., 1999, p. 323), Stafford, David, and McPherson (2014) found that, in an examination of 342 couples, sanctity was positively related to marital satisfaction. Further, this sanctity led couples to focus and build on positive aspects of their marriage in seeking to please God. Also, Fincham, Ajayi, and Beach (2011) utilized a similar model to examine the impact of religion on marital satisfaction for 487 married and engaged African American couples from the southeastern United States. The researchers concluded that self-rated spirituality was positively correlated with marital satisfaction, and this relationship was especially salient for African American men. The relationship between religion and marital satisfaction extends beyond Christianity. In a randomly sampled group of 973 Muslims, marital satisfaction was measured with questions such as, “My life partner is my best friend” and “If reborn, I will marry the same person.” Following analyses, the researchers found a significant positive relationship between religiosity and marital satisfaction (Suhail & Chaudhry, 2004). Although the aforementioned studies establish a typically positive relationship between religiosity and marriage, and over 80% of research supports such findings (Koenig et al., 2012), there does exist a small body of literature finding an inverse relationship or no relationship between religious involvement and marital stability.

An older survey of 290 married Quakers sought to examine the relationships between religious involvement, religious commitment, and marital violence (Brutz & Allen, 1986). The researchers measured religious commitment with an instrument that captured peace activism, a religion-driven belief that an inner light should guide interactions with adversaries in efforts to seek peaceful resolutions at all costs. The researchers concluded that while religious involvement decreased physical and emotional violence against a spouse, religious commitment,
and the commitment to non-violence outside of the home increased in-home abuse reported by men. Further, this study noted that varying religious belief systems could impact marital violence differently, as some religious affiliations may deem such behavior more appropriate than others (Brutz & Allen, 1986). A more recent study by Olsen, Goddard, and Marshall (2013) randomly sampled 1,204 married individuals and measured the impact of religiosity on marital commitment. While the researchers found that support from a religious congregation and general religiosity were associated with higher levels of marital commitment, they also found that church attendance was not related to increased commitment within a marriage. Although this finding contradicted the results of previous research (Brown et al., 2008; Call & Heaton, 1997), the researchers concluded that meanings derived from religious beliefs and practices may be more important than simply having a presence within the church (Olson et al., 2013).

Of the reviewed studies, with the exception of one (Fincham et al., 2011), a commonality of an underrepresented sample of African American participants existed. While this in no way infers that existing research is void of views on religious African American marriages, it does help to recognize that only few studies have sought to explore the strength of religion in marital stability for African Americans. Further, although research on African American families are replete with discussions of divorce, female-headed households, and child delinquency (Brown et al., 2008; Connor & White, 2006), a shift to recognize positive aspects of religion in the lives of African Americans is now beginning to provide information about the under-examined corner of the spectrum (Marks et al., 2005, 2006, 2008, 2010).

Religion in the Lives of African Americans

Several books, articles, and reviews have focused on the importance of religion in the African American community (Chaney, 2008a; Mark et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2004). The
following subsections review those studies exploring African Americans from a religious perspective. Discussed first will be the history of religion in the lives of Blacks, along with the factors that contribute to the salience of religion for this group. Next, studies discussing the church congregation and social support garnered from the church congregation will be shared. Finally, those studies exploring the beneficial and damaging effects of religion on the health of African Americans will be reviewed.

**Historical context.** Approximately 80% of African Americans say that religion is very important to them, in comparison to 56% of other ethnic groups (Taylor et al., 2004), and numerous researchers have conducted racial-based comparative studies and drawn similar conclusions (Chatters, Taylor, Bullard, & Jackson, 2008; Chatters, Taylor, Bullard, & Jackson, 2009; Gillum & Griffith, 2010; Taylor, Chatters, & Joe, 2011). Historically, religion has played a unique role in the lives of African Americans, and researchers note this role as dating back to slavery (Chaney, Marks, Sasser, & Hopkins, 2010; Jackson, Chatters, & Taylor, 1993).

It was common practice to separate enslaved Africans from their families upon arrival in America, and this was done in an effort to divide and better control various familial and religious communities (McAdoo, 2007). These actions led to a mixture of faiths and cultures on plantations, but the reliance upon religion to navigate the harsh realities of slavery remained a common thread amongst slaves (Watson & Stepteau-Watson, 2015). Many slave owner’s used religion as a control mechanism that called for obedience to the master. Also, these slave owners would often allow slaves to engage in spiritual expression, with the understanding that the message would not encourage revolt and threaten the institution of slavery (Pinn & Pinn, 2002). One common form of expression for slaves was the singing of hymns.
African American hymns have been referred to as a melodic blending of emotions, and were considered by DuBois (1908) as one of the three characteristics of religion for the Black man. Sometimes incomprehensible, hymns are frequently lined, a practice of having a leader to speak the next few lines that the group will sing (McAdoo, 2007). Hymns provided slaves with a promise of refuge and instilled in them a faith that could be carried from plantation to plantation and passed down to younger generations. Further, this mobility of hymns contributed to the spiritual unification of enslaved African Americans, as regardless of where they were, there was a commonality that brought them together through the power of religion (Minifee, 2015). While hymns were often echoed during toils in the field, they also frequently filled the Black church.

The Black church was one of few stable institutions to emerge from slavery, and in most communities it was the only institution owned and operated by African Americans (Krause, 2010; Marks & Chaney, 2007). To date, many church congregations assemble based on race, and the term Black church is often used to refer to those Christian churches that are predominately African American and minister to and within the African American community (Giger, Appel, Davidhizar, & Davis, 2008). Previous studies by multiple researchers (Boyd-Franklin & Lockwood, 2009; Nye, 1993) identified functions that are essential to the Black church. These include: 1) an expressive function that gives one a place to be open and honest, 2) a status function that allows one to be valued and recognized, 3) a meaning function that provides a sense of understanding about life, 4) a refuge function that allows an escape from systemic racism, 5) a cathartic function that allows one to release inner-most frustrations, 6) a child-rearing and socialization function, essential for single parents, and 7) a social function that allows one to receive support from like-minded individuals (Boyd-Franklin & Lockwood, 2009; Marks & Chaney, 2007; Nye, 1993). These functions of religion seep into numerous aspects of life for
African Americans. Although the African American marriage is one construct that can be significantly impacted by religion, it must first be noted that factors such as church family and health are religiously influenced and can impact this relationship.

**The church family.** According to the National Survey of Black Americans and the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 87% of African Americans self-identified as having a religious affiliation, and over 90% of those with affiliations actively attended church (Neighbors, Musick, & Williams, 1998; Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2009). For many, the Black church becomes an extension of the family, and the church family provides just as many, if not more, resources than actual kin (Boyd-Franklin, 2010). Also, ethnographic research noted the prevalence of African Americans to refer to church members as fictive kin, defined as unrelated individuals referred to in kinship terms such as mother, brother, and sister (Sussman, 1976).

Chatters, Taylor, and Jayakody (1994) used data from the National Survey of Black Americans, which consisted of a sample of 2,107 individuals, to examine the frequency of fictive kin relationships in African American communities. The researchers discovered that 66% of those sampled indicated that there was an unrelated *family member* referred to in kinship terms and viewed as an actual member of the family. In a survey of seven Black churches in the northeast United States, Thompson and McRae (2001) discovered that those in the Black church used many of these fictive kin terms and discussed the church itself in terms such as church home and spiritual home. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) noted that these fictive kin labels go beyond just church culture and expectation; those referred to as fictive kin are expected to abide by the rights and responsibilities of family. Further, because of these close ties, the Black church served as a valuable resource for social support.
One shared benefit of both family and church family is support during times of need (Boyd-Franklin, 2010). Research reveals that the Black church has been essential in providing support for members faced with financial distress (Stack 1974), illness (Koenig et al., 2012), sporadic employment (Barnes, 2011) and even divorce (Lawson & Thompson, 1996). A study by Taylor and Chatters (1986) used a sample of 581 older African Americans to explore the primary avenues of support provided to these older adults. The researchers found that nearly 50% of the sample reported that they received support from church members either often or sometimes, and the types of support primarily received included advice, encouragement, help during sickness, and prayer. Also in a study of older adults, Levin, Taylor, and Chatters (1994) analyzed the data of four national surveys and concluded that, in comparison to churches within White communities, Black churches provide congregants with higher levels of self-rated social support. However, worth noting is that older adults may be less likely to attend church due to health concerns (Krause, 2010; Krause, Ellison, & Wulff, 1998), and therefore, these numbers may be even higher for younger African Americans. Qualitative interviews of 17 African American church congregants revealed that the salience of the church family and the impact of social support within the Black church are often viewed as a cohesive pair (Chaney, 2008a). Further, in those interviews, Chaney (2008a) found that common themes included both fellowship, characterized by a genuine concern for the well-being of fellow church members, and familial connections, which made social support a perceived obligation. Recently, researchers are devoting more attention to religious and spiritual capital, rather than a simplified focus on social support.

Just as social capital is related to collective benefits and resources from close social support groups (Sartorius, 2003), religious and spiritual capital are those benefits and resources
derived from a relationship with a faith community or a relationship with a higher power, respectively (Perry, Williams, Wallerstein, & Waitzkin, 2008). Perry et al. (2008) recognized that, in addition to social support, capital represents an interconnectedness related to relationship maintenance and community participation. Using this information, Holt, Schulz, Williams, Clark, and Wang (2012) developed a measure of religious and spiritual capital and found in a sample of 803 African Americans that religious capital had a significant impact on the emotional functioning of women. Also, in a later study using the same nationally representative sample of African Americans, Holt et al. (2012) found that spiritual capital in the form of community service through the church was inversely related to depression. Therefore, such studies recognize that the benefits of the church family and social support actually have positive health-related consequences. Further, when internalized, social support, spiritual capital, and religious capital are about more than simply giving help to fellow church members when summoned.

**Impact on health.** With the abundance of studies on religion and health for African Americans, it would be careless to omit a review of the topic. One compelling study adequately captured the benefit of religion on health for this group. Hummer, Rogers, Nam, and Ellison (1999) used a nationally representative sample of over 21,000 U.S. respondents in their survey of religious involvement and mortality. Calculating life expectancy with the inclusion of five health-related cause-of-death categories, the researchers found that participants attending church more than once per week were expected to live over seven years longer than those who never attend. More alarming, for African Americans the researchers found a near 14-year life expectancy difference in favor of those that attended more than once a week, in comparison to their non-attending counterparts. In a qualitative follow-up, Marks, Nesteruk, Swanson, Garrison, and Davis (2005) asked 32 highly religious African Americans to share perceptions
related to the health differences and longevity gap of religious and non-religious Blacks. Following analysis, the researchers found that the participants expressed the following beliefs: (1) active faith kept religious Blacks alive longer, (2) religion contributed to an avoidance of negative coping strategies, (3) many young people not attending church got caught in violence, (4) the lack of hope contributed to death, (5) church attendees had strong social support networks to help keep them alive, and (6) prayer contributed to longevity. Although these studies adequately captured the overall influence of religion on health, other researchers note several health-related factors that contribute to this well-studied area.

African Americans typically have poorer health outcomes and are disproportionately more likely to develop some cancers and hypertensive-related chronic illnesses (Giger et al., 2008). The American Cancer Society (2013) recognizes that African Americans have the highest death rate and shortest survival span for most cancers. Further, limited financial resources, limited access to healthcare providers, and lack of trust in the American healthcare system often serve as factors in the high death rate of these African Americans (Bache, Bhui, Dein, & Korszun, 2012). With cardiovascular disease and stroke together accounting for over 30% of all African American deaths (American Heart Association, 2014), the numerous studies finding health-related benefits for such a highly religious group help to provide a thread of optimism (Koenig et al., 2012).

Religious coping accounts for the majority of studies on religion and health in African Americans (Koenig et al, 2012; Taylor et al., 2004). Although some of those studies will be addressed at a later point in the review, the purpose of this section is to examine more broad intersections of religion and health for this population. In addition to the aforementioned chronic illnesses, research suggests that African American and Whites have a similar rate of major
depressive disorder. However, African Americans are more likely to go undiagnosed and untreated for depression (Ward & Brown, 2015).

In a quantitative examination of 1,897 Baptist-affiliated church members, with an oversampling of African Americans to ensure a minimum representation of 55%, Musick, Blazer, and Hays (2000) sought to examine the relationship between religious involvement, alcohol use, and depression. The researchers discovered that those participants that attended religious services more often were less likely to use alcohol. For those that rarely attended religious services, the use of alcohol was positively associated with depression. Similarly, a study by Holt, Wang, Clark, Williams, and Schulz (2013) sampled 803 adult African Americans via random digit dialing and examined linkages between religious involvement, depression, and physical functioning, conceptualized as the ability to meet physical demands. Although the researchers found no influence on physical functioning by religious involvement, frequent church attendance was inversely related to depression, a relationship mediated by the emotional support received from fellow congregants (Holt et al., 2013). Finally, Jang and Johnson (2004) also noticed the important role of social support in impacting the relationship between religion and well-being in measures of aggression, depression, anxiety, poor appetite, and restless sleep, which they collectively labeled as distress. The researchers used data from the National Survey of Black Americans and found that higher levels of religiosity in African Americans were inversely related to distress. Further, this relationship was in part credited to a sense of control and consistent social support through the church. While these quantitative studies help to empirically emphasize the influence of religion on health for African Americans, the stories behind the data are also of importance.
In a study of 47 older African Americans interviewed about the help-seeking behaviors of those with depression, Wittink, Joo, Lewis, and Barg (2009) found that the most rich, salient points made included the idea that depression is a result of losing faith. More specifically, the participants shared that to treat depression, one should maintain religious involvement and seek to rebuild that lost faith. Also, qualitative studies uncover that religion both impacts and is impacted by health. For instance, in 54 interviews of ethnically-diverse HIV women asked about positive changes and stress-related growth following diagnosis, African American women were most likely to report that their illness had helped them to grow spiritually and gain a closer relationship with a higher power (Siegel & Schrimshaw, 2000). Indeed, research recognizes and documents the ties between religion and health (Koenig et al., 2012), and although there are studies that do not show religion to have a positive influence on health-related outcomes (Fitchett & Powell, 2009; Le, Tov, & Taylor, 2007; Park & Dornelas, 2011; Van Olphen et al., 2003) these studies are minimal in comparison to those that have found positive benefits. As recognized by multiple researchers (Koenig et al., 2012; Pargament, 1997), one of the primary roles of religion in stressful situations is to act as a coping mechanism. However, prior to exploring this coping mechanism in relation to African Americans, general religious coping is highlighted next.

**Religion as a Coping Mechanism**

Although there exist notable rifts between religion and psychology, with references to one another that have included dogmatism, elitism, and even accusations of neurosis (Bonelli & Koenig, 2013; Vitz, 1977), religious coping serves as a common seam between the two disciplines because both coping and religion involve a search for significance (Pargament, 1997). When combined, religious coping is synonymous with a partnered, sacred search for significance.
alongside a higher power and during a time of stress (Pargament & Raiya, 2007). Brewster (2014) noted that in Western culture where individualism is applauded, there is a tendency to desire self-control over stressors. However, according to Pargament (1997), an important part of coping is to realize when to relinquish some control. There exists three distinct approaches to religious coping: 1) self-directed religious coping, which intentionally removes perceived input from a higher power during the coping process, 2) deferred religious coping, in which all responsibility to remove the stressor is placed on a higher power, and 3) collaborative religious coping, which seeks to work in partnership with a higher power to resolve the situation (Pargament, 1997). Pargament, Koenig, and Perez (2000) also noted that not all religious coping is used in a healthy manner.

Just as there exists approaches to religious coping and an essential division of responsibility, there also exist more nuanced aspects to the practice of religious coping. Due to being frustrated with the simplicity of existing measures, Pargament et al. (2000) sought to find a better way to quantifiably measure religious coping. The efforts of the researchers led to the identification of positive and negative religious coping strategies. According to the researchers, positive religious coping involved a secure relationship with a higher power and a belief that life has meaning. However, negative religious coping was conceptualized as an insecure attachment to a higher power and difficulty in finding meaning in life. More specifically, positive religious coping strategies included depending on a higher power during times of need, cognitive reappraisal through a religious lens, and seeking a spiritual connection. Negative religious coping strategies included blaming a higher power for the stressor, fleeing from the church, and feeling abandoned by the higher power (Pargament et al., 2000). In many studies of religious coping both positive and negative aspects are expressed (Idler, Kasl, & Hays, 2001; Koenig,
Pargament, & Nielsen, 1998), but effective coping is characterized by having the positive expressions outweigh the negatives (Pargament et al., 2000). Also, prior to examining some of the many studies that have explored religious coping, it is important to note that difficulty in adequately measuring religiosity and spirituality has contributed to a lack of conceptual clarity and difficulty in recognizing the power of religion as a coping mechanism (Koenig, 2011).

Researchers and the general public frequently use the terms religiosity and spirituality interchangeably (Chatters, Taylor, Bullard, & Jackson, 2008). This lack of specificity can be fertile ground for those that seek to negate the positive physical and psychological implications of religion as a coping strategy (Sloan, 2008). One of the more widely used definitions of religiosity came from Koenig et al. (2012) who defined the term as formal, public, organized religious practices such as church attendance. In contrast, the researchers defined spirituality as more individualistic and expressed via informal acts such as prayer and scripture reading. Researchers have suggested that while many may decrease their level of religious involvement, they remain invested in religion through acts of spirituality (Mindel & Vaughan, 1978; Sternthal, Williams, Musick, & Buck, 2012), and these acts positively influence coping and resiliency (Koenig et al., 2012). Therefore, although many studies use either religious coping or spiritual coping as a variable, a qualitative study by Chaney (2008b) revealed individuals frequently interpreted these constructs as mutually supportive and similarly related.

**Religion to cope with stress.** The use and benefits of religious coping have been recognized in studies from all over the world, across different age groups, and extend beyond race and gender lines. Several years ago, a Gallup Poll of 1,485 randomly sampled United States citizens found that nearly 80% of those questioned agreed they received comfort from religious beliefs (Princeton Religious Research Center, 1982). A later Gallup Poll found that 9 out of 10
Americans prayed, most often for purposes of coping (Princeton Religion Research Center, 1996). In a survey of over 1,900 Americans sampled via random digit dialing, researchers found that 90% of those surveyed turned toward religion as a coping response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Silver et al., 2004). A Gallup Poll conducted shortly after 9/11 supported these findings with 71% of Americans believing that religion was having an increased influence on life (Newport, 2007).

In addition to studies within the United States, research has also found that religious coping is a highly practiced response to stress in other parts of the world. In a study of 243 police officers in Singapore, Bishop et al. (2001) found that, for the Muslim portion of the sample, religious coping was the most comforting strategy to deal with work-related stressors. Also, in a study of university students in South Africa, Peltzer (2002) found that nearly 70% of the 310-student sample relied heavily on a higher power and prayed as a source of coping. However, while these studies highlight that religious coping is alive and well in other nations, several researchers have noted that religion is much less practiced and relied upon in areas such as Sweden (Cederblad, Dahlin, Hagnell, & Hannson, 1995), Germany (Angst et al., 2002), and Norway (Ringdal, Gotestam, Kaasa, Kvinnslaud, & Ringdal, 1996).

**Religion to cope with health concerns.** While the previously noted studies of religion and health did not focus specifically on coping, the recognized relationship between religious coping and health is salient. According to Shontz (1975), general coping with an illness or disability is best illustrated by four stages. More specifically, there is the initial shock, which can be characterized as a detachment from the reality of the illness or immediate clarity in understanding what needs to be done about the illness. Next, there is an encounter phase in which feelings of hopelessness and panic are common. The third phase is described as a stage of
retreat, which is when the individual bounces between negotiating strategies to cope with the illness and avoiding action. The final phase is reality testing, when active coping strategies are practiced. However, the retreat/avoidance phase, described by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) as controlling emotions, is the stage that allows the individual with the disability a brief psychological respite from the reality of being ill (Shontz, 1975). In relation to religious coping specifically, it is at this stage that deferred or collaborative coping becomes apparent through one laying their burdens down (Poussaint & Alexander, 2001). While studies of deferred religious coping and health find positive and negative results (Pargament et al., 1988; Wong-McDonald & Gorsuch, 2000), collaborative coping has been largely associated with positive health-related outcomes (Ross, Handal, Clark, & Wal, 2009; Wong-McDonald & Gorsuch, 2000).

In a qualitative study of spirituality after a first heart attack, Walton (1999) found that spirituality as a function of religion was a significant contributor to recovery, and spirituality enhanced the coping experiences of those interviewed. Also, Trevino and McConnell (2014) measured religiosity and quality of life in an examination of religious coping for 43 heart attack patients. The researchers found that increases in religious coping were positively associated with increases in self-perceived quality of life. In a survey of 274 women over the age of 55 analyzed for subjective religiosity, religious coping, and use of health services, researchers found that self-directed coping without the help of God was related to more physician and emergency room visits. In contrast, deferring all coping responsibilities to God was related to fewer physician visits (Ark, Hull, Husaini, & Craun, 2006). Similarly, Ross et al. (2009) found that self-directed coping in a sample of 189 college undergraduates was associated with a lower-rated satisfaction of life, in comparison to those that used deferred and collaborative methods. While these studies
are only a sampling of those that find positive associations between religious coping and health, there is a relatively short list that includes negative and inconclusive findings.

In a longitudinal study of systolic blood pressure, hypertension, and religious practices in White and African American women, Fitchett and Powell (2009) concluded that religious practices did not protect participants from increases in systolic blood pressure nor incidence of hypertension over a three-year span. This finding suggested that religious involvement, including coping, lacks any significant influence on the prevention of hypertension. In 2007, Bramm, Deeg, Poppeleaars, Beekman, and Van Tilburg conducted a study in the Netherlands and found frequent prayer to be associated with greater depression. Also, a random sample study of 2,016 church congregants found that negative religious coping strategies and the likelihood to ask God for healing were both associated with poorer mental health (Schwartz, Meisenhelder, Ma, & Reed, 2003). However, Koenig (2011) stated there exists an issue of capturing causal inferences in studies of religious coping, especially when negative findings are documented. For instance, in the aforementioned Bramm et al. (2007) study, it is likely the participants were already depressed and they turned to frequent prayer to effectively cope with the depression. If prayer, a positive religious coping strategy, fails to alleviate the depression prior to the study, the results may erroneously assume that prayer contributed to the depression. Just as a diagnosis of illness can be a major stressor, there also exist stressors in marriage that call for religious coping strategies.

**Religious coping in marriages.** The aforementioned studies examined religion as an existent, established, and present stabilizing factor in marriage. More specifically, mentioned were the role of religion as a divorce deterrent, a source of homogamy, and a factor in marital satisfaction. However, because coping is a process that occurs after the stressor (McCubbin &
Patterson, 1982), many of the studies that examine religious coping in marriage are those that have done so post marital dissolution, and even those studies that consider religious coping and the impact of the divorce on the ex-husband and ex-wife are rare.

In one longitudinal study of religious coping following a divorce, Krumrei, Mahoney, and Pargament (2011) used 89 divorced and religious individuals (59% female) to examine the use of positive and negative religious coping strategies and their influence on divorce adjustment over a one-year period. In addition to gathering measures of religious coping, the researchers surveyed the participants on depression, dysfunctional interactions with the ex-spouse, and posttraumatic growth, conceptualized as positive growth through traumatic experiences. After a one-year follow-up, the researchers found that the use of negative religious coping strategies predicted an increased risk of depression, and frequent uses of positive religious coping predicted greater posttraumatic growth (Krumrei et al., 2011). Therefore, those participants that frequently utilized positive religious coping strategies were better able to cope with the negative impact of divorce. In a similar study by Webb et al. (2010), positive and negative religious coping were compared against measures of depression in 9,441 Seventh-Day Adventists. When statistically separating the portion of the sample that had experienced a divorce within the previous 5 years (4%), the researchers found that positive religious coping was vital to reduce depressive symptoms. One additional study outside of the United States explored religious coping in 98 South African, divorced parents (Greef & Van Der Merwe, 2004). The researchers found that over half of the sample shared that religious faith was an important aspect of the divorce coping process. Although this sample was of African descent, researchers have consistently shown that African Americans are the most likely ethnic group to use religion as a coping mechanism (Koenig et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2004).
Religious Coping in African Americans

Many African Americans report using prayer to cope with problems (Taylor et al., 2004), and spirituality in African Americans is largely about living and coping with issues of the present, rather than preparing for the afterlife (Cicirelli, 2002). As noted by Krause (2010), the power of religious coping for many African Americans exists in the casting of worries onto a higher power that, in turn, reduces negative thoughts and psychological distress. Further, in studies of the African American community, researchers identify religion as a significant mediating factor in coping with health problems (Gillum & Griffith, 2010; Gregg, 2011; Koenig et al., 2012; Marks et al., 2005) and various stressors (Bjork, Cuthbertson, Thurman, & Lee, 2001; Wadsworth, Santiago, & Einhorn, 2009). Several researchers compare ethnic groups in efforts to capture the unique strength of religious coping in the African American community.

In a meta-analysis of over 40 studies that examined religious coping variations between ethnic groups, Johnson et al. (2005) found that African Americans were consistently and significantly more likely to use religious coping strategies in comparison to all other groups. The researchers found recurrent themes showing that spiritual beliefs served as a source of comfort for African Americans, and religious coping was the most reported coping strategy used to deal with stressors deemed beyond human control. Krause (2010) longitudinally examined multiple religious factors in older African Americans and Whites. The researcher concluded that African Americans receive significantly more spiritual support to assist in coping, and the sampled African Americans were more involved in all facets of religion in comparison to their White counterparts. Further, while religious coping can take several forms, as evidenced by studies of organizational versus non-organizational religious coping methods (Taylor, Chatters, & Joe, 2011), prayer is a unique practice (Krause, 2010; Levin & Taylor, 1997).
Organizational religious coping has been defined as those acts of religious participation that are largely formal, public and viewed as religious by parties unfamiliar with the person engaged in the practices (Chatters et al., 2009). More specifically, organizational religious coping has been operationalized as acts such as church attendance, church membership, religious social support, and group Bible study. Non-organizational religious coping has been defined as those acts of religious participation that are informal, often private, and used to connect one to a higher power (Chatters et al., 2009). Studies of African Americans have found that prayer is the most frequent act of non-organizational religious coping (Johnson et al., 2005).

The 1998 General Social Survey, the National Survey of American Life, and the National Survey of Black Americans all projected that approximately 80% of African Americans pray at least once a day (Taylor et al., 2004). Also, comparative studies have found African Americans engage in prayer more frequently than other ethnic groups (Johnson et al., 2005; Krause, 2010; Taylor, Chatters, Jayakody, & Levin, 1996). Age and gender also play a role in prayer frequency within the African American community. In comparison to their younger counterparts, older adults have reported higher levels of general prayer and higher levels of prayer for the purposes of coping (Koenig, 2011). Also, although both African American men and women report high levels of prayer, women pray more often than men (Chatters et al, 1999). Amongst the most commonly observed purposes for prayer in the African American community are health concerns and stress.

**Prayer to cope with health concerns in African Americans.** Although studies employing African American populations could examine prayer as a form of praise or thanksgiving, studies on prayer for health problems are most common (Taylor et al., 2004). In a qualitative analysis of 13 African American women with breast cancer, Lackey, Gates, and
Brown (2001) found that the use of prayer was used prior to diagnosis. However, following diagnosis, the frequency of prayer for coping purposes increased, and the women reported that prayer was their primary coping strategy throughout the course of the illness. Similarly, in a qualitative study of 47 African American breast cancer survivors, results revealed that prayer emerged as a salient coping strategy (Lynn, Yoo, & Levine, 2014). However, the cancer survivors were most likely to rely on the prayers of others as sources of spiritual and emotional support. Koenig et al. (2012) put forward that intercessory prayer, or prayer in behalf of others, are not effective when the ill or disabled individual is not aware that they are being prayed for, but, as the study by Lynn et al. (2014) suggests, intercessory prayer can be a comfort to an ill person and can ease psychological distress. These qualitative studies are further accompanied by a number of quantitative examinations of prayer and health that share similar findings.

As illustrated by the aforementioned studies, an illness can serve as a trigger that brings prayer to the forefront of coping strategies for African Americans. For example, in a study of 205 African American women in New Orleans, Louisiana, researchers found that for about half of the sample infected with HIV (n = 99) prayer was more frequent and was used as a coping mechanism that contributed to optimism and hope (Biggar et al., 1999). Also, in a similar study that included a sample of 126 HIV-positive African Americans in the Midwest, Meredith, Jeffe, Mundy, and Fraser (2001) found that prayer was the most influential aspect of decision-making related to medication acceptance and adherence. Further, in comparison to Whites, the African American participants of the study were much less likely to seek counsel from the physician and much more likely to seek counsel from a higher power through prayer. Numerous other quantitative studies also find that prayer is a frequently practiced coping strategy for African Americans faced with an illness (Ai, Peterson, Bolling, & Koenig, 2002; Kaplan, Marks, &
Mertens, 1997; Phillips & Sowell, 2000). However, personal encounters with major chronic health conditions are far less common than the day-to-day stressors many African Americans navigate.

**Prayer to cope with common stressors of African Americans.** As previously mentioned, there exist systemic forms of prejudice and disadvantage that impact the daily need of many African Americans to use religion and prayer as coping mechanisms (Dixon, 2009). In a study of religious coping strategies to combat racial discrimination, Hayward and Krause (2015) utilized the National Survey of American Life to analyze the responses of 2,032 African Americans and 857 Caribbean Blacks. The researchers concluded that prayer was the most common coping response for African Americans faced with racial discrimination. Also, an earlier qualitative study of 196 African American women, ranging in age from 18 – 77, used semi-structured interviews to explore behaviors used to cope with racism and sexism (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Among the most common internal coping strategies were prayer and a reliance on God to provide the strength to handle microaggressions, defined as subtle acts of racism. Further, these practices have been shown by researchers to also be frequented for work-related stress.

Bacchus and Holley (2004) conducted qualitative interviews with 10 professional African American women to discuss self-described definitions of spirituality and coping strategies associated with being African American, female, and working within a professional White male-dominated environment. The researchers found that a majority of the women used prayer as a source for reappraising stressful situations and gained the inner-strength to remain peaceful in an environment conducive to racism and sexism. Similarly, in a study that used focus groups to interview 67 African American women with various religious affiliations,
Majumdar and Ladak (1998) found that prayer was the most commonly used strategy to cope with work and home stressors related to discrimination and finances. Although only two of very few studies to examine religious coping within the workplace for African Americans, it is understood that stressors eliciting such actions are common (Staples, 1999). Further, although there is a dearth of literature on prayer specific to coping in African American marriages, researchers note that the practice can strengthen marital stability.

In another study, Beach et al. (2011) randomly assigned 393 African American couples to two relationship enhancement programs and a control group. One relationship program, CS-PREP, had a culturally sensitive focus that addressed the role of racism in marriage and used African American presenters. The other intervention group, PF-PREP, included all aspects of the CS-PREP but placed a focus on prayer and taught participants how and why to pray for their spouse. Finally, about a third of all couples were assigned to a control group that only received a self-help version of the relationship enhancement program. Following analysis, the researchers found that while both intervention groups were significantly better than the control group on outcome measures, the women of the prayer-focused intervention group were significantly more satisfied in their marriage and significantly more likely to use positive forms of communication in their marriage. Also, in a study of 205 married, African American couples, Fincham and Beach (2014) found that partner-focused petitionary prayer, operationalized as praying for the well-being and success of a partner, strengthened marital commitment. These findings are valuable contributions to current literature on African American families, and examining such practices through a coping-response lens could prove beneficial.
Gaps in Existing Knowledge

Those issues that impact African American individuals, including financial strain, racism, parenting, and health problems, also influence African American families (Dixon, 2009; Koenig et al., 2012; Marks, Nesteruk, Hopkins-Williams, & Davis, 2006). However, the responsive behaviors to these issues remain underexplored in existing literature. Further, those studies that have sought to examine stress in African American families have largely focused on low-income, female-headed households, and have relied on approaches that have failed to identify the strengths of the African American family (Connor & White, 2006; Marks et al., 2005, 2010). Because the marital dyad serves an integral, functional role in the family, the coping responses to stressors within African American marriages is a needed exploration.

Only one study specifically noted the stressors that happily married African American couples often endure. Through qualitative interviews of 16 married African American couples, Marks et al. (2006) found the most common stressors to be those deriving from the workplace, related to balancing work with familial responsibilities, and family stress such as traumatic loss and financial strains. Since that time, Marks et al. (2008) looked at the strengths of happily married African American couples, but still underexplored is the role of coping, and specifically religious coping in these strong African American marriages. As Taylor et al. (2004) noted, for African American families “it may be instructive to examine stress and coping processes within a religious context” (p. 86).

We know that African Americans often use religion to cope (Krause, 2010; Taylor et al., 2004). We know that African Americans have a high divorce rate, and systemic factors such as sporadic employment contribute to strain in marriage (Dixon, 2009). We know that African Americans are disproportionately impacted by many chronic conditions and, therefore, may lean
on religion to cope. Also, we know that marriage has positive physical and psychological benefits for African Americans (Koenig et al., 2012; Marks et al., 2005; Staples, 1999). Therefore, this study moves beyond the statistics to add depth to the conversation of religious coping in strengthening the marital glue of happily married, African American couples.
CHAPTER 3. METHOD

As noted by Taylor et al. (2004), most research exploring religiosity in African American populations has used only self-reported church attendance and denominational affiliation as measures. Similarly, Mahoney (2010) noted that, in the previous decade, 79% of the studies on religion in the family used only one or two measures of religiosity and primarily relied on the self-reports of a single family member. Further, only few studies “focused on ethnic minority families” (p. 806). This trend of capturing simple measures neglected the multidimensional aspects of religious involvement and contributed to the lack of clarity in religious-based research. Therefore, researchers used qualitative methods in studies of African American religious congregants to circumvent conceptual confusion and allow participants to describe the personal impact of religious involvement in depth (Chaney, 2008b). In keeping with this stance, this study presented the unfiltered voices of the participants as often as possible. As Marks (2015) recognized, although there will be times when the researcher must provide commentary on connections and interpretations, participant-voiced data conveys experiences with fidelity.

Data for this study was collected as a part of a larger, national research project, the American Families of Faith (AFF). Led by Drs. David Dollahite and Loren Marks, AFF has conducted qualitative interviews with over 200 religious couples and families throughout the United States (American Families of Faith, 2015). Further, these professors of family studies received research support from internal grants provided by Brigham Young University (BYU) and Louisiana State University (LSU) to gather data from religious families of various ethnicities and religious denominations. These interviews, gathered from regions across the United States, help to highlight the processes behind religious-based correlations, and such research is essential to countering, or at least supplementing the emphasis on, demographic family trends (Daly,
While Dr. Marks, along with other AFF scholars, lead and conduct research related to the role of religion in African American families, variations of religious coping in marital stability remains underexplored. Therefore, this study used qualitative research methods to examine the role of religion as a coping mechanism for some highly religious, happily married African American couples.

Sample

Qualitative research seeks to uncover poorly understood phenomena and describe the latent details of lived experiences (Anastas, 1999; Geertz, 1973). Further, whereas quantitative researchers tend to address research questions that answer the question of what factors matter, qualitative researchers are more concerned with the whys and hows of a phenomenon (Daly, 2007). This difference in approach often trades generalizability for detail and impacts the sampling strategies of qualitative research methods. Qualitative researchers often sample those outliers that may be disregarded in quantitative research (Creswell, 2013), resulting in purposive, prototypical samples that contrast the ideal random sampling strategy in quantitative methods (Daly, 2007; Marks, 2015; Rubin & Babbie, 2008). Marks and Dollahite (2011) referred to this qualitative sampling strategy as mining the meanings and note that researchers should sample the highly religious “to discover the meanings and motivations that drive those persons whose outcomes are most significantly impacted by religion” (p. 182).

For this study, the ideal participants were those African American couples that were highly religiously involved and happily married (or remarried). These couples were identified based on the premise that they should be most familiar with the personal role of religiosity in marital stability and most likely to describe their marriage as strong. Ideal participants were selected based on the following criteria: 1) both husband and wife self-identified as African
American; 2) both husband and wife responded with an ‘8’ or above to the question, “On a scale of 1–10 with one being ‘unimportant’ and ten being ‘very important,’ how significant is your religious faith in your personal family life?”; 3) both husband and wife responded with an ‘8’ or above to the question, “On a scale of 1–10 with one being ‘not at all’ and ten being ‘very,’ how happily married are you?, and 4) the couple had been married for at least seven years. This final criterion for inclusion was related to previous research that has found marriages to be at highest risk for dissolution within the first seven years, before the risk gradually declines (Kulu, 2014). Although the findings of Kulu have not been separated based on race, several researchers have found that the risk of dissolution is higher for African American couples (Amato, 2001; Blackman et al., 2005). Also, ideally couples interviewed would be diverse in relation to age and socioeconomic status. A healthy range of measures on these values could contribute to sample richness and provide a life course perspective into religious coping in marriages (Elder, 1998).

Participants were recruited through convenient, prototypical sampling techniques with the assistance of clergy, religious leaders, and acquaintances of the researcher. More specifically, these individuals were asked to identify African American couples that they believed were highly religious and happily married. If the potential participants agreed to the recommendation of the clergyperson or acquaintance, the contact information was shared with the researcher, and the couple was contacted via telephone or email to be told of the research purpose and be screened against the inclusion criteria.

Nearly one-thousand pages of narrative data was collected from 35 African American couples (N=70) that met the aforementioned inclusion criteria. While 31 of these interviews had been previously collected as a part of the larger AFF project, I contributed four additional
interviews to the project dataset. With the permission of the primary investigators, this agreed upon contribution allowed me access to all interviews previously collected by AFF contributors.

The sample included couples that resided in 11 states: California, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Ohio, Oregon, Washington, and Wisconsin. Further, couples in the sample identified as Baptist, Catholic, Mormon, Muslim, and Non-denominational (Christian). The mean age for husbands was 56 years, and the mean age for wives was 54 years. Further, the educational attainment of the participants ranged from no high school diploma to graduate degree. The sample allowed for variation in characteristics, while exploring the combined similarities of religious coping. Demographic data from the four couples personally interviewed for this project are presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Husband 1</th>
<th>Wife 1</th>
<th>Husband 2</th>
<th>Wife 2</th>
<th>Husband 3</th>
<th>Wife 3</th>
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<td>Baptist</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
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<td>Non-Denominational (Christian)</td>
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<td>Catholic</td>
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<td>High School</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>Graduate Degree</td>
<td>Graduate Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>10</td>
<td>12-15</td>
<td>12-15</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1. Demographic Data for Couples Added to AFF Dataset**

**Design and Procedures**

Grounded theory was the foundational approach to this research project (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This study utilized both a priori and emergent approaches. The purpose of these approaches were to move beyond simply describing a
phenomenon, in efforts to use a constant comparative method to compose a “unified theoretical explanation” (Corbin & Strauss, 2007, p. 107). While the atheoretical and open approach to grounded theory was most appropriate for the research design, it was used in unison with an abductive stance shown effective in studies of families (Daly, 2007). Further, having some understanding of theory and admitting that the tabula rasa viewpoint may not always be possible provides a lens through which the grounded theories of the researcher could be compared (Daly, 2007). This approach not only builds theory, but also helps to explain how the constructed grounded theory is unique in comparison to other related literature on religiosity in the marriage.

Interviews were conducted after obtaining from each participant a signed Informed Consent (Appendix A) and completed Demographic Summary (Appendix B). Further, data collection was based on, but not limited to, a semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol consisting of 18 questions related to stress, coping, and religious involvement (Appendix C). The interview questions sought response depth by probing for specific examples to highlight religiosity in those lived experiences that could impact marital happiness and marital stability.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants. This setting was supported by the belief that capturing naturally occurring experiences within their natural setting helps to establish a trust between the participants and the interviewer (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Additionally, the husbands and wives were interviewed together, with both being asked to respond to each interview question. Although some researchers have criticized paired interviews and noted that such strategies may inhibit open and honest responses (Seymour, Dix, & Eardley, 1995), there are unique benefits to interviewing married couples together. More specifically, Marks et al. (2008) has pointed out that combined interviews provide a rich context for exploring the underlying processes of marital interactions. This is
further articulated in a statement by Babbie (2004), in which the author noted that joint
interviews “elicit aspects of the topic that would not have been anticipated by the researcher and
would not have emerged from [solo] interviews” (p. 303). Also, a narrative approach was
utilized to elicit the descriptive stories that captured the phenomenon of religious coping.

The narrative approach to qualitative research has been recognized as an effective method
for understanding the realities of familial experiences (Daly, 2007). This interview method
allows and encourages the researcher to ask that stories be shared to provide more detail about
the beliefs and practices within family relationships (Josselson & Lieblich, 1993). Further, and
in relation to coping within a family context, Ellis and Bochner (2003) have noted that the stories
evoked with the narrative approach “create the effect of reality, showing characters embedded in
the lived moments of struggle, resisting the intrusions of chaos . . . and trying to preserve or
restore the continuity and coherence of life’s unity” (p. 217). Therefore, if the interviewer
believed that the participants are being reserved in their responses, they may be asked to provide
a story that can better capture their experiences with the phenomenon of interest. Asking for
richer narratives without leading the participant is a vital characteristic in understanding how
individuals compose their personal experiences within the context of their own lives (Daly, 2007;
Marks & Dollahite, 2011).

Data Collection

The 31 previously conducted interviews were gathered in the form of transcriptions.
Additionally, the four interviews collected as a part of this study were recorded with the use of
two handheld digital recorders and transcribed verbatim. This self-transcription process helped
to create a familiarity with the data by allowing the researcher to hear the interview for a second
time, process and type what was stated in the interview, and read the transcribed product as a
word document. Therefore, the researcher was exposed to portions of the data several times even prior to the data analysis.

**Data Analysis**

During the collection of additional interviews, the researcher began to analyze the data with a grounded theory approach. Consistent with the structure of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2007), it was not necessary to wait until all interviews had been collected before initiating the coding process, as a constant comparative strategy allowed each additional interview to contribute to and refine the emergent themes (Creswell, 2013). Also, the analysis was enhanced through abduction (a combination of induction and deduction), or looking beyond generated theory to compare findings with previous literature and suggest plausible explanations for actions (Dey, 2004). Therefore, throughout the coding process the researcher was aware of, but not limited to, the three dimensions of religious coping identified by Pargament (2007).

The transcribed data was coded through a process of open coding, a line-by-line analysis that used words or phrases to capture the meaning of a segment of data (Daly, 2007). Next, all codes were counted and captured, within and across interviews, consistent with the Numeric Content Analysis (NCA) process shown effective in enhancing qualitative rigor through the production of a data audit trail (Marks, 2015). More specifically, the NCA provided a condensed glimpse of several interviews along with the recurring emergent codes in each. Huberman and Miles (1994) have also suggested that this preliminary counting of codes and recognition of frequency can be effective in qualitative analyses. Following the identification of these core codes or themes, a word document was created that listed related narrative quotes for each theme. These narratives were then again reviewed to separate the *rocks*, or those superficial and mundane statements that did not add depth to the theme, from the *gems*, or those prized quotes.
that truly highlighted the essence of the theme (Marks, 2015). Consistent with the final phase of Marks (2015) NCA method, the narrative data within the newly formed gems file were reviewed for latent themes. This involved the researcher searching for the processes of religious coping in marital stability to present a thorough, vivid depiction of each theme. This process helped to create a data audit trail and separate the proposed systematic, qualitative project from journalism that cherry-picks convenient sound bites (Marks, 2015; Patton, 2002).

**Qualitative Rigor**

The positivist belief in potential objectivity in social science research has led several qualitative researchers to employ standards for establishing rigor (Barusch, Gringeri, & George, 2011). Although qualitative research remains under-published and under-funded in comparison to quantitative studies (Ambert et al., 1995; Marks, 2015; Nesteruk, 2005), quantitative research is no longer viewed as the sole source of valid and reliable data (Darawsheh, 2014). While qualitative researchers are not concerned with the identical expressions of validity and reliability as quantitative researchers, these studies can increase their actual and perceived rigor through qualitative variations of validity and reliability including establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Also, of equal importance and briefly noted below is reflexivity.

**Credibility.** Regarded by many qualitative researchers as the qualitative equivalent of internal validity, credibility is related to the degree to which the meaning from the participant is correctly interpreted by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The composite qualitative work should authentically reflect the perspective and lived experiences of the participant and not be heavily reconstructed based on the interpretations of the researcher (Drisko, 1997). Several strategies to enhance credibility have been previously noted. Member checking or feedback
sessions can be used for participants to examine transcribed information in an effort to verify the accuracy of statements (Barusch et al., 2011). Also, peer debriefing, defined as sharing personal and methodological approaches with a colleague or multiple colleagues in the efforts of identifying excessive biases, and has been noted as a beneficial approach to credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, persistent observation has been used in establishing credibility (Dienhart, 1998). Persistent observation is related to the researcher personally conducting, transcribing, and analyzing each interview, thereby increasing familiarity with the shared narratives. For this study, peer debriefing was employed as a method for establishing qualitative credibility.

Transferability. Transferability is a qualitative equivalent of quantitative concerns with external validity or generalizability. Transferability is achieved by depth and detail that could lead a reader to identify with some portion of the shared experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, it is not the job of the researcher to decide where the findings are transferable to, as in quantitative research, but the reader chooses what aspects of the study are transferable). Yet, the goal of qualitative research remains to fill an underexplored gap in existing literature (Anastas, 1999), and even if not all readers can identify with or make transfers from a qualitative piece, filling this gap still justifies its usefulness.

Dependability. Dependability is related to the quantitative standard of reliability and is concerned with the consistency of the research instrument and assessment across participant and time (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008). In an effort to ensure dependability, the proposed study used the same semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix C) for all interviews conducted. Although the husbands and wives may have been asked to elaborate or highlight their responses
with narratives and experiences, as previously stated, the researcher avoided unapproved questions that could threaten the overall consistency of all participant interviews.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability is related to the degree to which the findings of a study can be verified by others (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), similar to objectivity in quantitative methods. This study utilized multiple methods to contribute to confirmability and limit what could be deemed subjective input. Foremost, the aforementioned data audit trail (Patton, 2002) organized with the NCA coding process contributes to limiting researcher bias and drawing conclusions which may be tainted by preconceived notions. Also, counter examples that fail to align with observations were noted, and these counter examples also helped in adding to the richness of analysis reports.

**Reflexivity.** Finally, it is appropriate to report reflexivity and identify potential biases relative to the study of religious coping in African American marriages. While some quantitative researchers may hold a positivist view that there exist absolutes that can be quantifiably measured in bias-free environments, Slife and Williams (1995) argued that bias can still enter the research in the conceptualization and operationalization of variables on the research instruments. Numbers must be interpreted before they can have meaning, and because this interpretation is the work of imperfect humans, even the most objective quantitative social research may never be truly objective (Trochim, 2000). Therefore, reflexivity, or the practice of self-reflection and recognition of potential biases, has been applauded in qualitative methods (Anderson, 2008). Further, rather than denying or attempting to hide a bias, reflexive researchers intentionally maintain a level of transparency throughout the research process and then seek to check their biases to the degree possible (Darawsheh, 2014).
In an effort to acknowledge personal biases in relation to the proposed research study on religious coping in marital stability, it is important to reveal several personal connections with the project. I, the researcher, consider myself to be highly religious and happily married, matching two of the inclusion criteria for the participants of interest. Secondly, I self-identify as African American and hold a personal familiarity with the use of religious coping by African Americans. Finally, my family and I spend a fair amount of time engaging in religious practices and discussing the importance of religious beliefs within our home. To counter my potential biases, the interview protocol included questions that also reflect negative coping experiences and encourage open-ended responses to the influences of religious involvement.
CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

Open coding procedures consistent with the four-phase method as outlined in Marks (2015) yielded nearly 15 salient themes from the narratives of the couples. However, with a focus on religious coping in response to stress in strong, African American marriages, three themes are presented here. Within these three themes are a total of eight subthemes that contain the narrative data, highlighting the relevant, salient concepts relating to coping. More specifically, within a priori Theme 1, Self-directed Religious Coping, are emergent subthemes that capture the most salient responses to stress that do not involve the assistance of a higher power. Within a priori Theme 2, Deferred Religious Coping, are emergent subthemes related to the complete reliance on a higher power during times of stress. Finally, within a priori Theme 3, Collaborative Religious Coping, are emergent subthemes related to the combined efforts of the marital partners and a higher power in overcoming stress and strengthening marital bonds. Each of these themes will be presented along with illustrative and supportive primary data.

Theme 1. Self-directed Religious Coping: “Often, We Can Manage Our Stress”

For families that engage in self-directed religious coping, their coping strategy is suggestive of a belief that a higher power has given them the resources and abilities needed to effectively cope with a stressful situation without the involvement of a higher power (Pargament, 1997). In highly religious populations, such as those involved in this study, self-directed religious coping strategies capture both the positive and negative stress responses that are active and maintain the locus of responsibility within the human being. Each couple interviewed expressed some form of self-directed coping, although less frequently than deferred and collaborative religious coping. The most salient responses related to self-directed coping were
captured by two emergent subthemes. These subthemes are: (1) We Control Our Emotions to Control Our Stress, and (2) The Key to Managing Stress Is to Avoid Creating Stress.

**Subtheme 1. We control our emotions to control our stress.** For many of the couples interviewed in this study, self-directed religious coping was expressed by controlling the emotions associated with the stressor event. This emotion-focused strategy is common when the stressor seems especially daunting (Lazarus, 1999). Further, the couples that shared emotion-focused strategies as forms of self-directed coping did so without the involvement or mention of a higher power. They expressed a belief that they were in sole control of their emotions and able to independently reduce the emotional distress that resulted from the stressor. One group of participants that adopted this strategy shared stories in which they expressed an ability to minimize the perceived negative influences of stress.

In the interview of a Catholic wife from Louisiana, Nellie\(^1\) described her job as a common source of stress. However, when asked how she coped with this frequent stressor, she recognized her limited control in the situation and used that perceived lack of control as a way to reduce the impact of her work stress:

> I’m a teacher. I’m dealing with my kids [at school] and some of the other things that go along with the job...things that you wouldn’t expect to go along with the job but do come along with [it]... to be really frank, you get more of a hassle from administration, and, maybe occasionally, from the parents, but you’re choosing what to deal with because you learn their personalities. Usually, what frustrates you more than anything else is when you’re called out of the classroom to deal with things...many, many times your stress comes from administration...[but] you gotta learn how to put certain things into perspective. Some things you’re not gonna let bother you because there’s no control over it.

In another interview, a Catholic couple from Oregon discussed their emotion-focused coping response to encountering racism. Just as the above example, this couple, Bradley and Allison,\(^1\) the identity of all participants were protected via pseudonyms.
talked about their ability to deflect the negative impact of a stressor they felt was beyond their control:

*Bradley:* I was teaching in a class in LA, and a Mexican boy called me a black nigger. I stood toe to toe with him and he wouldn’t back down. I haven’t seen a lot of overt racism. I have the kind of personality [that] White people like. My best friend is White. The best man in my wedding was White. Things happen, but I don’t let it bother me too much.

The wife of Bradley, Allison, shared a separate racial encounter, along with the response she used to calm her emotions:

*Allison:* I’m the type of person, with uncomfortable things, I bury them subconsciously and consciously; memory loss over time. One time, the two of us went to the beach at the crab fest, [and] there was a woman giving free samples to all the people around me, but not me. So, I asked her for a sample, [and] she resented the fact that I asked...I was pretty upset at the time...There have been several times I have experienced racism. We used to be militant and belligerent in college. We are both more laid back now, laid back so we won’t blow up.

Similar to the ability of Allison to take stressful events and “bury them subconsciously and consciously,” Mitch, an Oregon husband, said this about responding to stress:

I’m cool. I’m cool to the degree that it’s annoying to some people [because] I’m so cool. Things don’t get me, things don’t make me upset too easily. I can say I’ve been out of control with rage maybe twice in my life...so things just don’t get me, and I tend to process things internally and not bring them [up].

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) have noted that emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping, outwardly expressed action intended to reduce the influence of stress, frequently facilitate each other throughout the coping process. As recognized in several interviews with couples, controlling the emotions that resulted from stress sometimes was a precedent for actively handling the situation, and this became evident in the interview of a Baptist couple in Louisiana. More specifically, the wife, Effie, discussed the stress that she experienced at work. Because simply controlling her emotions did not address those problems experienced, she talked
about how calming herself allowed her to make decisions. When asked about the stressors that she encountered daily, along with the way she responds to the stress, she shared:

Stress related to work...just having to make decisions about [stuff], whether it’s staffing or things related to occupations all over the hospital. So, just trying to prioritize and different things like that [is stressful]... I just, I try to maintain a positive attitude and just remember who I am...I really don’t go off the handle and that kind of stuff. [I] go in my office, take a deep breath, go back outside, and make some decisions.

In another example, a Baptist husband named Jerry also discussed work as a common contributor to stress. As a teacher, Jerry expressed being unable to immediately remove himself from stress in the classroom, but he also discussed how his attempt to control his emotions preceded disciplinary actions intended to remove the source of stress:

[My stress] is work. In dealing with the type job I have, working with kids, sometimes you’re trying to get a lesson over, and you always have someone in the class that don’t want to do anything that day, and they act out sometimes...It just disrupts the class and makes you have to stop the lesson you’re trying to bring to the rest of the kids...I basically, when I’m stressed out, try to throw myself more into the [lesson] that [I’m] doing. I try to keep busy [to] keep my mind off it...Otherwise, if it continues, there’s a form I write up on them, a disciplinary form, and send it to the office or the dean of discipline, and he takes it from there.

In the interview of Blanton and Christine, the Louisiana couple that once had to endure being separated by incarceration, the couple found the most common family stress to stem from finances. Following the discussion of their stress, Blanton shared how he often used an emotional reflection to realize that they should just “do what [they] have to do.” Further, when asked about frequent stress and subsequent responses to stress, they said:

Christine: Debt...unexpected things.

Blanton: Unexpected bills and unexpected emergencies. Not being able to do the things that we feel we need to do, like with this house, we need a new roof... Things like that concern us and consume a lot of our time, because, like, the water pressure is down, [and] the house needs to be rewired. [To make it through that], I just gotta sit back and reflect on the total of life. [See] where I was last year [as] compared to this year...how my week [is] going this week as compared to [last week]... and most times when I’m by myself, I pretty much get things under control and realize that everybody goes through things, and
life [is] not meant to be a struggle, but sometimes it is. So, you just have to deal with it and take it as it comes and that’s what I do. [I] just live every day one day at a time and get up [and] go to work. [We] do what [we] have to do and just keep on going.

As opined by Effie, Jerry, and Blanton, when the emotions associated with stress are used to produce active responses, rather than simply minimizing or avoiding the stressor, the coping process can become easier (Folkman, 2007). While, in the interviews, the practice of becoming aware of one’s emotions before acting was often expressed by only one partner, there were several instances when couples discussed the role of their spouse in helping them to control the emotions related to stress. One such example emerged as Patrick and Jane, a Baptist couple, were discussing experiences with racism. According to the couple:

*Patrick:* I have in many cases experienced racism, and after I finished cussing and screaming...I pray over it and discuss it with my wife. [My wife] has always had a very important part of her character where she finds something good in everybody, and she would always say, ‘Patrick, look, people do things because of certain pressures, and everybody’s not a bigot.’ She always had the ability to get me to stop and look at the situation in an intelligent way rather than being mad and ready to go out and kill somebody. Racism is a very sick thing and we have it in our race as well as other races. I’ve experienced a lot of it and thank God I haven’t let it influence me, because I don’t hate anyone because of their race.

*Jane:* I just try [to get] my husband to see the good in everybody. There is some good in everybody. I don’t care how bad they behave or whatever, but prejudice is something that has never really bothered me.

Other couples also shared instances when one spouse, and their varying personality, helped their partner to de-stress. While interviewing a couple from Louisiana, the husband, Eddie, discussed how his personality and acceptance that some things were out of his control helps to calm his wife during stressful times. When sharing a specific example related to their son, Eddie said:

I know there are times that she’ll come in, and she’ll say, ‘Oh, [this and that],’ and I’m like, ‘Girl, don’t worry about it.’...Even something as simple as earlier this morning, [she said], ‘Where’s [our son]?’ Have you heard from [him]?’ [I said], ‘No.’ [She replied], ‘Well, why don’t you call him?’ [I said], ‘Don’t worry about it,’ and I just told her that this morning, ‘Don’t worry about it. He’ll be here, okay.’ Even though your child is out, you’re still worried about it, but, it’s like, ‘Don’t worry about it, babe. He knows if
something was wrong, [he’ll] pick up that phone and call.’ Something as simple as that...and she kind of figures that’s my attitude with a lot of stuff...maybe they think I have a laid-back attitude. It’s not laid-back, it’s just some things I can’t control, some things I don’t have to control, and sometimes you just have to let things be, and for whatever reason, it works itself out.

Likewise, in the interview of an Oregon couple, a wife explained how the ability of her husband to help her emotionally reduce the perception of stress served as a major strength in their marriage. More specifically, when responding to a question about spousal characteristics that had helped sustain marital stability, Cathy shared a specific example of a time when she was stressed due to school, and her husband was there to support her:

[My husband’s] a really great individual...Really, he always manages, even when things don’t seem their best, [he manages] to be able to have a smile on his face, and just find something good about something that could be negative. It’s like I can always come in and be Stormy Sue. I’ll think that everything’s wrong with the world and he’s like, ‘Honey, you know it’s not that bad.’ Or he’ll give you another way of looking at, to look at it in a whole different light, and usually, it’s not as bad as the situation appears to be...I can remember when I had gone back to school. Our kids were young, and I was back in school taking classes...It was really, really just frustrating to the point where I would come in the door just crying cause I’d be so frustrated, and he’d give me a hug and talk it through. [Saying], ‘Let’s look at it like this. It’s really not that bad.’ There were several instances of that. And I’d come in and I’d just be boo-hooing all over the place and he would always find a way to make me feel better.

Just as Cathy, a wife in an interfaith couple was interviewed and spoke of the husband as the source of emotional balance during stressful moments:

Charlie: I don’t call [the things I have to deal with] stressful. There are things you have to do, especially when you’re the head of the house. You’ve got your children, you’ve got your other responsibilities like bills to pay, but I tend not to be stressed, but I do try to keep a calm demeanor because I don’t want my kids to get excited. I don’t want my wife to get excited. Over the years we’ve been married, all of them are excitable.

Pearl: To sum that up, he [tries] to keep us balanced. He’s the calm person, and he’s not very stress[ed] like we are. He tries to balance everything out.

As the voices highlighted above adequately captured, most often paired emotion-focused coping involved one partner helping to calm a fretting spouse. However, in a rare example, a Catholic
couple gave a simple response that showed how they both controlled the emotions brought on by stress. When asked to discuss whom they relied on to make it through difficult times, Canton and Nora responded by saying:

*Canton:* Each other. I think we turn to each other and take a look at it, and [we] realize that it’s not a life or death situation. It’s not like we haven’t been here before. We’ve had a similar thing, and we dealt with it...

*Nora:* And made it through.

The strong, African American couples interviewed discussed several instances in which they used an ability to practice emotion-focused coping as a source for preventing and tempering distress. When active responses to stress may be futile, such as in cases of racism, controlling the emotions of the stressor can help to prevent negative actions (Peters, 2006). Further, as some couples shared, efforts to control emotions can make it easier to respond to stress in active, productive ways (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and spousal support can aid emotion-focused coping in the marital dyad. Although not generalizable, such findings provide valuable insight into the coping responses of some highly religious couples, when these responses are not related to religion. For those couples interviewed, the desire to prevent the emergence of new stressors served as a final subtheme related to self-directed coping.

**Subtheme 2. The key to managing stress is to avoid creating stress.** Existent research on African Americans has found that the expectation of a stressor can significantly buffer the influence of that stressor, if and when it occurs (Cohen & Swim, 1995; Mallet & Swim, 2009). This coping practice, known as proactive coping, suggests that individuals may avoid habits and lifestyles that they believe contribute to stress (Krieger & Sidney, 1996). In this study, the strong African American couples interviewed often avoided habits that could contribute to stress, as a way to limit stress pileup and marital strain.
Many of the couples expressed a belief that the avoidance of additional stress in the marriage was directly related to the individuals they associated with. For example, in the interview of John and Dorothy, the couple discussed how they made a conscious effort to avoid fellowshipping with those they believed to have a fragile marriage:

*John:* You don’t get yourself connected with these people whose marriages are, I guess, [I’ll] use the word fragile or weak, or [someone] you know ain’t about much, because you already heard his story from last week [about] what he did against his wife. I’m not saying that we’re not responsible for our brothers and sisters and reaching out and strengthening them. That’s not what I’m trying to suggest. What I’m trying to suggest is that we had to be real careful, and we didn’t not allow that [negative] seed to get inside of us. That’s all I’m saying. That would have gotten inside of us had we continued to connect with these certain those people who are still out there now, and their marriages [are] in turmoil.

*Dorothy:* [We’re] still hanging in there....and they are still hanging on by a leaf. Some have not stayed together and have found someone else, and they are on [spouse] number two and number three.

In a similar example, Martin, a Baptist husband from Florida talked about the lessons he learned from those church members that strayed from their marriage, and how it contributed to stability in his own marriage:

I’ve known [people] that I’ve started out with years ago...they decided to bail out...It has affected me, and I know some of the ridiculous reasons why they left. They thought they could find a better deal...It influenced me to not want to do the same things they did but to stay in the ship...I see their lives in ruin...I don’t get critical. I could make that same foolish mistake. Like people who have taken the option as they call it, the option of remarriage or divorce, and they realize how complicated they have made their life. They not only have one mother-in-law; they now have a mother-in-law and an ex-mother-in-law, and the children have all these step parents. That’s the most foolish [thing]. The best thing I can tell them is to work it out.

For Tony, a Baptist husband, the source of peer pressure that he felt could negatively influence his marriage originated in the workplace. More specifically, when responding to a question about negative coping responses, Tony shared this encounter of his exchange with a coworker:

On Friday, [and] this just happened, you get your paycheck, and [co-workers] say, ‘Come on, let’s go have a little drink.’ Well, I don’t drink on Fridays, but they drink on Fridays.
You work hand in hand, 40 hours a week, and working together [has] this person in their mind saying, ‘Well, hey, I have a friend.’ Well, I had to tell this individual, ‘We are coworkers, but I’m not your friend,’ and he was destroyed by that, because that’s what he thought...I wouldn’t come over to his territory, and he wouldn’t come over to my territory, and we had different territories. We didn’t agree. We could work together, but my lifestyle and his lifestyle just didn’t agree because he believes in going to spend part of his paycheck before he goes home. I never spent one penny. The only thing I would spend is if I had to ride the bus home, that’s the only thing I would spend out of my check.

In a final example of managing the company you keep as a way to proactively avoid additional stressors in marriage, a Baptist couple from Mississippi shared their story of how the husband sought to surround himself with positivity. Further, when discussing common sources of stress, the husband, Frank, discussed avoiding external contributors to stress in this response:

If I hang around negative people, they’re going to tell me negative stuff, and once that negative [stuff] feeds into you, it starts in your mind and sets up. Now [it] begins to harvest. Once it begins to harvest, now it’s going to process. So, it goes through a process....You bring that stressor home and what [it] does is starts up confusion...That’s how a lot of marriages fail...See, you’re not strong by yourself, and that’s why a lot of failure comes in, because we hang around negativity, and when you hang around negativity, it hangs at the door...You turn to drinking, then you turn to smoking, then you turn to violence. I was that person, I was a violent person. I know what people go through. I tell [people] all the time, I can’t tell you about things I haven’t been through. I was a violent person. I was a violent husband. I’ve been through the drinking, I’ve been through the drugs. I was that person...[but] you’ve got to hang around positive people to make your marriage strong everyday...When I was out there in the world and hung around negative people...All I was chasing was life going away.

Following the story of Frank, his wife, Hope, added this piece of advice, “Get around positive people. Get you a new circle of friends. You have to change your surroundings.”

In the latter portion of the above excerpt from Frank, he revealed that he was once a person that engaged in negative behaviors, and those behaviors contributed to stress in his marriage. Likewise, others also discussed their avoidance of negative habits as a product of change. For one husband, he recognized that change was needed to prevent marital dissolution, and alongside his wife, he talked openly about how he almost destroyed his marriage. More
specifically, another husband named Marc shared this story when talking about how he now avoids situations that could harm his marriage:

Sex, drugs, [and] rock and roll. I don’t know in what order, [but] you name it, I was there, [and] I’ve done it. I’ve tried that kind of stuff. That didn’t fare so well...I made a lot of mistakes. I’d say the first 15 years was pretty much a mistake...I let those things influence me from the early age of 12...You travel enough out here, [and] you can see anything live and in color. You always tell yourself that those things don’t affect you, but they do. They affect your marriage. They affect everything. They stunt your marital growth. I thought I could handle both. I thought I was mature enough to handle both and I wasn’t...So, I got in trouble enough ‘til I single handedly almost destroyed the whole marriage years back...I almost ruined the whole thing...I never want to go through that again, even if I wasn’t a Christian, I wouldn’t want t go through that again. It’s just not worth it. One woman, one marriage, one family. I’ve learned [to] just say no. Don’t look [at other women]...In LA you see girls walking down the street all the time. I see them like a rock...If Halle Berry was sitting on that couch right there and said, ‘Marc, take me out to dinner tonight.’ I could actually say, ‘No.’

While not to the extent of nearly causing a marital breakup, a Catholic husband also shared that he once engaged in activities that could contribute to marital strain. Further, Sean discussed the importance of having both partners to avoid negative habits:

Both me and [my wife], none of us run the street, [and] we’re not used to going to bars or anything...We just don’t do that. We don’t smoke, and we don’t drink. Nowadays, smoking, that’s an expensive habit. Smoking and drinking are expensive habits, and usually poor people who smoke and drink, they like to go in lounges and bars...Well, I did all this before, and that’s a conflict, I’m gonna tell you.

Not all of the responses related to avoiding negative habits following a change discussed drugs, alcohol, or extramarital affairs. For Darryl and Ebony the negative habits were much more subtle. When discussing the major changes that have occurred over the course of their 23-year marriage, Ebony referenced the once common habit of Darryl to “conquer the world,” and how it has subsided and, in turn, strengthened their marriage:

He has mellowed tremendously. He was a lot more impulsive when we first started seeing each other, and now he contemplates every decision. He really weighs the risks of [every decision]...and thinks about the outcome. Whereas before it was full steam ahead, get out of my way, I’m gonna do this, and I’m conquering the world. Now, I think he weighs the risks. So, he has mellowed.
Ebony also added a reference to how the changes in the habits of Darryl have allowed her to grow in the marriage when she later said, “I’m [now] more independent...Once I met Darryl, it was like he felt there was nothing he couldn’t do, so I felt there was nothing [he needed me to] do...[Now], I’m a lot more independent.”

As expressed by Marc, Sean, and Ebony, oftentimes the couples used their own experiences as lessons to grow from, and they were able to recognize negative behaviors that could contribute to marital stress. However, a larger portion of the interviewed couples used the experiences of others to inform their decisions about avoidable habits. For instance, a Catholic wife, Gloria, witnessed the harm caused to her parent’s marriage by the drinking habits of her father. She explained how this contributed to her own marriage in this statement:

My father was an alcoholic. Sometimes when he was sober, there were some good things, [like] going to the park, [and] riding bikes, [but] those are few and far between. So there were a lot of things that I saw [and] I said, ‘Nope, when I grow up, no, this ain’t [happening]. When I get married, this ain’t happening.’

In another example, a husband and wife from Mississippi had both witnessed negative things happen to others as a result of not being able to handle stress, and they talked about how it influenced their coping and avoidance habits:

*Gabby:* I’ve seen negative things happen [that were] just done in anger...My sister and her husband lost a baby, and because of that, their marriage couldn’t survive. I know it was stressful, and they obviously couldn’t deal with that type of stress. There was a lot of anger and a lot of guilt.

*Deon:* I’ve had coworkers who have committed suicide, on average, like one a year for the last four years. They used drugs or other things just to try to be able to cope with family matters...You [have to] learn how to live...You learn how to take care of your body. You realize you’re not going to stay up all night, you’re not gonna do drugs, [and] you’re not gonna drink excessively, or maybe not drink at all.
A couple from Florida, Stephen and Rhea, also shared the perspective of the above Mississippian couple. When asked to discuss the bad or unhealthful things that they had seen people turn to during times of stress, they expressed the following:

Rhea: [People] go for outside help to drugs, drinking, alcohol, gambling, [and] anything to keep their minds off the problem at hand. [They’re] not realizing that if they just focus and slow down, many times the problems would just work themselves out.

Stephen: They want to take control of the situation. They want to feel like they can do something to help them get out of the problem, but you know, if you turn to that type of behavior, drugs or gambling, you’re just…

Rhea: Defeating the purpose.

Stephen: Yeah, you’re defeating the purpose, you’re making it worse.

Rhea: [We’ve] learned how to not let the burdens and the stresses of today wear [us] down and bear [us] down.

Stephen: And it’s a lifestyle change, too, because you change habits. You give up things in a way, you give up smoking and…

Rhea: The vices.

As the couples within this subtheme shared, they have recognized, through personal experiences and the experiences of others, that negative company and habits can add additional stress to the marital union. With an average of nearly 30 years of marriage, the African American couples interviewed also shared several words of advice to younger African American couples that may be looking to attain a long-lasting marriage. Consistent with this subtheme, much of this advice was related to avoiding habits that could lead to stress and threaten marital stability.

Two wives, one Catholic and one Baptist, both shared advice that referenced the negative effects of alcohol. The Baptist wife, Wilma, discussed the ineffectiveness of alcohol as a coping resource when she said, “You hear get a glass of wine or something to kind of relax [you], and it does work like when pain pills relax you, but when you get back up, that pain is still there.” In a
more direct tone, the Catholic wife gave this advice to younger couples looking to find healthy way to cope, “Make sure that [your spouse] is not an alcoholic person, because once that alcoholic business gets in there, that’s what tears up a home. You make sure that you have an understanding about alcohol.”

Other sources of advice about avoiding negative habits included the statement of an Oregon husband and wife. More specifically, the couple identified balancing work and family commitments as a major stressor in their lives. The husband, Gerald, then went on to share this glimpse into how he avoided interfering with family time as advice to others:

I try to do as much as I can between 8 and 5, and if I have to do things after 5, I’ll usually do it maybe after like 10. [That’s] after the family has already gone through their evening period of time [together]. Everybody is preparing for bed, or they’re winding down their evening, and I’ll start up at about 10 o’clock and do [things] that way.

In a similar statement, a Baptist husband in Mississippi also spoke of managing stressors within the family as the healthy alternative to allowing stress to pileup. Further, when discussing those responses to stress that had contributed to stability in his marriage, Ken said:

If you can’t get through one challenge or conflict, then the next one comes along. Storms come in and out of our lives. Trouble comes in and out of our lives. Challenges come in and out of our lives, and if we don’t get one out of the way, then we have two. If we don’t get the two out of the way, then [we’ve] got three...Anxiety comes on, and [you’re] add[ing] stress.

The ability to advise younger couples that may be facing similar stressors adds to the strength of the unique sample in this study. The limited body of research on strong, African American families, and the habits of these families, leaves much to be learned about how these families cope with stress (Marks & Chaney, 2007). As expressed by the couples within this subtheme, a significant aspect of coping is the proactive avoidance of situations that could contribute to marital stress. One Baptist wife, Edna, adequately captured this subtheme in just a few short words. More specifically, according to Edna, “A religious family will stay away from
the things that will hurt them.” As expressed in the other interviews, likely those things that Edna was referencing included drugs, alcohol, and negative people. The second a priori theme and relevant subthemes revealed in this study were related to deferred religious coping. This topic is presented next.

**Theme 2. Deferred Religious Coping: “I’ve Laid My Burdens Down”**

Of the 35 highly religious Black couples that were interviewed, 74% of them (26 total couples) mentioned deferred religious coping to deal with stressful and challenging situations. These respondents discussed the benefit of having a higher power there to willingly accept the burdens that they themselves felt were too heavy to bear. The most salient responses related to deferred religious coping were captured by three emergent subthemes. These subthemes were: (1) We Give God the Stress in Our Marriage, (2) Even in Sickness, God is in Control; and (3) Work Can Bring Stress, but God Can Bring Peace.

**Subtheme 1. We give God the stress in our marriage.** The initial subtheme, We Give God the Stress in Our Marriage, captured the overarching use of deferred religious coping in response to general, day-to-day stressors associated with marriage. More specifically, the respondents highlighted in this section often explained the importance of deferred religious coping in their daily lives without using the narrative approach to relate this coping strategy to specific stressor events. Instead, these respondents shared the personal influence of deferred religious coping in relation to their strong marriages. Stanley and Coretha were one couple that referenced deferred religious coping as a factor in their stable marriage. When asked to share their perception of the differences between couples that could effectively manage stress contrasted with those that were torn apart by stress, they responded:

*Coretha:* I think it goes back to...knowing how to handle the stressors that come into life. A person that doesn’t have a strong faith, a strong religious outlook, I think they may take
on all the stressors and conflicts in life, and it just wears away at them because they’re keeping that all inside, bottled up inside of them. Whereas [us], we know that you don’t need to carry that by yourself. There’s somebody much greater than you who can carry those burdens for you, and you don’t need to just be up all night worrying and caring...scripture teaches us that we can cast all our cares upon the Lord...He cares for us, and He’s gonna take care of us, and He’s gonna sustain us...[We’re] able to give it up to God and leave it there and know that He’s gonna take care of it.

Stanley: I think that’s exactly right...I think having that lets you always know that you’re never alone.

Coretha: Yeah, and I think the Lord has a way of letting you know that He’s in control...He has a way of letting you know, ‘I know what you’re going through; I’m here for you, and I’m working it out for you.’

Similarly, during the interview of a Baptist couple from Louisiana, the wife, Maggie, alluded to deferred religious coping when discussing religion as a stress reducer in marriage. She explained:

I think during challenging times, the Word of God teaches us that we ought to take all our cares to Him, all our problems and all our needs...because He cares about us...We’re not built to be burdened down, but we’re built to praise God, and we take our problems to Him, and He takes the burden off...we trust that.

As the aforementioned couples describe, they have been taught, through scripture and the Word of God, to take all worries and issues to a higher power. Further, such teachings are often passed down through generations and contribute to the frequent reliance on religious coping by African Americans (Gutierrez, Goodwin, Kirkinis, & Mattis, 2014; Taylor et al., 2004). In one interview, a Southern Baptist husband and father of two described how young Christian couples should allow religious teachings to guide their marriages. With over 50 years of marriage, Bubba used his experience to explain:

The Bible say[s] when these [stressful] things happen [in marriage] and you’re a Christian, you’re supposed to take them to the Lord and leave your burdens [there]. Don’t you pack them around because it’s going to cause you to mess up your brains and sickness will come into your body. Worries kill a mule.

Further, based on the statements of Coretha, Stanley, Maggie, and Bubba, deferred religious coping in response to marital stressors is a three-part process that involved: (1) carrying
one’s burdens and stress to God, (2) emotionally releasing one’s burdens and trusting that God will take care of them; and (3) no longer worrying about those burdens, because as Bubba exclaimed, “worries kill a mule.” While these respondents highlighted each portion of this three-part process in their responses, others chose to focus on the last step and how it helped them to manage stress. More specifically, without discussing specific instances, they talked about the view that the problem no longer existed after giving it to a higher power. One example came from the interview of Chancellor and Joanne. When asked about the differences between couples that handle hard times well and those that do not, the couple shared:

*Joanne:* The difference is their faith, their faith in God... because He says if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, that’s just a little bit, you can say to this mountain be...moved. The stress and the problems are mountains, so you’ve got to continue to pray and decree and declare and ask the Lord to come in and move [them].

*Chancellor:* Yea, because if you don’t, you won’t stand, [and] you can’t handle the problems. See, a lot of times, with problems in my life, I don’t let problems bother me. I don’t let situations bother me. I see where I’m going. See, once you learn that then the problem is not there anymore. The situation is not there anymore because you know it’s all in God’s hands, because you can’t change it.

When asked the same question, Charlie, a Baptist husband of over 30 years from Mississippi offered this explanation:

The number one thing I’ve got [is] faith in the Lord. God [has] his own appointed time and place for you, even when you’re going through those storms, he put you there for a purpose. You’ve got to have faith that he’s gonna lead you out. I have faith in my wife, but I have faith in God first. Sometimes I just go to bed and don’t know how I’m going to get out of [the stress], I wake up the next morning, and as the preacher says, ‘It’s already done,’ but I know that I didn’t do it. It had to come from somewhere, and the only person I know it came from is God. That’s how I weather the storm.

In a straight-forward, yet equally clear example of not worrying about problems, Eve, a wife from Louisiana said, “It’s hard when you’re talking about stress, [and] asking me these questions about stress...I don’t really go through a lot of stress because I don’t dwell on it. I leave it in God’s hands.” She also later added, “[I] don’t get stressed over things...stress has a lot to do
with illness in your body...when you pray and leave it with God, then it’s there.” With the emphasis on there, Eve made it apparent that by using deferred religious coping, the problem was no longer hers to bear, and her willingness to pass the burden provided an emotional ease.

In some interviews couples described the stressor in the marriage as being their marital partner. Consistent with deferred religious coping, there were times when the husband or wife had to figuratively carry their spouse to God and ask that he deal with them and their situation. In one instance, Leroy and Linda, a non-denominational couple from Mississippi, talked about the added household stress associated with the excessive time Leroy spent outside the home. Leroy began by saying, “I was in the world, I was hanging around negative people and I fed off that. I put friendship before family, and it had me out in the world.” When asked how she dealt with this stress and managed it to strengthen her marriage, Linda replied, “[I said], this is on you God; it’s off me, [and] it’s on you.” In a similar instance, a wife from Florida used a “screen door” example to share the advice that she would give to young couples about handling a spouse that may contribute to stress in the marriage. Further, in using this example, she highlighted the importance of deferred religious coping when she told us:

I could probably only talk to the chicka roonies...the woman in the marriage, but one thing I would probably advise the woman...we tend to...nag. I mean, we complain about certain things...I would say to a woman that if there’s something she needs to say to him [her husband], that she should do so when things are calm. Like if perhaps it’s a screen door that’s quite annoying [and] all he has to do is just repair it quickly with the screwdriver...[if] she tells him the first time about it, and he doesn’t do anything, then any other time she thinks about it she needs to tell God because God will whoop him up (Laughter). One lady [from church] says women should bow in submission to give God a clear shot at their husband, you know we do like this (bends down), [then] God can let him have it...She [can say], ‘You know, that [screen door] really is annoying, Honey, I really wish that you would fix that.’ Then [when] she thinks about that screen door again...She [can] say, ‘God, you heard me tell him about that screen door so would you talk to him about it,’ and trust in God to deal with it.
Similarly, Eunice, a wife of over 30 years from Oregon described how she had to apply a “screen door-like” example to her own marriage by asking that Jesus alter the thinking of her husband. When asked about the role of religion in marital stability, Eunice began by discussing the positive influence of her religious friends. Following that discussion, she offered this insight into how she used deferred religious coping to “fix” her husband:

Jesus [will] always be your backup if your marriage [is] not working, and it’s his obligation to me to make my marriage work...I [can’t] look to him [my husband] to fix everything, [it’s] not fair because one person can’t fix everything about another person, and plus, I don’t know if my fix would be good. So, I was committed to always running everything through Jesus and through the Word. What does the Word say? The Word says I can have this out of a marriage, [and] I’m making a demand on [Heavenly] Father...A lot of things [that] I would have said to him [my husband], I could [instead] go into the bathroom and tell Jesus, ‘Now listen Jesus, did you hear what your son just said? That is not going to fly here. We are going to have to have a resurrection. His thinking is going to have to be resurrected because it’s not right, [and] it’s not going to fit into who I am.’ So that was a great ability to have, to know that he [Jesus] was concerned and that he would fix it, just like he said he would. We’ve [seen] him do it over and over again.

As the quotes from these respondents illustrate, even strong marriages will likely have a fair share of stressors, including those that arise from each other. However, these couples shared a common belief that no marital stressor was bigger than God, and they also believed that it was vital to share with other couples the importance of deferring marital stressors to God. In this vein, the couples frequently described the religious deferring process in marriage as carrying burdens to God, leaving the burdens with God, and taking comfort in knowing that the problem is handled. As a result, as many of them shared, the problem or stressor no longer existed once they felt that God had taken control. Also, for many of those interviewed, deferred religious coping was a frequent response to sickness. This is reflected in the next subtheme.

**Subtheme 2. Even in sickness, God is in control.** Consistent with previous research on African Americans (Johnson et al., 2005; Krause, 2010), deferred religious coping is often practiced when a situation is viewed as uncontrollable, and this is frequently the case when
highly religious families are faced with life-threatening health concerns (Koenig et al., 2012). As a portion of those interviewed expressed, deferring health issues to God helped them to limit the amount of stress they experienced from the event.

Paul and Marjorie, a Catholic couple from Louisiana, discussed a stressful time when Paul got sick. After initially believing that the illness would only cause Paul to miss work for a while, they later recognized the severity of the issue and turned to deferred religious coping when they felt that the outcome was beyond the control of mortal beings, including doctors:

*Marjorie:* I thought I was going to be a young widow with two children...I think it would have been different for me had I not been able to attach myself to a stronger faith, you know, because, like I said...it’s frightening to be young, two children, happily married, and everything’s going [good], and then all of a sudden, your husband gets sick. You’re frightened, and family can tell you everything they want to tell you, it doesn’t matter, you still need something else there.

*Paul:* Along those same lines...the health issues...that’s not something you can just personally put your hands on and take care of...You trust doctors and stuff like that, but the whole thing about it is, it’s all in the hands of the Lord you know...your health...doctors, you, or no one else has anything to do with that, it’s just the Lord decides that situation.

As Marjorie and Paul shared, deferring a situation to God can mean that one not only relinquishes personal control of the situation, but they also remove the control of others in relation to the outcome. Qualitative research has similarly found that some religious African Americans viewed physicians as tools that God works through (King, Burgess, Akinyela, Counts-Spriggs, & Parker, 2015). Further, like Paul and Marjorie, Campbell and Estelle, a Mormon couple from Wisconsin shared their story of turning their health-related burdens over to their Heavenly Father. When discussing a horrific accident, they provided the following reflection:

*Campbell:* I didn’t know what really happened to my wife when I first pulled up. I know they said a car hit her. I know I seen blood and stuff on the ground when I made it here. I looked at a paramedic, [then] at her. When I seen her face and I’m saying, ‘Where’s the
blood coming from? The neighbors, the daughter, nobody would tell me what happened. Didn’t nobody tell me ‘bout what happened...From that day, my faith got even stronger. Because if my faith wasn’t strong, when the doctor was telling me she wasn’t going to live and stuff like that...I would probably have told them, ‘Okay then, there ain’t no use [hoping] for her then; let me sign the [DNR – do not resuscitate] papers,’ but the faith was there, and the Heavenly Father was touching me and saying, ‘Everything[‘s] going [to] be all right’... It might be wrong, but...the doctor could’ve been Satan telling me, ‘She ain’t going to make it, she ain’t going to make it.’

_Estelle:_ They [the doctors] didn’t believe I would recover...but God knew better.

_Campbell:_ I wasn’t giving up, the family wasn’t giving up...the stuff [they’re] telling you when you go have family meeting[s] with the doctors...that she ain’t going to survive...But I wasn’t going for that...I wasn’t hearing [them] because my mind was focused on my wife...and the good Lord told me, He said, ‘Just believe in me and let me handle it,’ and when He came back and told me all that, I started going to church every day.

Campbell often highlighted the contrast between what the doctors were telling him about the condition of his wife and what his Heavenly Father was telling him. The severity of his wife’s accident contributed to his limited personal control in her health-related outcome, and he even referenced the doctors as the opposition when he felt their messages failed to align with the messages he had received from God. As Campbell found, once he removed the perceived control from the doctors and deferred that control to his Heavenly Father, he was better able to cope with the condition of his wife and re-engage in normal daily activities.

In another example, a husband from Oregon described how his lack of control in the hospital forced him to engage in deferred religious coping and, in turn, grow to be able to “let go” of many other stressors. In response to a question that asked how his coping strategies had changed over the course of his marriage, Clark said:

_Basically, [I] have let go of a lot of things...I think more than anything it was just coming to the realization that there are so many things that I don’t have control over, and I think for me it really took me getting sick to get it...just letting God take over and direct what happens._
Further, Clark was not the only person to feel that his health scare was a call to grow closer to God during stressful circumstances. Jason, an Independent Baptist from Georgia, and his wife, Cindy, also echoed a similar sentiment. Following a discussion referencing two knee replacement surgeries and war-related injuries that have now left the husband 100% dependent on disability checks, the couple told me:

Jason: I believe [the Bible verse] Romans 8:28. ‘All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose.’ So, when I break that down, I say, ‘Well, all things work together for good. Well, what is the good in this?’ It says for those who love God. Do I love God? Well, I say that I do. Well, if I do, then I’ve got to see that there is some good in this stress.

Cindy: [We] know that God is in control of everything, and no matter what I might think, it doesn’t matter.

These couples collectively identified the common shift in the locus of responsibility when health circumstances seemed especially daunting. Multiple researchers have referenced this form of coping as passive (Bänziger, Uden, & Janssen, 2008; Sloan, 2008), while others have challenged this thinking by noting the active role one takes in handing off their health burdens (Koenig et al., 2012). As many of those interviewed opined, deferring health stressors to God may follow a series of ineffective self-directed coping strategies, but passing that burden can ease the stress of personal responsibility and build resilience. In summary, this subtheme captured a few of the highly stressful medical issues that strong African American families may endure, but it also provides a religious-based response that these couples have found to be effective. Those interviewed also expressed deferred religious coping as a mechanism for dealing with stress in the workplace. Next, we will turn our attention to workplace stress.

Subtheme 3. Work can bring stress, but God can bring peace. In examining the strengths of Black families, Robert Hill (2003) noted that, in these families, “a major source of strength and prosperity is the presence of a working wife” (p. 7). While this strength of dual-
earner households has also been recognized by others researching African American families (Blackman et al., 2005; Keith & Herring, 1991; Mincy & Pouncy, 2003; Mincy, Um, & Turpin, 2016), a spillover effect of bringing work issues into the home has also been found (Beale, 1997). A similar phenomenon emerged in the data of the present project.

Garrison, a member of an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church in Delaware, spoke of his experiences with work stress and how he used deferred religious coping to dampen the impact of a stressful altercation. As Garrison explained:

Faith [as a belief] is good, but faith is also an action...On my job, the phone was ringing while I was working at my machine...it kept ringing and ringing and I thought why in the world isn’t anybody answering the phone? So I picked the phone up and the person asked for a certain individual...so I called back there to his department to see if he was back there to let him know that he had a phone call. Well this individual picked the phone up and got nasty towards me, I mean nasty. Irate. I don’t know why. He went belligerently crazy on the phone...right then and there my spirit was, I don’t want to say downtrodden, but angry. I wanted to go back there and confront this joker. That’s what my flesh wanted to do. Now this is where my faith kicked in...I wanted to go back there and kick in his behind, but my faith wouldn’t let me do it...Something told me, ‘Hang the phone up.’ The Lord told me, ‘This is a challenging time in your faith. Don’t let something like that get you angry.’ I was shaking...but I put my head down ‘cause I knew that ten years ago there would have been no hesitation, I would have been on him...I would have snapped...But I just let it go. I prayed about and the Lord told me, ‘Just let it go,’ and that was a challenging time for me...You hear something say, ‘Go get him!’ and something else say, ‘Peace, be still. Don’t worry about it. I’ll fight your battles.’

In less detail, a Baptist couple from Louisiana also talked about the benefit in deferring work-related stress to the Lord. The couple began by discussing the work-family balance that can cause stress by limiting the amount of time the family spends together; the husband followed with the deferred religious coping strategy:

*Patrick:* I work two jobs...I only get home for a certain time and then I go to another [job] and that seems to be a big problem, with her and with me.

*Jane:* I was working two jobs...[and] for us not to be able to spend as much time as we want[ed] to spend with each other...sometimes it can be stressful...we have to work a second job, but soon that will be coming to an end.
Patrick: And I know, quite often, I have some stressful times at work, with certain coworkers...at my job, you have quite a few stressful times...[but] I know there is someone there to get me through this you know, the Lord’s gonna bring me through this. I don’t know how, but he’s gonna bring me through, and that’s what I depend on.

As Jane mentioned, just as in many African American homes (Blackman et al., 2005), she and her husband felt that they had to work multiple jobs and maintain a dual-earner household. In addition to the stress of limited family time due to the multiple jobs, the family encountered stress within the workplace. However, in a subtle act of deference, the husband credited a higher power the responsibility of bringing him out of those stressful situations.

Previous research has found that racism and discrimination complicate the coping process for many African Americans. More specifically, studies have concluded that Blacks frequently respond to racism, including racism in the workplace, by lashing out in an aggressive manner or by suppressing the feelings associated with racism (Feagin, 2013; Plummer & Slane, 1996; Robinson-Wood et al., 2015). According to Utsey and colleagues, African American responses to racism are often context-driven and can depend on time, place, and parties involved (Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, & Cancelli, 2000). Shorter-Gooden (2004) qualitatively explored 196 Black women that had encountered racism in the workplace, and the researcher found that a reliance on God was a frequent coping strategy. However, while the Shorter-Gooden study did not identify specific religious coping responses, couples within this sample shared the effectiveness of deferred religious coping when dealing with racism.

Connor and Virginia, an AME couple, talked about their experiences with Whites and their ability to hand negative racial interactions over to God. When asked how they discussed issues of racism as a family, the couple responded:

Virginia: I’ll talk about somebody on my job...I had a white person ask me, ‘Well, Mrs. Gleason, why you and your husband don’t never go out nowhere to the town?’ I said... ‘What you mean go out?’ I said, ‘[I] go out every day, I come to work every day and go
to church every day.’ [He said], ‘Oh, I mean go to parties or to go to clubs.’ I said, ‘No, that’s not in our lifestyle.’

**Connor:** There are some good White people and there are some bad ones. I was raised to know all about those types of people...But I’m not mad at the White man or anything like that. The Bible says, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay’, says the Lord. He’ll take care of all that.

Although narrative data may not always adequately capture tone, Virginia was clearly frustrated by what she felt to be personal questions from a White co-worker. Her tone conveyed feelings that a boundary had been crossed, and her husband followed her response by noting that there are “some good White people and bad ones.” Further, Connor acknowledged that he was raised to understand issues of race, and, in turn, he realized that race-related battles were not his to fight. Similarly, a couple from Florida articulated the effectiveness of deferred religious coping when responding to racism in the workplace:

**Tina:** I have experienced it [racism] in the workplace...and when I got home, I just unloaded it on [my husband] as to express just what had happened. But bottom line was we both knew that it was a job for God...and I just said to the Lord, ‘You just need to help me with this because this person has a problem,’ and so the Lord just did something absolutely incredible. I’m just so thankful for it because...first of all [the person] had an old football injury that affected their leg. They had to have an operation on that leg so they were gone from work for quite a while, and then after that they got mono[nucleosis] for another long, extended time. When they did return [to work], they were only there for maybe three or four weeks and decided to move on. So I think the Lord just had that person and whooped them up a little bit and then kicked them out (Laughter)...So, it’s just one of those things where, yes, you will encounter it, and I know I will [continue to encounter it] until Jesus comes and get[s] me out of here, but until then it’s like...God is not going to put up with that [racism]...I have to just rest in the Lord on that one.

**Martin:** Some people are racist and don’t even know it.

As Tina highlighted, for many Blacks, dealing with racism has been and may continue to be a lifelong occurrence. Per her workplace example, Tina maintained a belief that God recognizes the ills of racism and will address racist individuals in His own time. While the study of Plummer and Slane (1996) noted the frequent negative responses to racism by Blacks, couples
such as Tina and Martin believed that a personal response is not needed when a sacred response is expected. A Catholic wife, Alicia, also shared this spiritual perspective. When she and her husband were asked about responses to experienced racism, she said, “I can’t deal with it. I’ll just put it in the hands of the Lord to handle.”

In the home, the hospital, and the workplace, many of the highly religious, African American couples interviewed reportedly relied upon deferred religious coping to deal with stressful events. This finding contrasts that of Wong-McDonald and Gorsuch (2000) who concluded that less religious individuals were more likely to use deferred religious coping practices. Instead, those within this sample were both highly religious and likely to defer their problems to God. Further, although deferred religious coping has been called passive (Bänziger et al., 2008), those interviewed expressed that the coping method had an impact in decreasing the distress associated with situations they believed to be beyond their personal control. Throughout the interviews, there were several situations discussed when couples expressed a belief that they could adequately cope without fully relying on a higher power. Instead, these couples felt that they were partly responsible for those outcomes following stress, and rather than using deferred coping strategies, they partnered with a higher power to cope. The final a priori theme presented captures those collaborative religious coping strategies expressed in the interviews, and also introduces the most salient subthemes related to collaborative religious coping.

**Theme 3. Collaborative Religious Coping: “Dear God, Help Us to Help Us”**

Thirty of the 35 couples interviewed (85%) referenced collaborative religious coping in their interview responses. Further, most of these couples expressed that a partnership with a higher power was an essential factor in helping them to gain control of stress in their marriage. In this study, the role and practice of collaborative religious coping was captured by three
emergent subthemes. These subthemes are: (1) When Stress Comes, We Have a Partner Willing to Help, (2) We Seek God’s Help through Petitionary Prayer, and (3) In This Marriage, God Helps Us to Stay Strong.

**Subtheme 1. When stress comes, we have a partner willing to help.** As illustrated by the subthemes, an essential function of collaborative religious coping is the concept of divine help. Pargament et al. (2000) have recognized that this seeking and acceptance of help is one recognizable trait of collaborative religious coping. However, it is important to note that, unlike deferred religious coping, those that employ collaborative coping strategies do not ask for help and then consider the stressor to be handled without their personal involvement. Instead, the reader will see from the quotes in this subtheme, those that employ collaborative coping strategies take an active role in addressing the stressor alongside a divine partner. Highlighted first are the quotes that described collaborative religious coping as a response to general stress; following these quotes, situation-specific examples are presented.

One example of using collaborative religious coping came from Charlie, a Baptist husband in Mississippi. After describing himself as the carefree “cool-head” of the family, Charlie gave this message when talking about remaining resilient through hard times:

> When you go through those hard times, you have to have faith in the Lord to understand what he’s saying. Now, I think he gives you the talent to come out of those [hard times], but you’ve got to have faith in him first to know that you can use those talents to come out.

Charlie noted that faith and talent combine to form a two-part response to hard times. Further, if faith is conceptualized as trust in a higher power and talent is perceived as the capabilities of man, Charlie is in essence describing a collaborative religious coping response to stress. In a similar statement, Sarah, a wife from Oregon described what she believed to be the most important thing to do when facing challenging times:
You have to trust God, [and] be able to hear [God’s] voice. Practice hearing God’s voice above anything else. Practice that more than praying; practice that more than going to church; practice that more than singing [and] praising. Learn to hear his voice so he can always talk to you and tell you what he really wants you to do.

Like Charlie, Sarah expressed a belief that in the midst of stress there exists a message from a higher power. Further, for those that seek the voice of God, she believed that this message directs them through stress.

Jason, a husband from Georgia, shared a similar perspective on receiving a sacred message and using that message to direct personal actions. However, rather than emphasizing a practiced ability to hear the voice of God, Jason believed the message is written and available to everyone that chooses to read it. When asked about religious responses to stress, Jason discussed the “roadmap:”

The word of God tells us...tribulations bring patience. Patience brings experience, and experience brings hope. Well, what that says is that when you’re going through something you can glory in that situation because it’s going to make you patient, it’s going to make you wait. Why? Because patience brings experience. By going through it you gain experience. Been there, done that, got the t-shirt...It says tribulation brings experience and experience [brings] hope. So if somebody tells me, ‘Man, my mom just died and I don’t know what to do.’ [I say,] ‘Let me tell you how I got through that.’ [If they say,] ‘Man, I’m feeling like my wife don’t love me.’ Well...let me tell you what the Bible tells you about that. People don’t understand that there’s nothing new under the sun...There isn’t a situation in the Bible where God doesn’t tell us how to address it. Everything. Everything. Well, if somebody has given me a roadmap, then I know where to go. I know how to get through, I know how to manipulate and find my way out of it. Just read the roadmap.

A devout Baptist couple from Louisiana, Wilma and Mike, also discussed the Bible as a collaborative resource, while adding their feelings about a Christ-like mind, in this message:

Mike: You look in the Bible and there [are] portions of the Bible that [tell us] how to deal with sorrow, how to deal with death, how to deal with happiness, and I’ll go to the Scripture and just kind of feed off of that.

Wilma: It does, [and] the person you call on, [that] we [call on] is God when [we] have some tough times.
Mike: I look at Scripture, and [that] Scripture where it talks about, ‘Lean not unto thy own understanding…’ And that, man, that’s deep when you’re just reading it. Some things we can’t understand, and that’s where your faith comes in, and when you let that go and you just try to deal with the situation and look at it from a ‘What would Jesus do?’ kind of thing. That really helps me to deal with [the situation].

Gloria, a Catholic wife from Louisiana, seemed to combine the prewritten Biblical experiences Jason, Wilma, and Mike all mentioned with the timely, situation-specific messages from a higher power shared by Charlie and Sarah. In an interesting twist to seeking help from God, Gloria described how God can initiate the collaborative religious coping experience when he notices that she and her husband are in need of help. As Gloria shared:

It says in the Bible...God knows everything that we’re going through. It’s not like you have a God [and] He don’t know what you’re going through, and [it’s not like] He can’t empathize or put Himself in our position. He was tempted at every point, just like we are, and He didn’t fall. He’s just waiting there with loving arms, and say[ing], ‘Come on, I understand. I understand what you’re going through because I’ve been there. I know what you’re going through, and it’s gonna be all right. Just come on, we can work on this thing together.’

The emphasis on working “together” by Gloria served as a simple expression of collaborative religious coping. In fact, the concept of togetherness is so sufficiently central to collaborative religious coping that in the 105-item RCOPE, a common resource for measuring religious coping, together is only used to reference collaborative coping (Pargament et al., 2000), as opposed to the other forms of religious coping.

In a final example of using collaborative religious coping to respond to general stress, the data from two interviews highlighted the importance of this coping strategy, while also serving as counterexamples to self-directed religious coping. As previously noted, self-directed religious coping involves handling issues without the use of a higher power. In the next statement, Meagan, a Catholic wife from Louisiana, shared her belief that often people need to depend on more than themselves when coping with stress in marriage:
You’re gonna have trials and troubles...[and] you still have to work at it, but there’s also that underlying, underlining belief that the Lord doesn’t give you any more than you can handle. And as long as you know that...you can handle the situation...I mean, a lot of people don’t have that faith. When things are thrown at them, it’s like, ‘Oh, God, what am I gonna do?’ You know, and they depend upon themselves, and sometimes, you’ve gotta have a little bit of faith that there’s something else out there, and [God is] gonna help you.

PJ and Tiffany, an interfaith couple, added to this counter on self-directed religious coping by discussing their tendency to seek collaborative help from God. Further, when asked about the role of religion during challenging times, they shared:

PJ: [God] plays a major role [in dealing with challenges] because otherwise you’d be stressed out, you’d be upset, you’d get ulcers, and all that stuff, and it’s not worth it.

Tiffany: And I want a word from God. I want something that I can just hold on to during those challenging times, and [God] is faithful. If I go to Him, He’s gonna help me. If I just try to handle it by myself or don’t go to Him, then I get stressed and overwhelmed.

Just as previous participants’ reports have illustrated, it is not uncommon to find collaborative religious coping expressed in a manner that counters the perceived effectiveness of self-directed religious coping (Bänziger et al., 2008). This finding may be especially salient in highly religious samples where a higher power may be involved in many decisions that result from stress. As some respondents shared, the use of collaborative religious coping can be a strength when situation-specific stress enters the marriage. More specifically, many of the highly religious, African American couples interviewed discussed collaborative religious coping as a response to work stress.

Tiffany, a Catholic, once-stay-at-home wife from the previous example, again described collaborative religious coping when discussing work-related stress. More specifically, she once considered her job to be her homemaker duties, and she described this responsibility as the most difficult work stress she had experienced. When asked about a challenge that had greatly changed her, she discussed the moment she realized that God had helped her with everything:
I always wanted to have children...my first two were 16 months apart. After I had that second one, it was a little overwhelming [and] not as easy as I thought it would be because...the jealousy was just horrendous, and [my daughter] would try to kill [my son]! I mean, she was only 16 months old when he was born, but she would throw things at his head in the playpen...it was a constant struggle for me to intervene and to accomplish everything else at home...I wanted to be a good homemaker and have a nice meal cooked and keep my house clean and have my children clean and well-behaved, but you know, it just didn’t happen, and it was quite overwhelming...at the time I was already a Christian [and] going to church...I had the God part of my life and then the secular part of my life, but it was at [that] point [in] my life when I really realized that God is all one life...I cried out to the Lord for wisdom and understanding and the verse that says, ‘Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all for the glory of God.’ I used to wonder what that really meant before that happened [with the children], and after that, it just all became so clear that God is a part of everything we do. Our whole life, it’s not just a matter of going to church and being fine and doing good...He helped you raise your children. He helped you do your housework, He can help you do anything! So, I think [realizing that] was the biggest change in my life.

As Tiffany (and social researchers) have noted, homemaker responsibilities can be especially stressful when young children are involved (Kahn & Cutherbertson, 1998). However, religious beliefs and religious involvement can serve as a buffer of stress for stay-at-home mothers (Gupta, Narayan, & Gupta, 2010). Tiffany found that reflecting on the stressors she had overcome with the collaborative help of God helped her to better cope with her work at home. Other couples also discussed collaborative religious coping in relation to work stress.

A Baptist couple, Maggie and Sam, discussed the influence of a higher power on helping them to cope with the day-to-day stress of having to maintain a job. After Sam opened with a discussion of work stress, Maggie followed by sharing the strategy that had helped her to collaborate with the Lord during her 30 years of employment:

Sam: It’s stressful knowing that it is incumbent upon you to get up and go to work...[but] you can’t [live] without finances. So, sometimes, and not on an everyday basis, but sometimes it’s stressful because that portion of life [work] dictates you, and you may want to do something else that particular day...but if you allow yourself to get away from what is the norm, more often than not, it creates the sense of laziness that does not agree with the Scriptures.
Maggie: [I] realize that I need income to be able to survive...I [start] every morning with a prayer [that I got from] a little girl...She had this selfish attitude about her mom. Her mom and her father [were] separated and they [her and her mom] learned how to do everything together...And she [would say], ‘[It’s] just me and you, mom, just me and you.’ So, to jump start [my day], I say, ‘Here we go again, Lord, [it’s] just me and you, just me and you,’ and it kind of speaks to me to know [that] I’m doing this, and I’m not doing it by myself...I do it, [and] I’ve been doing it now for 30 years.

Again, just as in a previously referenced interview related to general stress, Maggie gave a clear indication of collaborative religious coping by referencing working together with the Lord. Further, she used the example of a little girl’s desire to do everything together with her mother as a reflection of her personal desire to work together with God. In a similar quote, a Baptist husband from Louisiana, named Travis, talked about receiving the strength to go to work daily. More specifically, when asked about the most challenging stressor within the family, Travis explained:

Dealing with work has been [a] major stress for me. [I’ve] just been keeping the faith, and it’s not like quitting is really an option when you’re trying to raise a family. I mean, it’s not like I can just up...and just walk away. So, [my] strength comes from the Lord and, [I] just wake up every day and do the things I need to do.

As Marks et al. (2006) have recognized in their qualitative examination of stress in strong African American families, often work-related stress and financial stress are closely related. This dual tension is highlighted in the previous two quotes when Sam says, “You can’t [live] without finances,” and when Travis adds, “It’s not like quitting is really an option when you’re trying to raise a family.” Shelby, a member of an AME church in Delaware, gave a powerful example of collaborative religious coping as a response to financial stress. Shelby began by discussing the importance of her faith in what initially seemed like an example of deferred religious coping. However, in her final sentence she shifted the locus of responsibility from solely God to part God and part Shelby:
God is the provider of everything that you have…No matter what problems you have, He can provide a solution for it if you just ask Him. I mean, it might not be something that you can see. It might just be a thought in your mind. You’re having financial problems, can’t pay your rent. You might [have] an old loan, [and when you] call your bill collectors and explain the situation, [they] say, ‘I can tack that on the end of your loan. Let’s re-evaluate, let’s do whatever we need to do.’ We have a fear of things that we don’t know…but if we realize that God is a provider and that He’ll provide a solution we don’t have any worries. I mean, I’m not perfect and some things frustrate me, and I fear some things and some obligations I can’t meet, but I know in the end that if I believe God is my provider, He will provide a solution. All I have to do is seek that solution and say, ‘Lord, I’m still waiting.’ Take an active part in that solution and everything is going to come around okay.

As the respondents in this subtheme highlighted, they found collaborative religious coping to be a comforting strategy in dealing with a variety of stressors, including work-related stress, financial strain, and everyday hassles. Further, they emphasized the belief that God acted as a willing partner, ready to work together with those that sought him to address stressful life situations. The second subtheme related to collaborative religious coping reflects the method these participants used to seek the help of a religious higher power – namely, petitionary prayer.

Subtheme 2. We seek God’s help through petitionary prayer. As “the soul and essence of religion” (James, 1902, p. 365), prayer has been found to be the most frequently practiced form of religious expression for African Americans (Krause, 2010; Taylor et al., 2004). Although the role of prayer extends beyond coping (e.g., praise and thanksgiving), petitionary prayer was found to be a salient part of coping for those couples in this study that sought the collaborative help of a higher power. Petitionary prayers are those that seek an effect or concrete outcome as a result of the prayer (Zondag, 2013). More specifically, petitionary prayers are often the result of a specific stressful situation, and the praying individual or family is asking for a specific action from the higher power. In relation to collaborative religious coping, those sampled in this study often used petitionary prayer to ask for help and strength in moving forward to address stress within their marriage.
Similar to the reliance on deferred religious coping in Theme 3, numerous participants that called for collaborative help via petitionary prayer did so in response to health-related stressors. One such example came from a Christian couple from Southern Louisiana. More specifically, after 20 years of marriage, Harvey and Veronica experienced a health scare that left Harvey fearing for his life and sent Veronica asking the Lord for help. When questioned about the most challenging experience they had overcome, they shared this example of seeking collaborative aid:

**Harvey:** That last surgery I had, when the doctor told me they found a spot on my liver, that was, that was scary, but then at the same time, it was like, ‘Well, Lord, whatever is going to happen is going to happen.’ It brought home [the message that] you’re laying in bed, and you don’t know what they’re going to find. [You don’t know] if you’ve got things in order, [or] if you have enough life insurance, [or] if your wife is going to make it without you. I mean...that was a...a wake-up call.

**Veronica:** Well, reflecting back on what [he] said about that surgery, it’s like that Monday when I had decided that I was going to retire from work, the following week is when they found that spot on [my husband’s] liver, and I told [my husband], ‘My Lord, I retired, I put in my paper to retire, and I’m gonna have to go ask the State to give me back my job.’ Because if he had to be hospitalized and something was wrong, we couldn’t afford it, and I started thinking, ‘Well, you know what? Well, if I can’t afford it, I don’t have a job. So be it, I’ll find a way.’ And I just asked the Lord to just guide me through it, and I said, ‘I have to be there for him.’

Veronica never had to return to the State to ask that she be rehired, but her panic in the wake of her husband’s illness seemed to be somewhat eased once she chose to petition a higher power to guide her decisions. In another health-related example, a Catholic wife (also from Louisiana) directed her petitionary prayers to an apostle, and she and her husband shared this experienced:

**Marjorie:** When Joe first became sick and had to retire, it was like, [just] St. Jude novena, …you know, help us through it, make sure we’re okay.

**Paul:** Make sure we don’t lose anything. That was the main part about it, just make sure we don’t lose anything...Even if we don’t get anything else, you don’t want to lose your house...you don’t want to lose anything. I think that was the whole thing, let’s not lose anything. We just kinda made it through, and that’s mainly because of [my wife] that we were able to get through. [There’s] no doubt about that.
Marjorie: Mainly because of me? That was mainly because I truly depended upon St. Jude. St. Jude many times became my patron saint...I prayed, I did the novenas, a lot of novenas...Saying, ‘Help us through.’

Interestingly, as Paul credited Marjorie for helping them to endure a difficult time, Marjorie credited St. Jude and her calls upon the apostle. Further, she discussed her novenas to St. Jude, which in the Catholic faith are prayers that ask St. Jude the Apostle to intercede with God for assistance during times of despair. Consistent with the use of petitionary prayer for collaborative religious coping purposes, Marjorie sought help in maintaining familial stability during the sickness of her husband.

In a final example of petitionary prayer in response to illness in the marriage, an Islamic husband from Massachusetts discussed the moment sickness threatened the stability of his marital union. In addition, he talked about his call for strength in this statement:

Amir: ‘In sickness and in health,’ sometimes this world will test that [vow] for us. [Life] has a way of testing if you mean what you said or [if you] were you just sitting up there ‘cause everything was rosy that day. You said it, but now that you’re confronted with it, are you really going to live up to it? Are you going to hold your sacred vows? I was sick when she was sick, and so it was holding on to God’s eternal word [that] really gave me strength. Because in my own power, I didn’t have the strength, but I know that I have a Creator that gives me strength once I pray to Him and let Him know what help I need...He provides that for me.

Just as Amir sought strength in the aforementioned example, others also used petitionary calls for strength to get through stressful situations. As one Baptist husband, George, put it, “We know where our strength comes from, and we know that we can go down in prayer and ask the Lord to just help us, just hold us and help us through these difficult times.” Similarly, as a Seventh-day Adventist, Clark discussed how he had changed over the course of his marriage. More specifically, he described how his former personal quest for the “biggest and baddest” material possessions had been replaced with a collaborative dependence on sacred strength:
I was self-centered for a while. I think that I wanted the biggest and the baddest and the best [of] everything. I never took it to an extreme, but underneath it all I always wanted the biggest and the baddest...Now I don’t’ worry about that because I pray...It’s like right now, I’m praying that we are going to sell our house and move more toward the country, in a more remote area outside the city, and I know that we will. [The way] I changed [is], I don’t have as much confidence in what I can do on my own strength [anymore]. I have more confidence in the strength that God gives me, and through his blessings, I will be able to do more.

In self-identified religious samples, research has consistently found a positive correlation between age and the reliance on a higher power during times of stress (Ai et al., 2002; Koenig et al., 2012; Krause, 2010). Therefore, the transition of Clark from a young, possession-oriented man to an older husband that recognized his limited strength in acting without God is not an uncommon theme. In addition to the petitionary prayers for strength shared by this sample of religious, strong African American families, those interviewed also discussed several instances when they sought guidance and direction as the coping outcomes of their petitionary prayers.

One example of seeking direction via prayer came from Joseph and Geraldine, a non-denominational couple. When asked about how they made it through challenging and stressful times, Geraldine first exclaimed, “I pray a lot. I pray through the course of the day. I seek the Lord, [and] ask God to direct me, and show me what to do daily. Sometimes moment by moment, I ask Him to give me directions.” In response to the same question, Joseph later added, “The first thing I do is call upon the Lord [and] go to him in prayer. And really, [I] just wait for Him to direct me and tell me what to do.” The similar responses by Joseph and Geraldine highlight an interesting aspect of prayer in the marital dyad. More specifically, several studies have found a positive relationship between shared religious practices and marital stability (Call & Heaton, 1997; Vaaler et al., 2009). Further, numerous studies have also found shared prayer to be a positive religious coping strategy (Koenig et al., 2012). Responses such as those from Joseph and Geraldine move beyond these findings to suggest that the specific types of shared
prayers in marriage are worthy of further exploration. Such an inquiry would answer the call of Ladd and McIntosh (2008) to give less emphasis to the frequency of prayer and more attention to how families pray. In further noting how families other than Joseph and Geraldine used petitionary prayer to summon direction during stressful times, some people used prayers as a way to escape a state of temporary indecisiveness.

Over four decades ago, Shontz (1975) described one frequently practiced coping response to stress as shock. Further, this shock can present as temporary stagnation and an inability of the family to address the stressor immediately. As some respondents highlighted, petitionary prayer was used to seek the help needed to act in response to stress. Scottie, a Baptist husband from Louisiana, shared this statement when discussing his response to difficult situations:

A lot of times, I [just] sit down, and I don’t do anything. Then, that’s when my faith kicks in and I realize I have to get up and ask the Lord to help me through [the stress]. Then, I [can] go on from there.

When a couple from Georgia, Jason and Cindy, was also asked about stress responses, Jason began by discussing a stressor event that occurred without warning:

Jason: The most stressful thing for me, every day, is currently having five little grandchildren living here [with us]. We love them dearly, but still, when you’ve been alone for years and then in a moment’s notice [your] situation [changes]...All of a sudden you go from a two [person] home to an eight [person] home overnight...That’s been very difficult for me.

When further discussing how the family coped with this immediate, overnight change in family structure, Cindy revealed that her first action was to petition a higher power to help her maintain order in the home:

Cindy: Before [I] try to pick up the pieces, [I’m] leaning on the Lord [asking] God to help me at that moment. That’s just what I do, and my grandchildren constantly hear me say, ‘Lord, help me!’ So, it’s just real practical for me. I’m just calling on the Lord to help me keep [everything] together.
For some of those interviewed, seeking sacred, collaborative help through petitionary prayers were in response to interfamilial stressors. Amir, the Islamic husband from Massachusetts, talked about the importance of influencing his family to adopt Muslim beliefs. In his discussion, he highlighted that stress could be the result of belief-related disagreements in the family, and he also shared how he would seek help in such a situation:

Once I spend my time and energy trying to teach them how to [live] Allah’s law, I’m hoping that they would choose themselves freely to follow Islamic laws...So, part of my job is to ask my Lord for guidance for me and my family, because if we can’t get along, we’ve got to ask for God’s assistance. We’ve got to ask for His help. We have to beg Him for His help and His aid, and we have to receive His guide.

Amir expressed that his responsibilities as a husband and father called for a collaborative reliance on God, and although he did not explicitly reference prayer, his emphasis on begging God for his help, aid, and guidance implied petitionary prayers were practiced. Amir used the topic of disagreements within the family as an example to discuss his coping outlets. For another couple, disagreements were very real. More specifically, in the interview of Jeff and Charlotte, the couple discussed how they both relied on petitionary prayer to seek help for family stress, although the response of Charlotte may have been somewhat of a delayed reaction:

Charlotte: If I’m stressed with them, normally, I’ll leave out the house. First of all, let me stop, I’m going to be honest, I go off! Then, I’ll take myself and go outside...Or sometimes, I’ll grab a little prayer book and say a prayer to ask God to just help me through this.

Jeff: Her rosary...You’ll just say your rosary...[Me], I don’t really have a set way of dealing with stressful times, it just depends on the situation. Usually, I’ll just kind of say a little prayer to myself, ‘Lord, help me to fix up some things.’

Debbie, a Catholic wife from Mississippi, gave an example of the type of “little prayer” Jeff may have been referencing. She acknowledged that there are “a lot of things that I’ve succeeded [at] that I never thought I’d be able to [do] without believing in the Lord...and saying “Lord, help me Lord to try and get through this.”
As the couples within this subtheme expressed, petitionary prayer can be a common avenue towards collaborative religious coping. Whether for health-related stress, interfamilial stress, or general stress, these couples called upon a higher power to ask that the sought outcome involve help, guidance, and direction in dealing with difficult stressor events. For some, the reliance on petitionary prayer followed a momentary period of limited reactions or a negative response of “going off.” However, all of the highlighted respondents shared a perceived benefit from seeking the assistance of a higher power via petitionary prayers, and this method of praying for collaborative help seems to be one commonly expressed gateway to receiving collaborative help. Another way that collaborative religious coping was frequently expressed throughout the interviews was in relation to God as a sacred partner in the marriage, as discussed next.

**Subtheme 3. In this marriage, God helps us to stay strong.** Limited research has explored the role of collaborative religious coping as a resource for married couples, and the only study to specifically consider this coping strategy has found collaborative religious coping to be positively related to marital duration and marital commitment (Van Scoy, 2014). However, a larger body of literature has noted the importance of God as a sacred partner in marriage (Burr, Marks, & Day, 2012; Ellison et al., 2011; Sabey, Rauer, & Jensen, 2014). This sanctification of the marital union applies to marriage a divine significance in which the Deity is seen as an active partner in the union (Lichter & Carmalt, 2009; Mahoney, 2010). There exists a common thread between a higher power acting as a partner in the marriage while simultaneously acting as a partner in response to stress, and this similarity connects marital sanctification and collaborative religious coping in a unique way. More specifically, as the couples within this sample highlighted, the belief that God ordained their marriage has contributed to their ability to overcome stress and partner with God to achieve stability in their marriage.
One Catholic couple from Louisiana, Bishop and Michelle, gave an example of God as a third-party in their marriage. When responding to a question that inquired about sources of strength in their marriage during stressful times, the couple shared:

*Bishop:* [Having] the Lord there [for] both of you, [because] you’re going to need something...I’m talk[ing] about building a foundation, because if both of you believe in the Lord, I think you’re starting to build your foundation on rock [rather] than building it on sand. We know [that] sand shifts, and so therefore when it shifts the walls start to crumble and it falls.

*Mishelle:* It would be the same thing [for me]. I mean, God is foremost in my life, and I heard an example once of seeing marriage as kind of like a triangle with God at the top. The closer you get to Him, the closer you get to each other, and I really like that example. I think that once you start to drift away from God, you start to drift away from each other.

While Bishop described the Lord as a solid foundation on which a marriage should be built, Michelle used the example of God being the peak of a triangle. This *divine triangle* expressed by Michelle has been found to be a common theme in studies of marriage with religious populations (Marks, 1986). Further, triangulation and including God as an additional partner in the marriage draws in a third person through which marital stress can be diffused, and this practice can serve a stabilizing role in the marriage (Butler & Harper, 1994). Michelle also recognized that there were times in her marriage that her husband was unable to supply the help she needed, and during those times she utilized her divine partner. She explained:

*Mishelle:* I think there have been times [in our marriage, and] I think it happens in any marriage, [but] definitely in ours...[times] when there are certain things that your spouse can’t help you with. I think that’s the problem with a lot of marriages; people depend on the other person too much, and they don’t depend on God for their needs. So, in my case, there are things I know that I couldn’t help Bishop with, and [there are] things that he couldn’t help me with, but if we have another source to go to, a higher power, then we don’t have to look outside the marriage for that.

As a foundational pillar or a divine point in a three-party union, several interviewed couples expressed a belief that the relationship with a higher power should be established before the relationship with a spouse can be strengthened. In the aforementioned example, Michelle
briefly alluded to this belief when discussing her spouse: “God is foremost in my life.” Although not extensive in length, responses related to putting God first were salient in numerous interviews. Sarah, a wife from Oregon, discussed how her commitment to placing God before all else was expressed to her husband, and initially was not well received:

I remember when we were talking about getting married, and I told him that God is always first in my life and he, [as my husband], would have to be the second man. I don’t think that went over that well, but over [the] years he came to accept that fact...It took a few years of working things out, [but] we were able to [get] on the same page.

Walt, a schoolteacher and Baptist husband for 29 years, shared this sentiment when he expressed, “You have to make marriage number one, or [no], it’s number two because your relationship with God really should be number one.” Another Baptist husband, Charlie, added, “As for me and my house, I will serve the Lord...and by putting him first, that’s the best thing you can do in life is to make sure that you put God first in everything.” Also, in another, Eunice discussed the order of the relationship within her divine triangle when she shared, “My obligation [has] to be first to Jesus and then to making the marriage work.”

Leroy, a non-denominational husband that frequently discussed the family-related struggles he experienced before he developed a relationship with God, also discussed the importance of placing God first. He began by discussing his relationship with friends, before he later recognized who was in charge:

I was gone. I mean I would put friends before my wife [and] my kids, but God had to switch that thing around...I had to learn through life that God [is] first, and then [it’s] my family...Everything else is just there you know...When you please Him...when a man and his household please God, guess what, everything else will fall in place. Everything else will fall in line. That’s what I had to learn. I had to learn who was in charge. God was in charge of my life, [and] I was in charge of my family...and that’s how things go.

As these respondents reportedly recognized, placing a higher power first, both in their marriage and in their personal lives, added strength to their marital union. If this perspective
were applied to the previously mentioned divine triangle, it would be a safe assumption to say that the triangle should begin with two separate lines that first reach toward a common point – the higher power – before the addition of the third line connecting the marital partners. Such a concept might be further supported by the theory of psychosocial development (Erikson, 1959), which captured religion as an aspect of identity formation that should be mastered before intimate relationships commence. While the divine triangle may not always be formed in this manner, as reported by Sarah and Leroy, marrying prior to establishing and strengthening a common connection with a higher power may add additional stress to the marriage. Later in their interview, Leroy referenced the correcting power of having God as a sacred partner in his marriage. When asked about a stressor that greatly changed their lives, Leroy and his wife Linda talked about the times when Leroy realized that there was a divine being in his marriage. The couple painted a vivid picture of these moments when he shared this story:

*Leroy:* I was at a strip club one night. [I] had been drinking...me and my buddy, and he was sitting [across from me]...I heard a voice [call me], and I said, ‘Man, stop playing.’ He said ‘I ain’t call[ing] you,’ and I heard that voice three times, and you probably remember the story of Eli and Samuel. When Samuel went to Eli, he said, ‘If you hear that voice a third time, say ‘Here am I Lord,’ and I heard that voice three times, and it was so soft. That night when I came home, I told Linda [about it], and I told my buddy, I said ‘You know what, I love you, but I can’t roll with you no more.’...God had to change my life [and] my priorities and get [them] lined up right, and once God lined my priorities up, then everything started working the way it was supposed to be in my marriage.

*Linda:* But before that he had two incidents.

*Leroy:* Oh yeah, the wreck.

*Linda:* [Incidents] where God had visited you; the wreck where the tree fell across the car.

Linda saw things differently. She felt the Lord had “called” Leroy previously but with no response.

*Linda:* But before that he had two incidents.
Leroy: Warning signs.

In a similar instance, a Baptist wife, Alexis, discussed the role of God in changing her husband and, in turn, strengthening her marriage:

Before, we couldn’t [get along] because he was living a life that I didn’t agree with, and that was a conflict between us...There was always a conflict between us. He had his life, and I had mine. Not an adulterous life or anything like that, but not together. We were married but not together. He was still ‘single.’ Once we got into our spirituality and our religion, we understood that God meant for man to have this thing [marriage], and [knowing that] influences everything we do...We always say, ‘Do we want to go to this place? Do we want God to catch us there?’

In both of the previous two excerpts, the respondents revealed a stressor within their marriage that God (and beliefs related to the role of God in marriage) helped to alleviate. As a collaborative partner within a marriage, couples may often turn to a higher power to address stress-related circumstances (Butler & Harper, 1994). Within this sample, several couples discussed the influence of God when difficult situations threatened the sanctity of their marriage.

In the interview of Sam and Maggie, a Baptist couple from Louisiana, the respondents discussed the influence of Biblical scriptures and God in navigating the hard times and disagreements within their marriage:

Maggie: Like all marriages, we have our ups and downs and our differences and disagreements, and I think being able to go back to the Word and read Scripture and what Scripture says about it helps, because that is my roadmap for my life and for my marriage.

Sam: Well, marriage for me is a commandment of God. He said, ‘Be fruitful and multiply.’ Having faith in Him gives me the base in order to build on, and any engineer knows that the bigger and stronger your base is, the higher you can make the building, [and] the more you have to build on. So, having my faith in Him and having everything I need come from Him, there’s no limit to where my marriage can grow...self-sacrifice is not a problem to me...He gives me [the ability] to say, ‘I don’t need to win this argument today’ or the next one, or the next one. Reaching goals is the most important thing, not self.
Sylvia, a Baptist wife from Mississippi, shared a similar story about God as a third-party, stress-diffusing help in her marriage:

We [my husband and I] argue, we fuss, [and] we have our moments. I’m sure I get on his nerves, [and] he gets on my nerves, and we argue, we fuss, but the thing of it is, [we] know not to let the enemy rule and make [us] hold a grudge. [God] says, ‘Because we are different, we’re not going to always agree.’ God is always going to bring a word back to our memory that’s going to make us realize [that] and ask him for forgiveness, and [then] we come back and ask each other for forgiveness.

In another interview, Betty, a psychotherapist and wife of 29 years shared an interesting gem to capture how she and her husband had maintained their marriage for nearly three decades. Rather than relying on a combined husband-wife sacred strength to address stress, Betty said, “I think because of the person that Walt is [and] that God made him to be, he could tolerate all the stuff that I’ve thrown at him all this time. [That’s] a large part of why we’re still married.”

While those such as Sam and Maggie, Sylvia, and Betty discussed God as a partner in the marriage that helped to reduce the negative impact of stress when disagreements came about, others shared how God was a marital partner that helped prevent stress. In an interview with Pauline and Sanders, a couple from Florida, Pauline discussed how knowing and understanding the desires of God for her marriage helped her to avoid becoming “a woman who tears her house down.” Further, when asked about the influence of religion in marital stability, Pauline shared:

[There’s a] scripture in Proverbs that [says] a woman who tears her house down with her own hands, she is as rottenness in the bones of her husband. I have never ever wanted to be that. So, to circumvent that or to keep that from happening, you spend time on your knees, and you spend time in the word knowing what God is saying to you and what you need to be doing. Plus [if you] realize you have the spirit of God to help you, you are not out there all alone...I want my marriage to testify of Him.

Later in the interview, Pauline revealed that there was one time when she and Sanders experienced significant discord within their marriage. However, she also discussed how sharing a relationship with a higher power helped to avoid it from ever recurring:
[We] both want a marriage that lasts and [we] want our marriage to glorify God. You want it to be an example of Christian principles and Biblical principles, and you make up your mind that my marriage is going to testify of Christ. When you both say you are going to do that, you don’t let the little things interrupt that...We don’t argue and fight, except for that one time of course, but it was so awful [that] we didn’t want to do that again. So, we prayed about it...Having that relationship with Christ, you want everything you do to bring glory to his name, especially your marriage. [You want] to be an example for other people to be able to follow Christ as you’ve followed him in your marriage.

Cooper, a Catholic husband from Louisiana, also felt that God had allowed him and his wife to persevere in marriage and to be an example to others. More specifically, when asked about the influence of the church community on marital stability, Cooper chose to share how his family impacted their church community with this statement:

I think God has allowed my wife and I to remain on Earth and to remain together to display our love for one another and maybe affect the thinking of one other couple, if not more, to live the right life and to love each other and have a strong marriage.

While several of the quotes within this subtheme capture the belief that a higher power acts as an active third member within the divine triangle of marriage, a stress buffer for marital stability, and a reason to serve as an example for other couples, the majority of couples that formed Subtheme 3 expressed a belief that the key to marital stability is the understanding that God ordained marriage. Along with discussing marriage as a sacred covenant, such couples felt that a higher power became a collaborative partner in their marriage, thereby witnessing and sealing their agreement to remain committed to one another. Further, this belief seemed to give the couples a marital staying power that helped them to remain resilient and strong in their marriage.

In one interview, Patrick, a Baptist husband explained how he perceived the desire of God to have influenced his strong marriage to his wife Jane:

We know how God ordained marriage...when both of us agree on the same thing and we want the same thing, [which is] to be in the will of God, then it just enhanced our
marriage. We believe what the Bible says about marriage, and so, when we do that, then it’s been all good.

Similarly, in the interview of PJ and Tiffany, an interfaith couple, Tiffany shared the personal importance of understanding that God ordained marriage, as it related to her marriage.

Following the expressions of Tiffany, her husband simply provided his verbal and nonverbal agreement:

_Tiffany_: God ordained marriage and family...He ordained faithfulness, and it’s sinful to be adulterous...I think [that] keeps you focused on what [marriage is] supposed to be. Of course, every relationship has its challenges, but I would say if I didn’t have the Word of God as a direction at times when you want to take the easy way out, you [would]. I think that’s why the divorce rate is so high and everything. But you know, if you know God, and you made this commitment with God, then you want to be faithful. So, you try to work through your problems instead of just saying, ‘To heck with it!’

_PJ_: That was good. (Laughter)

Some of the statements related to ordained marriages shared more than just a common theme; a few couples used similar wording and Biblical scriptures to express the belief that God’s will for marriage sustained them. One such example came from Garrison, a Delaware resident and member of an AME church. When asked how his marriage had been influenced by faith, he referenced stress as a “rocking boat,” while sharing the role of Biblical scripture as a marriage stabilizer:

As He [God] says, ‘Whatever I join together, let no man put asunder.’ I believe that my faith made me love my wife a lot more. We are very different. If it weren’t for faith, I probably would have run a long time ago. [I would have said,] ‘You don’t want to do what I want to do. We just don’t see eye to eye. I’m gone.’ But, when you believe in God, yes, the boat still gets to rocking, but the Bible says, ‘In me you can weather the storm.’

A wife of 16 years, Courtney, referenced the same Biblical scripture in a separate interview. When discussing the beliefs she found to be meaningful in her family, she shared this perspective on marriage as an ordained, spiritual-driven phenomenon:
‘What God hath put together, let no man put asunder.’ I don’t believe in divorce. Even if my husband left me, [or] even if [my husband] divorced me, it would be legal to the world, but it wouldn’t be legal to me spiritually. I know that I would never marry again, because, not man but, God has engrained my marriage in me so deeply that if he’s not dead, I can’t have another mate…it’s so prevalent in the world [to] marry a couple of years [then] divorce [and] move on...[but] it’s engrained in me so deep spiritually, that even though he might have went out and did whatever, I’ll still take him back. That’s just one of my beliefs.

Further, when she was asked, as a follow-up question, if her disbelief in divorce had been a motivating factor in her helping her to remain married, she added, “Yeah, it’s a motivator to practice what I preach. When I’m not doing what I’m supposed to be doing, I turn around and get back on the right track. [I] soften my heart to whatever is going on.”

This aforementioned Biblical scripture was used for a third time when Bubba and Edna, a Southern Baptist couple in Louisiana, were describing the role of God in their marriage and how their beliefs had contributed to a strong marriage:

*Edna:* Religion has been a glue to our marriage because it has kept us together for 55 years, and I know if it wasn’t for the Lord, ain’t no way in the world. In marriage you have ups and downs. It’s something that is not all-day happy, but it’s a good thing, and I always promised myself [that] when I got married, I wanted to stay with my husband.

*Bubba:* The Bible tells you, the way the Lord compared himself with the church is how he wanted a marriage to be, and how a man should treat his wife. If you love your wife, you should love the church also. So, I compare them. How can I say I love my wife and don’t love the church? Or how can I say I love the church and don’t love my wife?...What God has joined together, let no man put asunder. That means, what He puts together, if it’s pleasing in his sight, you stay together. No marriage is perfect.

Couples such as Bubba and Edna shared a belief that humans should not have the ability to divide what has been assembled by a higher power. Further, as Edna and Courtney revealed, this perception of marriage contributed toward many years of marital stability and the belief that divorce is spiritually illegal. Along with those that discussed marriage as an ordained allowance of God, several couples referenced the sanctity of their marital union and marital vows as the glue that kept them together.
In an interview with a Catholic couple, the husband, Blanton, revealed that at one point during their marriage he had been incarcerated and away from his wife for several years. While his incarceration was a stressor that his wife, Christine, at times felt would tear their marriage apart, Blanton used his time away from his family to reflect on the seriousness of his vows and the sanctity of his marriage. While recognizing their differences, they discussed the following belief related to their marital vows:

*Blanton:* The longer we stay married, the more I realize that even though we are married and we’re supposed to be one...

*Christine:* We’re just different! (Laughter)

*Blanton:* We’re individuals. We battle, you know, and a lot of times, she don’t like the differences in me, and a lot of times, I don’t like the differences in her, But, because I think we both believe that marriage is a sacred vow [and] a vow we took before the Lord, we’re gonna honor that vow, and we’re gonna go through with it. We said the same vows, ‘For better, for worse, in sickness and health, for rich, for poor’ and everything, and by me being incarcerated, I had to reflect on the vows I took because when I read that over, the vows for marriage, I thought, ‘I gotta do something to make it right. I gotta do something to let my wife know that I love her and let her know that I’m gonna be there for her, [with] whatever it takes. You know, she might not trust me now, it might take years and years and years and years and years and years before she ever trusts me again, but, whatever it takes, that’s what I’m gonna do.’

For Blanton and Christine, the sanctity of their marital vows proved important in helping them to collectively survive a difficult, extended period apart. However, many other couples expressed that even aside from their vows, the view of their union as sacred and holy has kept God as a central figure in their marriage and helped them to establish a strong marriage. For example, in the interview of an Oregon couple, Mitch and Minnie, both husband and wife shared the importance of having a union they believed to be holy. When asked about the sources of strength that were important for their marriage, they responded:

*Minnie:* Our relationship with God is central. So, we have a place where we can meet, and it gives us added trust within our union...because he’s watching over us, we know that everything is going to be alright, and it gives us a calm and a resolve to do what he
said to do...our union is holy, [and] so when I look around for good marriages, I don’t have to look far.

Mitch: Learning over the course of many years how God looks at marriage...and the union that we are involved in as a couple just gives me strength, even in my ignorance of what true marriage was about, I knew it was right because of my relationship with God, and as I got involved even deeper and learned [more], it just solidified it even more.

Clark, a Seventh-day Adventist from Massachusetts, gave a straightforward response when discussing the role of God in his marriage. According to Clark, “Marriage is sacred...marriage is wonderful...there is nothing better...Make God above all [and] God will glorify your marriage.”

Also, a Mormon husband, Turner, explained his view of marriage as sacred, while sharing how his marital beliefs had implications that extended into the afterlife:

I married my wife 13 years ago...we were sealed in the temple...Well, we were married in that temple, and sealed for time in all eternity...so that’s sacred...being married in a temple, as a couple, that marriage is binded not only here, but also in Heaven...the highest level of degree that you can attain is the Celestial Kingdom, which means husband and wife have to be married for time and all eternity, and it takes two to get there. I can’t go without her, she couldn’t go without me.

As expressed by Turner, the Mormon belief in eternal marriages adds a unique level of sanctity to the marital union, and the practice of sealing marriages in Mormon temples dates back to the early 1800s (Bishop, 1990). Further, his belief that, once sealed together, he and his wife would be unable to attain the Celestial Kingdom alone gave them even more reason to honor the covenant they made in the temple. This is a covenant that John and Dorothy, a couple from the state of Washington, collectively referred to as, “not a feeling, [and] not between you and your [spouse] necessarily. It’s between you and God.”

In the interview of a couple from Oregon, the wife gave a memorable summation of sacred influence in marital stability. Her response effectively captured the subtheme of God as a partner that helped to keep marriages together, and she included with her response a broader perception of marriage in the African American community. More specifically, when asked
about the marital advice that she would share with younger Black couples seeking long-lasting unions, Eunice explained:

Marriage is God’s design, and you can’t truly experience marriage without having God be a part of it. When God is [a] part of your marriage, that’s when you can experience the true fulfillment of what a marriage is. The two [people] come together, and they may be different in many, many ways, but when they come together and love each other and respect each other and do marriage the way God has designed it to be, it’s very fulfilling even though you may not agree [on] everything...By allowing God to show you how to be that husband or that wife you can live a very fulfilled life, and in the African American family, family and marriage had always been so important, [but] these days, the times that we are living in right now, there’s this sense of demoting family and marriage, and it is destroying our civilization. So, [placing] emphasis on really loving and respecting and holding each other up in high esteem is so important [for] the marriage union [to] be strong.

Within this subtheme, couples expressed a belief that a higher power acted as a collaborative partner in their marriage. Further, as a partner, the higher power helped the couples to maintain marital stability by buffering the influence of stressor events, establishing guidelines meant to honor marriage, and contributing to marriage a level of sanctity that strongly discouraged marital dissolution. In relation to collaborative religious coping and the role of religion in strong marriages, this subtheme was the most saliently expressed belief across the African American couples interviewed. Although this phenomenon may have largely been related to the nature of the highly religiously involved sample, this qualitative data adds to existing literature a unique perspective of God as a collaborative partner throughout the course of a marriage. Further, such a review had been previously underexplored in African American families.
CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS

There is no more lovely, friendly and charming relationship, communion or company than a good marriage.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Prior to the published lectures of William James (1902) entitled *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, there existed a proverbial wall between religion and psychology. As to whether this wall has been removed, or at least had a door built within it, remains a topic of debate that has bled into other social science disciplines, including social work. What is supported in previous literature is that much of the discord related to the scientific inquiry of religion has been a result of poorly operationalized measures and the oversimplification of religious influence (Koenig et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2004). Therefore, researchers made repeated calls for more in-depth examinations of the processes underlying religious beliefs and practices (Dollahite & Marks, 2009; Marks et al., 2006). The present study sought to answer those calls by qualitatively exploring the uses of religious coping in the marital dyad. Further, this study was also formed in response to the calls for research on strong African American families (Marks et al., 2008, 2010; McAdoo, 2007).

According to Daly and colleagues (1995), “There is a need for more research [on African Americans] from a non-deficit model in which the dominant culture does not set the behavioral standard” (Daly, Jennings, Beckett, & Leashore, 1995, p. 246). When researchers choose to focus on weakness and disintegration in the African American family, they give the false impression that pathology is a characteristic trait of *most* African American families (Hill, 2003). While the problems within some Black families should not be ignored, we must not fail to examine the strengths that help to get many of these families through difficult situations. If, as represented in the Code of Ethics for the National Association of Social Work (2008), the goal of
social work is the enhance the well-being of those groups that have been historically oppressed, a research-based, salutogenic approach to inquiry could be beneficial in understanding the characteristics of those that are doing well. Findings from such an approach could then be used to inform practice with those of similar traits and within a similar context. Therefore, the goal of this study was to take a strengths-focused approach in examining the behaviors, thoughts, and coping strategies of strong African American couples with stable marriages. More specifically, given the salience of religion in many African American households and the aforementioned need for more qualitative studies of religion, this study examined religious coping as a potential contributor to marital stability for the (purposively selected) couples that were interviewed.

As presented in Chapter 1, scholars have found that African American families are disproportionately affected by many stressful events, including financial strain, racism, incarceration, unemployment, and several health issues (Blackman et al. 2005; Dixon, 2009). Even strong African American families are not immune to many of these difficult life experiences (Boss, 2002). However, as noted in the Family Strengths Model (Stinnett & DeFrain, 1985), a key characteristic of strong families is their ability to effectively cope with stressors that have torn other families apart. When it is considered that “strong marriages are the center of many strong families” (DeFrain & Asay, 2007), one approach to examining the African American family through a strengths-focused lens is to tease apart the coping processes of strong African American marriages—something that has rarely been done (e.g., Marks et al., 2005, 2006).

Chapter 1 also addressed the frequent dependence on religion as a source of coping for many African American families. The reliance on the global indices of religion in studies of African Americans have adequately supported the belief that the group often turns to religion in
stressful times (Pargament & Raiya, 2007). However, as Pargament (1997) observed, religious coping is a pluralistic construct (i.e., deferred religious coping, collaborative religious coping, and self-directed religious coping), and exploring all religious coping responses similarly can lead one to miss the individualized impact of each coping form. Research efforts with the African American population frequently neglected to examine these variations of religious coping, instead opting for comparisons between religious coping strategies and other non-religious coping strategies. Of the relatively few studies that consider the variations of religious coping among Black families, most of the available studies only examined these coping mechanisms within the context of health (Johnson et al., 2005; Koenig et al., 2012). Therefore, one goal of the present study was to explore at least three different forms of religious coping in strong, African American marriages.

A review of relevant literature was presented in Chapter 2. More specifically, Chapter 2 recognized studies that identified and acknowledged the salient influence of religion in American families. In many instances, religious beliefs and practices were found to impact marriages by acting as a divorce deterrent, creating a level of homogamy between partners, and contributing to overall marital satisfaction (Fincham et al., 2011; Marks et al., 2008; Popenoe, 2010). In relation to African American families, religion as a source of coping had a documented influence that dated back to slavery (McAdoo, 2007). Further, Black families have been found to rely heavily on resources such as prayer and the church congregation when coping (Boyd-Franklin, 2010; Taylor et al., 2004). As previously mentioned, however, there is a conspicuous gap in the research with respect to studies that carefully examine religiosity in strong, Black marital dyads. Therefore, Chapter 2 closed by acknowledging the need to move beyond the deficit-focused
identification of stressors for Black families and broad measures of religiosity, thereby further establishing the need for this study.

Following a detailed explanation of the qualitative and analytic methods in Chapter 3, relevant themes, emergent subthemes, and supportive data were presented in Chapter 4. Although it is not ideal to repeat all of the findings presented in Chapter 4 (Goldberg & Allen, 2015), a few unique points related to the data are revisited and highlighted here.

Each form of religious coping, as recognized by Pargament (1997), was represented among the African American couples interviewed. Most frequently expressed was collaborative religious coping, and an accompanying belief that a higher power is an active partner in the marriage, providing the strength to cope with stress—and through whom stress is buffered. In this theme addressing collaborative coping, couples expressed a belief that a higher power was a third member in their marriage, and marital dissolution was discouraged because the marriage was viewed as sacred, consistent with previous work (Burr et al., 2012; Mahoney, 2010).

Following collaborative coping, the second most frequently referenced form of religious coping was deferred religious coping. More specifically, the couples in this study reported that they often gave a higher power complete responsibility in bringing them through those stressors that they believed to be beyond their control. Many of these stressors were work-related and health-related.

Finally, the least commonly mentioned form of coping expressed was self-directed religious coping. By definition, self-directed religious coping involved the belief that one already possesses the necessary resources to effectively cope with a difficult life situation (Pargament, 1997). The tendency of the interviewed couples to limit their reliance on self-directed religious coping may be a function of the highly religiously involved sample. However,
the findings related to self-directed religious coping are no less important than the other two coping methods in this study. In many studies of religious coping among African Americans, the researchers have solely focused on how religion has been used to counter stress (Johnson et al., 2005; Koenig et al., 2012). By exploring self-directed coping, this study indirectly addressed the question, “When highly religious couples do not filter their coping responses through a higher power, how do they cope?” Related findings provide a new look into the coping habits of some highly religious African American married couples. An outline of the themes and subthemes found in this study are presented in Appendix D.

**Implications**

Based on the construct of transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), as discussed in Chapter 3, the inability to generalize from qualitative studies does not entirely inhibit the implications that can be drawn from qualitative research. Further, given the strong linkages between theory, policy, and practice, research-based implications are vitally important to the field of social work (Reid, 1994; Williams, 2016). Therefore, the goal of this section is to discuss the implications of the present study in relation to the three domains of theory, policy, and practice, respectively.

**Theory implications.** As noted in Chapter 3, this study incorporated an abductive perspective and approach to theory formation (Daly, 2007). More specifically, abduction combines inductive and deductive approaches to inquiry by comparing the theoretical findings of the current qualitative study with previously developed and relevant theories in family research (Dey, 2004), while also looking for novel theoretical and conceptual developments (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For this reason, theory implications will be presented in relation to the conceptual framework for studying highly religious families (Dollahite & Marks, 2005, 2009), the theory of psychosocial development (Erikson, 1959), and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969).
Dollahite and Marks (2005, 2009) developed the conceptual framework for studying highly religious families in response to the overemphasis on correlations in religious research. This framework has been utilized in more than 50 published empirical studies. As a reputable model for exploring religion and families, the framework facilitates examination of the underlying processes that connect religious contexts to generally positive, but also some negative, religious outcomes. Dollahite and Marks concluded that to effectively examine religion in highly religious populations, one must be aware of and sensitive to the beliefs, practices, and faith communities of those being studied.

In relation to the current study, the framework of Dollahite and Marks (2005, 2009) has several theory-based implications. For example, many of the couples interviewed in this study spoke within the context of spiritual beliefs and religious practices. Much of the religious coping process is related to the relationship that an individual, or family, has with a higher power (Pargament, 1997). Dollahite and Marks (2005) described this relationship as a function of spiritual beliefs, but as represented in this study, many couples utilize this relationship with a higher power through religious practices, such as prayer. This phenomenon became evident through Theme 3 (Collaborative Religious Coping) and the narrative data that supported the emergent subtheme “Heavenly Father, Help Us to Help Us.” More specifically, although the theme captured and illustrated the belief that building a partnership with a higher power would help in addressing stress, the most salient form of seeking this partnership was through the practice of petitionary prayer. Such a finding supports the recognized need for exploring the

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2 These studies are part of the *American Families of Faith* research project and can be viewed at: https://americanfamiliesoffaith.byu.edu/Pages/home.aspx. Several additional studies, involving other authors and projects, have utilized the same framework. Examples include, but are not limited to Lu et al. (2013) and Phillips et al. (2012).
underlying processes of religion that “take place primarily out of the public view, on the other six days of the week” (Dollahite & Marks, 2005, p. 537).

Also, the conceptual framework of Dollahite and Marks (2005, 2009) noted several outcomes that develop from positively utilizing religion as a coping mechanism. Two of those outcomes were marital happiness and family unity. More specifically, through processes such as constructively “turning to God for support, guidance, and strength” and authentically “living religion at home,” couples were reportedly better able to resolve marital conflict, establish stability, and reach a shared purpose (Dollahite & Marks, 2005, p. 535). As previously mentioned, the most commonly expressed form of religious coping within this study was collaborative religious coping, characterized by seeking sacred guidance and strength to help in addressing marital stressors. Based on such findings, the subthemes expressed under Theme 3 support the empirically-based conceptual framework of Dollahite and Marks, while answering the call to consider the underlying processes of religion before connecting religious contexts to marital and family outcomes.

Another conceptual framework or theory with direct relevance to the findings from the current study is the theory of psychosocial development (Erikson, 1959). In response to perceived limitations of the Freudian psychoanalytic theory, Erik Erikson developed the theory of psychosocial development to encompass lifespan perspectives of human development (Miller, 1997). Erikson identified eight stages of maturation and placed heavy emphasis on identity. More specifically, he posited that identity is gradually developed at each stage and, if not mastered, the failure to reach sufficient resolution can lead to role confusion during the fifth stage. In relation to the current study, Erikson recognized that religious identity is established as a part of this fifth stage. Further, some suggest that before individuals can successfully master
intimacy and relationships with others, they should ideally understand the role that religion plays in their lives (Crain, 2000).

There were several examples in this study that seemed to support some of the concepts of Erikson. For instance, in Subtheme 3 of the collaborative religious coping topic (“In This Marriage, God Helps Us to Stay Strong”), multiple couples shared moments when they faced some marital stress because they had not yet established an identity or strong sense of self. Also within the subtheme, several of the interviewed couples reported that they had discussions with their spouse in which they told their spouse that they are married to God first and foremost. Through the lens of psychosocial development, some stressor events noted in this study may have been in part the result of premature intimacy. However, as even those couples that got married before they had completed the fifth stage (identity) displayed, marital stability can still be attained when religious identities vary during the early years of the marriage.

A final theory worth considering, given the findings from the present study, is attachment theory established by Bowlby (1969). Attachment theory was originally used to describe the emotional attachment of infants to their caregivers. Bowlby recognized that if infants were comforted by caregivers during times of need, they developed a secure attachment style, characterized by less emotional stress. However, infants rejected by caregivers following a frightening event, or infants separated from their caregivers, were more likely to develop insecure attachment styles characterized by anxiety and stress (Ainsworth, 1979). Following the testing and development of attachment theory with young children, interest in broader, lifespan outcomes related to attachment theory have become more common (Pittman, Keiley, Kerpelman, & Vaughn, 2011). In relation to the current study, researchers considered the attachment to
marital partners as a possible function of attachment to a higher power (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990).

Hazan and Shaver (1987) developed an interest in adult attachment and suggested that self-confidence and satisfaction in romantic relationships characterized secure attachment. Although the current study did not access the self-confidence of the couples interviewed, it would be a grounded assumption to conclude that most of the interviewed couples were securely attached to one another based on their high, self-reported marital satisfaction and marital stability (over 26 years, on average). Further, the narrative data frequently illustrates secure attachment as the couples describe their spouse as a secure base. In the current study, partner attachment was also best highlighted in Subtheme 3 of the collaborative religious coping topic. More specifically, within this subtheme the couples commonly described the connection they had to and with one another. If the divine triangle, which was mentioned throughout the aforementioned subtheme, is considered, one of the lines within that triangle would form the secure connection between spouses. Based on this commonality with the adult attachment theory of Hazan and Shaver (1987), it can be implied that those interviewed in this study have developed secure attachments following several years of marital growth.

Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990) applied attachment theory to personal and relational religious experience, considering and positioning God as an attachment figure, or secure base, to whom one can turn during distress. Kirkpatrick (1994) expressed that the God-individual relationship was similar to the parent-infant relationship in that only the former was capable of being the protector and perceived safe haven. Also, Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1992) administered a “forced choice attachment to God” index, and they compared attachment styles to the three forms of religious coping developed by Pargament (1997). The researchers concluded that
secure attachment, characterized by a view that God is responsive and warm, was most commonly associated with collaborative religious coping. Avoidant attachment, a style that describes God as impersonal and distant, was associated with self-directed coping. Finally, anxious attachment, feeling that God is inconsistent in His reactions, was related to deferred religious coping. Although establishing attachment styles was beyond the scope of the current study, the lens of Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1992) provides an interesting perspective on the data collected in the present study. More specifically, it is likely that, because those interviewed identified as highly religiously involved and shared examples of spiritual connections to a higher power, self-directed religious coping may have not been the sole result of a detached God. Instead, as noted throughout Theme 1 (Self-directed Religious Coping: “Often, We Can Manage Our Own Stress”), the couples used self-directed coping to address those stressors they believed did not require the intercession of a higher power. Therefore, such findings in the present study emphasize the need to consider the qualitative, underlying processes of religious coping. We now turn from theory implications to policy implications.

**Policy implications.** Several researchers note that marriage is an important determinant of quality of life for many Black families (Blackman et al., 2005; Mincy & Pouncy, 2003). Given these findings, those policies that aim to strengthen marriage in the Black community, such as the African American Healthy Marriage Initiative (AAHMI) could positively impact the well-being of African American couples and those children within the homes of African American couples (Blackman et al., 2005). Therefore, in discussing the policy implications with relevance to the current study, those policies that could strengthen marital stability in African American families will be discussed. These policies include those that contribute to the
marriageability of African American men and those policies aimed at supporting the needs of lower income and less educated Americans.

According to Blackman et al. (2005), policies that seek to strengthen Black men will likely increase marriage rates and marital quality in the Black community. The criminal justice system is one area in which policy changes could have a major impact for many African American men. The incarceration rate of African American men is eight times the rate of White men, and an African American male has a 30% chance of being imprisoned during his lifetime (Alexander, 2012; Browning, Miller, & Spruance, 2001; Roberts, 2004). Incarceration increases the risk of divorce and negatively impacts the financial security of the wives and girlfriends of imprisoned men (Chaney, 2011; Wildeman & Western, 2010). One reform that could contribute to more African American men remaining in the home includes alternative penalties for nonviolent crimes, such as drug abuse and parole violations. The families of these nonviolent men often suffer the greatest consequences, and alternatives such as community supervision, drug treatment, and changes to mandatory sentence minimums could strengthen many fragile, African American homes (Wildeman & Western, 2010). Also, policies that implement programs to ease and improve the transition of incarcerated men back into the family and community could positively impact many Black marriages (Alexander, 2012; Chaney, 2014; Reiman & Leighton, 2015; Shamblen, Arnold, Mckiernan, Collins, & Strader, 2013). There was at least one husband in the current study that had been previously incarcerated, and he discussed the extreme marital strain caused by his incarceration. However, he used his time in prison to reflect on the vows that he had made to his wife, and he made a promise that he would work to strengthen his marriage. While marital stability is not impossible following an incarceration, the
The aforementioned policy reforms could contribute to the marriageability of African American men and strengthen fatherhood in the Black community.

African American fathers are frequently portrayed as uninvolved and uninterested in the lives of their children (McAdoo, 2007). These depictions reinforce the negative stereotype of Black fathers as *deadbeat dads*. However, the married husbands in this study were also fathers, and these fathers frequently discussed the importance of being engaged in the lives of their children. As research reveals, children benefit from the engagement of both parents, and lack of father involvement can contribute to child behavior problems and decreased cognitive abilities (Blackman et al., 2005). In this vein, interventions that increase father involvement, both in and out of the penal institutions, could have positive impacts on the emotional and psychological well-being of Black fathers and children.

In addition to policy reforms with relevance to African American men, those policies that aim to strengthen and support the marriages of low-income, less-educated families could benefit the African American community as well. Such policies include those aimed at eliminating the marriage penalty in the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), those that seek to provide programs to low-income parents that may consider marriage, and those that encourage marriage and relationship education for low-income individuals and couples (Blackman et al., 2005; Chaney, 2013).

Several studies have explored the marriage penalty tax (MPT) and its impact on marriage in low-income areas (Carpenter, Lassila, & Smith, 2013; Chaney, 2012; Herbst, 2011). Marriages penalties are common when individuals with similar incomes marry, for both those with low-incomes and high-incomes. For a couple with a low-income, when their incomes are combined following marriage, they risk a reduction in their combined net income as a result of
the MPT. However, Chaney (2012) found that even when there is the potential for a bonus under the EITC, many Blacks felt that the bonus alone would not encourage marriage. Therefore, policies should also establish programs that could address the intrinsic aspects of marriage.

Programs such as Building Strong Families (BSF) provided relationship education to unmarried, low-income couples around the United States (Wood, McConnell, Moore, Clarkwest, & Hsueh, 2012). However, the BSF program had minimal lasting impact on relationship quality and the marital habits of those involved. Jackson et al. (2016) posited that a reason for these limited findings, in relation to African American couples, may be because these couples need programs that address external factors that make marriage more evasive, rather than solely addressing internal issues such as relationship skills. Therefore, programs seeking to establish job training, provide financial advice, and alleviate the social stressors that impact low-income, African American couples may be most effective for encouraging and strengthening marriages.

In the current study, 27 of the 35 interviewed couples (77%) referenced finances as a source of stress and marital strain. Further, at least once in each of the 35 interviews, financial stress or work stress was referenced. Indeed, financial and work-related stressors were mentioned more frequently and appeared to be more salient influences on the participants’ marriages than communication, shared interests, or time together (as these issues received relatively little attention). Therefore, the findings of this study offer at least partial support for the position of Jackson et al. (2016) that programs aimed at better addressing the external stressors on marriage may be most beneficial for strengthening low-income, African American families. Legislators and policymakers should work to become more familiar with these stressors to ensure that they are addressed within marriage programs. As Airhihenbuwa and colleagues expressed, the European perspectives in which many policymakers are trained impact the reach of programs.
Therefore, observed differences in African Americans populations are more likely to be viewed as deviations from the norm and remain unaddressed (Daly et al., 1995). Finally, because policy often informs practice, those practice implications related to the current study are discussed next.

**Practice implications.** The couples included in the present study were unique in several ways that have practice implications for social workers, counselors, and marriage family therapists. Foremost, each of the couples interviewed self-identified as highly religiously involved and utilized religion as a source of coping. Second, both husband and wife in each family were African American, and the couples often spoke about encounters with racism and discrimination. Last, individuals within these couples both independently self-identified as happily married and, based on the inclusion criteria, were considered a strong couple. Because each of these characteristics can impact practice in different ways, implications for professionals will be discussed in relation to religiosity, race, and strengths.

As previously mentioned in this chapter, religion has frequently been excluded from social work training and social work practice. According to Crisp (2011), unless religion is the source of the problem, religion is often never addressed or explored from a strengths-based perspective in social work practice. Similarly, Sanzenbach (1989) stated that strong religious beliefs have the potential to inhibit and slow down proven, evidence-based practices and interventions. Such beliefs, whether explicitly expressed or unspoken, have the potential to impact social work treatment with the near 90% of Americans that have said that religion is fairly important or very important in their lives (Mahoney, 2010). Even more concerning are the findings that, when used, many times religion has been helpful in practice, and, along with their clients, social workers also frequently self-identify as religious (Koenig et al., 2012). However,
conversations about religious influence rarely occur between social work professionals and the clients they serve (Crisp, 2011). These findings suggest that the importance of religiosity may be under-recognized in many university-level social work programs.

According to the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), social workers should consider the influence that religion and spirituality can have on practice. The Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards for social work programs state that religious diversity and religious development should be respected and accepted within the classroom (CSWE, 2008). However, very few social work programs offer a course in religion or spirituality, and religious discrimination has contributed to some students being dismissed from social work programs (Crisp, 2011)—and many others feeling marginalized or even persecuted. The transition toward religious acknowledgement in the social work profession must start within the university, and efforts should be made to teach students how to be sensitive to religious diversity (Thyer & Myers, 2009).

As each of the couples in the current study acknowledged, religion not only matters, but it often matters profoundly (see Burr et al., 2012). Therefore, a social worker that seeks to address the coping practices of religious couples would be ignoring a key component of well-being if they fail to discuss religion. Understandably, there are proven therapies that have been practiced within social work for decades, but if the role of religion is ignored when it could be influential, the client has been done a disservice. The findings from the present study revealed that many highly religious couples might rely upon religion as a coping mechanism more frequently (and more deeply) than non-religions forms of coping. Consistent with the construct of transferability, the impact of religion in this study may extend beyond race, emphasizing the importance of social workers to understand religious influence with even those that do not
identify as African American. Therefore, there is a need for the social work profession to treat religion with the same kind of respect, awareness, and sensitivity that is supposed to be afforded race and gender (Thyer & Myers, 2009).

Several bodies of literature that discuss the practical implications of working with religious populations have also expressed the implications of working with African Americans (Boyd-Franklin, 2010; Koenig et al., 2012; Morris & Jagers, 2001). African Americans are consistently regarded as the most religious ethnic group in the United States, and they are significantly more likely to seek pastoral counseling in comparison to other groups (Taylor et al., 2004). Some counselors and social workers may find that deeply religious African Americans actually perceive therapy as anti-spiritual, and that reluctance towards (and suspicions of) professional treatment may often be based in previous experiences with racism (Boyd-Franklin & Lockwood, 2009).

Wilkins and colleagues previously called for counselors and marriage family therapists to move beyond simply acknowledging race, instead adopting racial sensitivity and a stance to challenge racial injustice (Wilkins, Whiting, Watson, Russon, & Moncrief, 2013). From Wilkins and colleagues’ perspective, therapists should aim to have open conversation about the residual effects of racism with their clients. Further, those working with African American couples should seek to establish a rapport with the client by discussing issues that could contribute to racial and cultural mistrust in practice (Davey & Watson, 2007). Clinicians should understand that issues of race may be difficult to discuss initially, but race can impact many aspects of coping and should be considered in the treatment of African American clients.

As those couples in the current study expressed, several encounters with racism and discriminatory practices contributed to their need to seek religion as a source of coping.
Therefore, if these couples sought professional therapy, they would possibly be more likely to continue treatment with an individual that openly discussed and considered race-related stressors. Also, because factors such as income and education are closely related to race, therapists should work to address those underlying issues that contribute to African Americans being an underserviced population.

Along with the need to acknowledge the intersections of race and religiosity in social work practice, clinicians should also work to use more strength-focused strategies in working with African American couples. Overall, African Americans are a remarkably resilient group that responds well to many forms of stress and crises (McAdoo, 2007). As this study highlights, the ability to build strong marriages has been, in part, the result of successfully coping with those stressors that have broken many other families apart. Vaterluas, Skogrand, and Chaney (2015) call for professionals to more closely consider the strategies that strong African American couples use to solve their own problems, rather than forcing upon them clinically-driven therapies. Further, considering the strengths of clients involves listening intensely during conversations that ask about their ability to overcome, similar to the practices of a qualitative researcher (Laursen, 2003). However, because clients generally visit a therapist or social worker during a time of turmoil, the responsibility to encourage strength-seeking conversations belongs to the professional.

In addition to questions about common stressors, this study asked couples to discuss their strengths and effective coping strategies. As a result, many of the couples enjoyed the interview process, and marriages were likely left stronger than they were before the study. Those same strength-focused strategies that were adopted in this study could be reflected in social work practice and used to strengthen marital bonds. Even in the midst of crisis, it is likely that a
family has strengths that have helped them to make it through hard times, and being reminded of those strengths can help families to utilize them. As Saleebey (2002) shares, “When you adopt the strengths approach to practice, you can expect exciting changes in the character of your work and in the tenor of your relationships with your clients” (p. 1). Such an approach is especially important when working with clients, such as African Americans, that are often viewed from a deficit perspective.

**Limitations**

While this study addressed a need for more strength-focused studies on African Americans and more in-depth examinations of religious engagement, the study was not without limitations. One limitation of this study was its sole focus on heterosexual couples. While there is emerging evidence that religiosity may contribute to commitment in some same-sex couples (Oswald, Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & Clausell, 2008), research on religion and the relationship stability of homosexuals remains relatively new. Further, given the recent federal allowances for same-sex marriage, it is possible that research on marital stability for this population will grow.

A second limitation of this study is that it primarily highlighted the positive outcomes associated with religiosity, a natural emergence given its strength-focused goal to examine coping. However, there is also a growing need to identify the negative aspects of religious coping in highly religious populations. According to Pargament and Raiya (2007), religious coping can be both advantageous and damaging. Yet, only a small number of studies have considered the ways some religious behaviors can increase marital conflict (Mahoney, 2010). For example, excessive religious involvement can contribute to large amounts of time outside the home, potentially straining relationships with those within the home that do not have the same level of religious engagement (Koenig et al., 2012). Also, while religious coping can often
alleviate mild episodes of stress, anxiety, and depression in marriage, more severe circumstances may warrant the intervention of a psychiatric professional. However, as Marks (2008) noted, religious couples are less likely to seek this professional marital help. Future researchers should aim to balance positive religious coping outcomes with negative religious coping outcomes for religious populations (Marks et al., 2006).

A final limitation of the current study was that it only considered religious coping as a contributor to marital stability for those couples that identified with an Abrahamic (Christian, Jewish, Mormon, and Muslim) faith. While those within these faiths maintain a monotheistic view of a higher power and often have similar views of marriage and family, religion also influences marriage for couples with other religious affiliations. Therefore, future research efforts should consider the role of religion in familial stability for groups that do not self-identify with one of the Abrahamic faiths.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, this study countered the media and research-related emphases on deficit and dysfunction in African American families. More specifically, this study recognized that religious coping, when applied effectively, can strengthen the marriages of Black couples and contribute toward many years of marital stability. By moving beyond the broad measures of religiosity and the repetitive conversations of frequent stress in Black communities, this study helped to answer the rarely asked but vitally important question, “How did you make it through those hard times together?”
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT

Purpose of the Research

I am being asked to participate in a study that examines families and religion. My participation in the study will take 60-90 minutes. I understand that the interviewer will audio record my interview and that she or he will later analyze the interview data.

Rights of Participation

Everything I provide the researcher with will remain anonymous and confidential. If any information from my interview is used in any form, this information will not be accompanied by my name or any other identifying information. I have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) I am uncomfortable answering or request that the tape recorder be turned off for certain responses. I also may end my interview at any time by telling the researcher that I do not want to participate any longer.

Risks and Benefits

There are no known risks for participating in this study. However, this research will help family scholars and professionals better understand the relationships between families, stress, coping, and religion.

Contacts

I have had time to address any questions or concerns I have with the researcher. If have additional of future questions or concerns, I may contact Dr. Loren Marks at loren_marks@byu.edu or Dr. Cassandra Chaney at cchaney@lsu.edu.

Participation Assurance

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary.

Consent Signatures

__________________________________  ____________________
Signature                          Date

__________________________________  ____________________
Signature                          Date

Please sign and date above if you agree to participate in the study.
APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC SUMMARY FORM

Name:________________________________________________________________

Age:______  Circle One:  Male     Female

Faith Affiliation:_________________________________________________________

Number and Gender of Children (i.e., 1 girl, 2 boys):_________________________

Child(ren’s) Age(s):_____________________________________________________

Educational Level (High School, College, etc.):______________________________

1)  If you feel comfortable responding, approximately what percentage of your income do you spend or donate in direct and indirect ways that involve your faith community?

2)  Approximately how many hours a week do you spend in faith-related activities? (including worship services, faith-related meetings, prayer and meditation, scripture study, family worship, youth or children’s organizations, service to other congregational members, etc.)
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

In accordance with a narrative-based interview approach, some questions are followed up with the request, “Will you tell me a related story or experience [that illustrates or expounds on the initial response]?” For simplicity, this follow-up question is not written after questions below.

**Stress and Coping Questions**

1. What are some stressful things or hassles that you have to deal with almost every day?

2. What do you do to deal with these hassles?

3. What types of things cause the greatest stress for your family?
   - Can you tell me about an experience you have had?

4. What is the most stressful challenge you and your family have faced in the past year?
   - Why was it such a challenge?

5. What do you do to make it through stressful and challenging times?
   - Can you give me a specific example?

6. What are some bad or unhelpful things that you have seen people do when faced with hard times and challenges? (e.g., anger, violence, alcohol, drugs, etc.)
   - Why do you think they turn to these things?

7. What people or things you can touch help you make it through hard times?
   - Can you tell me about an experience you have had?

8. Have you ever faced a challenge that greatly changed you?
   - If so, what was the challenge?
   - How did it change you?

9. In your opinion, what are some differences between families that handle hard times and challenges well and those that do not?
   - What can we learn from both of these kinds of families?

**Religious Involvement Questions**

1. We understand that you are highly involved in your church. If someone who was not religious looked at you, what do you think they would say you sacrifice? From your point of view, what do you sacrifice?

2. Are there some personal/marital/family benefits to being involved in your church? Will you share some of those with me (along with related stories)?

3. Is your religion helpful to you personally during challenging times? If so, how?
4. Is your religion a strength to your marriage and family during challenging times? If so, how?
   -Can you share an experience you have had?

5. Have your spouse and/or child(ren) been influential in your religious involvement? If so, how?

6. Will you tell me about a couple of religious beliefs that are especially important to you and your family? Why are these important to your family?
   -Story?

7. Will you tell me about some religious practices that are meaningful to you and your family? Why are these meaningful?
   -Story?

8. Is your religious congregation important to you? Why?
   -Story?

9. Last question: What faith belief or practice would be most vital for an "outsider" to be aware of in order for her/him to better understand the importance of your faith in your personal and family life? Why does this matter so much?

Is there anything else you would like to add?
APPENDIX D. DESCRIPTION OF FINDINGS

Theme 1. Self-directed Religious Coping: “Often, We Can Manage Our Stress”

Definition:
- Coping strategies wherein couples assume all control in the coping process without the assistance of a higher power.

Subtheme 1. We control our emotions to control our stress

Definition:
- Words and/or phrases that were related to emotion-focused coping, characterized by couples managing their emotions rather than seeking to directly change the stressor.

Example of Commentary:
- I’m the type of person, with uncomfortable things, I bury them subconsciously and consciously; memory loss over time.

Subtheme 2. The key to managing stress is to avoid creating stress

Definition:
- Words and/or phrases that were related to proactive coping, characterized by couples managing habits to avoid stress or mentally preparing for expected stressors.

Example of Commentary:
- A religious family will stay away from the things that will hurt them.

Theme 2. Deferred Religious Coping: “I’ve Laid My Burdens Down”

Definition:
- Coping strategies wherein couples rely solely on the higher power to cope with stress.

Subtheme 1. We give God the stress in our marriage

Definition:
- Words and/or phrases that were related to the complete deference of daily, common marital stressors to a higher power.

Example of Commentary:
- We’re not built to be burdened down, but we’re built to praise God, and we take our problems to Him, and He takes the burden off...we trust that.

Subtheme 2. Even in sickness, God is in control

Definition:
- Words and/or phrases that were related to the complete deference of health-related stressors.

Example of Commentary:
- I think for me it really took me getting sick to get it...just letting God take over and direct what happens.

Subtheme 3. Work can bring stress, but God can bring peace

Definition:
- Words and/or phrases that were related to the complete deference of work-related stress.

Example of Commentary:
- I have some stressful times at work, with certain coworkers...at my job, you have quite a few stressful times...[but] I know there is someone there to get me through
this you know, the Lord’s gonna bring me through this. I don’t know how, but he’s gonna bring me through, and that’s what I depend on.

Theme 3. Collaborative Religious Coping: “Dear God, Help Us to Help Us”

Definition:
• Coping strategies wherein couples and the higher power are both active in the coping process.

Subtheme 1. When stress comes, we have a partner willing to help

Definition:
• Words and/or phrases that were related an expressed belief that a higher power strengthens the couple to help them address a stressor event.

Example of Commentary:
• I [start] every morning with a prayer. “Here we go again, Lord, [it’s] just me and you…I’m doing this, and I’m not doing it by myself.”

Subtheme 2. We seek God’s help through petitionary prayer

Definition:
• Words and/or phrases that are related to the use of petitionary prayer, used to solicit the collaborative help of a higher power.

Example of Commentary:
• I’ll grab a little prayer book and say a prayer to ask God to just help me through this.

Subtheme 3. In this marriage, God helps us to stay strong

Definition:
• Words and/or phrases that are related to a higher power as a third-party in marriage and marriage as a sacred covenant, both as contributors to marital stability.

Example of Commentary:
• If you know God, and you made this commitment with God, then you want to be faithful. So, you try to work through your problems instead of just saying, “To heck with it!”
APPENDIX E. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL FORM

IRB #: 2768  LSU Proposal #: 18946  Revised: 03/24/2004

LSU INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) for
HUMAN RESEARCH SUBJECT PROTECTION
578-8692 FAX 6792
Office: 203 B-1 David Boyd Hall

APPLICATION FOR EXEMPTION FROM INSTITUTIONAL OVERSIGHT

Unless they are qualified as meeting the specific criteria for exemption from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight, ALL LSU research/projects using living humans as subjects, or samples or data obtained from humans, directly or indirectly, with or without their consent, must be approved or exempted in advance by the LSU IRB. This Form helps the PI determine if a project may be exempted, and is used to request an exemption.

Instructions: Complete this form.
Exemption Applicant: If it appears that your study qualifies for exemption send:

(A) Two copies of this completed form,
(B) a brief project description (adequate to evaluate risks to subjects and to explain your responses to Parts A & B),
(C) copies of all instruments to be used. If this proposal is part of a grant proposal include a copy of the proposal and all recruitment material.
(D) the consent form that you will use in the study

to: ONE screening committee member (listed at the end of this form) in the most closely related department/discipline or to IRB office.

If exemption seems likely, submit it. If not, submit regular IRB application. Help is available from Dr. Robert Mathews, 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu or any screening committee member.

Principal Investigator  Loren Marks  Student?  Y  ☑
Ph: 8-2405  E-mail Lorenm@lsu.edu  Dept/Unit  HUEC (FECS Division)
If Student, name supervising professor  Ph:  
Mailing Address:  Ph:  
Project Title  Faith and Families  
Agency expected to fund project  Grants will be submitted to PiIEF, NSF, OIR and Louisiline Institute
Subject pool (e.g. Psychology Students)  Religious Two-Parent Families
Circle any "vulnerable populations" to be used: (children <18; the mentally impaired, pregnant women, the aged, other). Projects with incarcerated persons cannot be exempted.
I certify my responses are accurate and complete. If the project scope or design is later changed I will resubmit for review. I will obtain written approval from the Authorized Representative of all non-LSU institutions in which the study is conducted.

PI Signature  Steven D. Marks  Date 10/23/04  (no per signatures)
Screening Committee Action: Exempted  ☑  Not Exempted  Category/Paragraph
Reviewer  Mathews  Signature  Public Marks  Date 9/6/05

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VITA

Antonius Skipper is a PhD candidate in the School of Social Work at Louisiana State University. Antonius is a recipient of the Huel D. Perkins Diversity Fellowship. He specializes in exploring the underlying processes of coping in African American families, with a special interest in religious coping. Also, he has an interest in generativity in African American homes and an interest in spirituality and health. Antonius earned a bachelor’s degree in Exercise Science and a master’s degree in Gerontology, both from Georgia State University. In addition, he also earned a master’s degree in Education from Louisiana State University.