

2014

## The Hard Decisions: A Qualitative Study of Marital Reconciliation

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THE HARD DECISIONS:  
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF MARITAL RECONCILIATION

A Dissertation

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

in

The School of Human Ecology

by

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December, 2014

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank all of the participants who took the time to speak with me. Marital hardships can be a difficult and emotional topic to discuss, so I sincerely appreciate your time and your willingness to share your beautiful stories with me. It is my hope that your marriages and families continue to be strengthened. This project could not have happened without you.

Next, I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Loren Marks, for your tireless efforts to guide me through this entire doctoral program. Your counsel and direction have been a blessing to me not only professionally, but personally. Thank you for all of the time you have dedicated to this project and to my education, for your patience with me, and for all of your advice and encouragement along the way. It has been a privilege to study under your guidance.

I would also like to thank Dr. Fran Lawrence for the numerous experiences you provided me during my time in graduate school. Being employed under your supervision has been an amazing experience. I appreciate the opportunities you have provided me to fund my education and to gain many valuable professional experiences. My time in graduate school was deeply enriched by working for you.

I also want to extend my thanks to the rest of my committee members. Dr. Pamela Monroe, thank you for putting the desire in my heart many years ago to return to school for a Ph.D., and for helping me see it to the end. Dr. Katherine Mitchell, Dr. Jennifer Baumgartner, and Dr. Theresa Buchanan, I appreciate each of you for your time, your willingness to be a part of my committee, and your guidance along the way.

Lastly I want to thank my personal support network. To each one of my friends and family members who shuffled kids for me, helped me navigate a hectic schedule, or were just

there for me during this process, you are deeply loved. To my children Isabelle and Eric, you have made this process so much easier just by being the amazing children that you are. I pray that you will both look back on this time when we all had to learn to go to school together, and remember it well. I could not be more proud of the people you are turning out to be. Lastly, there are no words to thank my husband, Scott Plauche, enough. When you asked me to marry you 20 years ago, you promised to make all of my dreams come true. Thank you for the support, for wiping my tears, for bearing the brunt of my frustration and stress, for celebrating each milestone, for believing in me, and for being the person I've walked through this journey with, so that this dream could come true.

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## ABSTRACT

The topics of marriage and divorce have been studied extensively, especially in recent decades; however, the topic of marital reconciliation has been scarcely researched. Seven couples ( $N = 14$ ) participated in a qualitative investigation of marital reconciliation. Each couple had filed a petition for divorce in the state of Louisiana between the years 2000-2010. Before the required 12 month period of living apart were complete, each couple decided to discontinue the divorce proceedings and reconcile their marriages, and have lived together continuously for a period of more than three years. A purposive, convenience sample was solicited due to the specific participation criteria of the study. Each husband and wife individually completed a semi-structured, open-ended interview, then an additional interview was conducted with the couple together. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using grounded theory techniques. Three primary themes emerged from the analysis as factors in the decision making process to reconcile: (a) Support systems, (b) Outlook and attitude regarding marriage and divorce, and (c) The importance of hard work in marriage. Both scholarly and clinical implications are discussed, as well as suggestions for future research.

## **CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION**

Marital reconciliation is a topic that has not received much attention in scholarly research. Although marriage and divorce have been covered extensively and from many different angles, little emphasis has been placed on the vulnerable state of marital separation and less attention has been given to reconciliation. Although Gottman (1993) stated that 75% of couples who separate eventually divorce, the remaining 25% of these couples decide not to divorce. Little is known about couples who start the process of dissolving their marriages but then decide to maintain their marriages.

The focus of the current study was to explore potential common themes among couples who filed a petition for divorce, but did not file for divorce after the 12 month period of “living separate and apart” required by the State of Louisiana (Louisiana Civil Code 102). In-depth qualitative interviews with 7 ( $N = 14$ ) couples who met these criteria were conducted. Using grounded theory, (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) conclusions were drawn about why these couples decided to continue their marriage instead of proceeding with divorce.

### **The Changing “Family”**

Marriage has existed in some form throughout history in cultures around the world (Wilcox, Taylor, & Donovan, 2011). While this particular institution has been around for centuries, the face and function of marriage has changed drastically through the years (Cherlin, 2004; 2010). Specifically, American marriages have faced significant changes, especially in the last half century. Burgess and Locke (1945) argued that American marriage shifted from institutional to companionate as families have changed in form and function. Cherlin (2004) claimed that a second transition has occurred in which marriages have moved from companionate to individualized in which the focus of marriage is more on personal choice and

self-development. These changes have many implications for how we view, study, and engage in family life.

The “traditional,” nuclear family, once considered the prototypical family form, is now viewed as just one of many different family forms (Cherlin, 2004). The rise of single parent families, blended and step families, and other alternative family forms have shifted the definition of “family” to encompass many groups of people (Cherlin, 2004). While American culture may recognize many different forms of families, a debate still lingers over the nuclear family and its significance. Although this debate is now decades long, it continues today, perhaps most visibly in the debate over legalizing same-sex marriage (Badgett, 2009).

Cherlin (2004) contends that marriage is in a state of deinstitutionalization and may one day be virtually unrecognizable from other family configurations. In a later decade review on demographic trends, Cherlin (2010) reported that “traditional demographic indicators are becoming less useful in identifying the units we call families” (p. 415) and further claimed that some scholars argue that the idea of the family is outdated. Various studies have attempted to find the similarities and differences among the different family forms to determine if in fact they are not that different.

However, despite all of the changes and the arguments about the importance of “family,” for the time, marriage is still seen by most as the most desirable relationship and as the cultural ideal, even if the social norms supporting marriage have weakened (Cherlin, 2004; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). As stated by Wilcox et al. (2011), “The vast majority of Americans still aspire to marriage and honor the ideal of marriage in theory, but-and this is a key caveat- they are increasingly tolerant of departures from that ideal in practice” (p. 4). Orthner, Blakenhorn, Bayne, and Elshtain (1990, cf. Waite & Gallagher, 2000) reported that when asked to rate their

life goals, nearly 93% percent of Americans rated “having a happy marriage” as either important or very important.

There are many significant factors contributing to the shift in family forms and functions, including the rise of women in the workforce, the rise of cohabiting unions, the rise of single-parent families, the increase in same-sex unions, and a multitude of other cultural shifts (Cherlin, 2010). As of 2009, 41% of all births in the U.S. occur outside of marriage (Wildsmith, Steward-Streng, & Manlove, 2011). This drastic increase in the number of children born outside of marriage is related to the increase in cohabitation (Wildsmith et al., 2011), as 58% of women reported they had cohabited as of 2008 (NCFMR, 2008). Also, the rise of the divorce rate has impacted families significantly. Of all of these contributing factors, divorce seems to be the most prominent. Amato (2000) called the increase of the divorce rate the change in family life during the 20<sup>th</sup> century “perhaps the most dramatic- and the most far reaching in its implications” (p. 1269).

As these changes in family life have affected most other facets of American culture, marriage still remains an important institution. Although scholarship has covered a multitude of topics related to marriage and divorce, there are still some areas, such as marital reconciliation, that are scant in research. Understanding the processes that support such an important cultural institution is worthy of further exploration.

### **Significance of Research**

Although the nature of research related to marriage, divorce, and family issues has changed with the rise of fall of important cultural concerns and the ever changing nature of the meaning of family, continuing to research in these areas remains important. According to Cherlin (2004), marriage is still seen as the pinnacle of relationship status. He further stated that “81% of

non-Hispanic White women, 77% of Hispanic women, and 52% of non-Hispanic African-American women were predicted to marry by age 30” (Cherlin, 2010, p. 404), suggesting that a majority of the American population will marry at some point in time.

Although marriage has changed considerably in the last several decades, it remains a significant institution of American culture (Wilcox et al., 2011). In fact, an entire field of study has evolved around studying families, with marriage-related studies holding a significant portion of the literature. If marriage is such a significant part of our culture, understanding how marriages are strengthened and kept together becomes an important cultural concern.

### **Benefits of Marriage**

Wilcox et al. (2011) stated that the nuclear family remains the gold standard for raising children, that marriage is a public good considering all of the economic, health and safety issues related to marriage, and that the most marginalized segments of our society (minorities, working class, poor) are also benefited by marriage and family life. They further argued that children do not fare as well under cohabiting unions, that family instability is generally bad for children, that family instability is increasing and thus many adults and children will spend some portion of their life in what is referred to as a “complex household,” and that this retreat from marriage is particularly hard on minorities, the working class, and the poor. They continued with a comprehensive review of literature that documents the benefits of marriage on family, economic, physical and mental health, and criminal and domestic violence. Fincham and Beach (2010) stated that “The increased attention to marriage education programs, diversity in marriage, infidelity, and spirituality in marriage is because of the need for policy-relevant research with potential implications for strengthening marriages across many different contexts” (p. 634).

Although Fincham and Beach (2010) noted the most prevalent topics in the literature during the 2000s, their review points to the trends being identified as important among family science scholars. However, some topics related to family life have been covered in more detail and with more intensity than others. While marriage related topics seem to dominate family science literature, divorce related research creates a significant portion of family science topics as well. As divorce still affects nearly 50% of American marriages (Amato, 2010; Cherlin, 2010), understanding the complex topic of divorce is significant. “Reduction of marital conflict and the prevention of divorce should represent high priorities for modern families” (Bray & Jourilies, 1995, p. 462).

### **Divorce Research**

Divorce related literature also covers an array of topics. Studies related to predictors of divorce, including demographic, cultural, and interpersonal characteristics are plentiful and somewhat consistent (Amato, 2010). Another area that has been met with a great amount of research is outcomes of divorce, including those for adults and children. Amato identified the most prevalent topics of divorce literature in the 2000s as predictors of divorce, outcomes of divorce for children, outcomes of divorce for adults, and intervention and policies related to divorce. However, Gottman (1991) stated that few studies observe interaction with couples in order to discover which interaction behaviors might contribute to marital dissolution. Further, he states that marital satisfaction is not always a strong predictor of separation and divorce, suggesting that there are other factors at work.

Scholarly literature does not document that divorce is a certainty for detrimental life effects. In fact, some studies have even document how families may fair better following a divorce (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007). Amato (2000) stated, “Divorce benefits some

individuals, leads others to experience temporary decrements in well-being, and forces others on a downward trajectory from which they might never fully recover” (p. 1269). Hetherington (2006) said, “Although divorce leads to an increase in stressful life events, such as poverty, psychological and health problems in parents, and inept parenting, it also may be associated with escape from conflict, the building of new more harmonious fulfilling relationships, and the opportunity for personal growth and individuation” (p. 204). Gottman (1993) also argued, “Not all couples should remain married and helping a couple to decide to divorce is a perfectly valid function of marital therapy” (p. 71). In gathering data for Waite and Gallagher’s (2000) book *The Case for Marriage*, Linda Waite analyzed data from two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households, and reported that of couples in this survey who considered divorce but decided against it, 86% reported being more satisfied with their lives five years later.

Divorce is not a life event that most people desire to experience. Waite and Gallagher reported that “Even 81% of divorced and separated Americans believe that marriage should be for life” (p. 25). Many people who experience divorce, even under relatively positive circumstances, report that it is a painful experience. Amato (2000) noted that often the spouse who initiates the divorce feels strain and stress before the divorce, but perhaps relief after, and the spouse who did not initiate the divorce may mourn the marriage after the divorce. He further stated, “Legal divorce does not bring an end to the stress associated with an unhappy marriage” (p. 1272). He also documented many of the stressors associated with the process of divorce itself, such as custody battles, declining monetary situations, relationships with in-laws and married friends, relationship difficulties with children for both custodial and non-custodial parents, and physical changes such as moving or changing employers.

Current research trends in divorce are starting to have had a salutogenic focus. One notable area with a budding strain of research related to divorce prevention has emerged (Amato, 2010). Buffers to divorce, divorce prevention, and divorce intervention programs are beginning to make an appearance in divorce related literature. The effects of mediation programs and marital enrichment courses are also beginning to be evaluated by scholars (Cole & Cole, 1999; Markman et al., 2004; Putz, Ballard, Arany, Applegate, & Holzworth-Munroe, 2012).

### **Benefits of Focusing on Strengths**

In relation, clinical fields have also recognized the need for using a strengths-based approach to therapy (Saleebey, 1996). However, this area of research needs further exploration and expansion. According to Dollahite and Marks (in press):

A recent Google scholar search of articles published since 2000 indicated about 8,500 references that contained “divorce” in their titles. By contrast, 29 titles contained “strong marriage”—a 293 to 1 ratio in favor of studies on divorce. This recurring “deficit perspective” in social science [has been identified] in previous work (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997), and scholars have noted that an emphasis on problems, failures, and pathologies (instead of strengths) is especially pronounced in empirical research on minority families, including African Americans (Marks et al., 2005, 2006, 2008, 2010). In the *American Families of Faith Project*, the focus has been, from the outset, salutogenic and strengths-based. [We] do not wish to disparage the valuable contributions of research regarding important social problems such as the consequences of divorce for adults and children, but we fear that as social scientists we have paid too little attention to the question *What can we learn from women and men who “do” marriage relatively well?* (p.xx).

A growing number of scholars have recognized a need to study families from a strengths-focused, rather than a deficit perspective (Crespi & Howe, 2001; Hawley & DeHaan, 1996; Patterson, 2002; Saleebey, 1996; Walsh, 2002). Family studies scholars have made great strides in the study of family resilience in the past few decades, but Hawley and DeHaan (1996) suggested that there are still many things to learn by assessing what families do well. Consistent with the previously mentioned Dollahite and Marks note relating to the overwhelming

prevalence of divorce research compared with “strong marriage” studies, a vast majority of the broader literature related to families seems to originate from deficit perspectives (Hawley & DeHann, 1996; Walsh, 2003). Existing empirical research reveals much about what goes wrong in families, including predictors of divorce, problems related to divorce, enmeshment, dysfunction, conflict, problems associated with alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, sexual abuse, and other problems in family life. Indeed, traditionally the study of families has focused on social problems and a great deal of research has been conducted on the pathology and treatment of the family and individuals within the family. If the end goal of research and therapeutic practices is to improve life for individuals, families, and society in general, understanding what goes wrong is an important piece of the puzzle. However, it takes several pieces to put a puzzle together.

Walsh (2002) noted an increase of literature focusing on growth through adversity, but reiterated the need to continue exploring strengths exhibited by families. She also noted that therapists have begun focusing on strengths of individuals and families rather than solely on deficits. She recognized the abilities of families to “bounce forward” as they “become more resourceful when interventions shift from a crisis-reactive model to a proactive stance” (p. 133).

Although it is important to study and understand the problems faced by families, understanding what families do well can be equally important from both a clinical and a research perspective. In fact, Patterson (2002) suggested that we must understand a family’s function before we can say it is in a state of dysfunction; although that is not an easy task as that definition continues to change throughout time. Walsh (2003) argued that it is of utmost importance to be able to view families from a healthy perspective rather than viewing them as damaged or broken. She further stated that the advantages of using a family resilience framework

are that it focuses on strengths under stress and it takes into account that no one model will fit all families in all situations. However, in order to use a strengths based focus for families, we must first discover what they do well.

### **Current Gaps in the Empirical Literature**

Although there are many areas that family science scholars have covered extensively, there are many areas still left to explore. The process couples use when making decisions to divorce or stay married, marital separation as a separate event other than a precursor to divorce, making marriages stronger, and family resilience are all areas worthy of further investigation. The aim of the current study was to address the above mentioned areas.

### **Divorce**

Divorce is a necessary tool for people to leave abusive or harmful situations and to make decisions that are in their best interests. The reasons one may consider divorce are complex and the outcomes can be even more complex. One study found that couples who were in high distress marriages reported higher satisfaction after divorce and those who were in low distress marriages reported greater stress and dissatisfaction after divorce (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007). The authors used a sample of 509 participants who were interviewed in two waves in order to assess how couples who end in divorce differ from those who stayed married. The respondents were asked to assess their marital happiness, interaction with spouse, conflict and violence in the marriage, and their perceived chance of divorce. Among those who divorced, about half were in low-conflict marriages prior to divorce, the other half in high-conflict marriages. The authors suggested the reasons for these findings may be that the quality of life may in fact increase for family members who are in high-distress marriages after they are divorced and may decrease for those who are in low-distress marriages but decide to divorce. This seems to suggest that

marriages that are not in high distress situations may be better served by finding methods to strengthen them. They further claimed, “These spouses may seek a divorce, not because their marriages is at rock bottom but because they have low levels of commitment to marriage as a lifelong relationship, hold high expectations for marriage, perceive few barriers to leaving their relationships, and believe that viable alternatives to their current partner are available” (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007, p. 627) . Another study reported that two thirds of divorces were in fact from low stress marriages (Booth & Amato, 2001). It is possible that more complex processes underlie these decisions.

### The Process of Divorce

Although we understand a great deal about divorce and we see a small but growing trend in research on marital strength, divorce intervention, and marital reconciliation, empirical research is lacking in the area of understanding the processes couples use when making the decision to separate or stay together. Amato (2010) argued for viewing the entire process of divorce rather than just considering it a family crisis or strain, as it is not a one-time event in a family, but a long term process families navigate through: “Marital dissolution is a process that unfolds over time, beginning when the couples are still married and ending years after the divorce” (p. 656). Previti and Amato (2003) asked 2,034 people as part of a longitudinal study, “Why do you stay Married?.” Many respondents discussed the rewards of being married. Those who discussed mostly the barriers to divorce (i.e., staying together for the children, economic issues) were more likely to divorce within the next 14 years of the study. However, the participants were not all necessarily divorce prone, so it is possible that the couples who were stronger at the start of the study expressed more of the rewards. This does not give us a look into couples who are considering divorce. Another finding of the study revealed that marital

cohesiveness was also a predictor of divorce for the participants in this study. Fincham and Beach (2010) referenced a growth in literature on newlyweds that are attempting to discover the early stages of negative marital processes. Amato and Hohmann-Marriott (2007) also argued for the need for more understanding of divorce prone marriages. Hawkins, Willoughby, and Doherty (2012) suggested that the research is limited in understanding the reasons couples give for divorcing and conducted a study to determine if the reasons couples gave for divorce were associated with their willingness to reconcile their marriages.

Gottman (1993) offered a theory on what he called “cascades” in which marriages that are heading for divorce are on a different trajectory than marriages that are not. He reported that although the variables that are predictors of divorce have been well established, researchers have not been able to pinpoint the patterns of marital interaction that make marriages more divorce prone than others, suggesting a need for more empirical research on the processes that couples use in their relationships. Sells, Bechenbach, and Patrick (2009), in a discussion on relational conflict stated, “Although the process of repetitive conflict is well documented in the literature, explanation and intervention into this process are lacking” (p. 204). Other researchers have argued that there are several other complex issues at work in the process of divorce that need to be studied (Schindler & Coley, 2012). Lee, Sbarra, Mason, and Law (2011) also stated, “What is not yet known in great detail is why and how some people navigate divorce with minimal or transient distress, whereas other people become mired in periods of considerable emotional pain and stuck on trajectories towards poor health outcomes” (p. 285).

## **Separation**

As stated by Amato (2010), “Few studies have focused on separation rather than divorce, and relatively little is known about the particular status” (p. 661). He further argued for more

research on this particular status. Gottman (1993) also noted that the vast majority of those couples who separate end in marital dissolution. However, separation statistics can be even harder to define than divorce statistics. According the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), approximately 9.7% of the population reported being separated from their spouse. The numbers vary widely from study to study on how many married couples and divorced couples have experienced separation and/or reconciliation. Other studies reported that as many as 10% of marriages have reported a separation and reconciliation, and 12%-15% of married couples who separate later reconcile, and between 30%-44% of couples who divorce experienced a separation before (c.f. Binstock & Thornton, 2003). However, separation is often vaguely defined and many of these studies are dated. The majority of research focuses on causes and consequences of separation, but little research has been conducted on the decision to end the marriage or to reconcile.

Binstock and Thornton (2003) stated that, “Extremely limited attention has been given to reconciliations and multiple separations. Some evidence suggests that reconciliations and re-separations may be important experiences for many married couples” (p. 434). The authors further stated that marital reconciliation is not necessarily an indicator of marital stability, and that only an estimated one-third of reconciliation attempts are successful (Wineberg, 1996). Due to the rise in cohabiting relationships, Halford and Sweeper (2013) assessed the different trajectories individuals take following separation from either a marriage or a cohabiting relationship.

Marital separation is also not consistently defined. Cherlin (2010) discussed that separation can be difficult to define because statistics on separation are rarely accurate or precise, and they tend to be reported differently from state to state. In a study of parent-child relationships as a predictor to marital separation by Schindler and Coley (2012), marital

separation was defined as the father leaving the marital household. Other studies consider separation as physically living in separate households (Halford & Sweeper, 2013; Kurdek, 2002).

### **Making Marriages Stronger**

While the literature offers strong evidence of the predictors of divorce, it may be equally important to know what strong families do to avoid marital disruption. The literature heavily documents the effects on children of living with single parents, but it is equally important to know about those families who were made stronger by overcoming marital difficulty. Integrating the concepts of family resilience and the strengths perspective is an important first step in furthering the study of families.

Although divorce may be the best option for some couples, many other couples find their way through the difficulty of marital strife and may come out stronger. In the qualitative portion of a study by Knowles, Sasser, and Garrison (2009), one man reported that he and his wife were in the divorce process before Hurricane Katrina struck the city of New Orleans, but after dealing with the family crisis of losing everything, they reported higher family functioning and decided to reconcile their marriage. Stories such as these are atypical but offer vital information. Divorce is not the only alternative to difficulties in marriage. Considering the potential negative outcomes of divorce for everyone involved, other alternatives may be worth further exploration. This recurring finding underscores an observation by Viktor Frankl (1984) that: “If architects want to strengthen a decrepit arch, they *increase* the load which is laid upon it, for thereby the parts are joined more firmly together” (p. 127). Although some bridges do indeed break under pressure, it is an interesting analogy. There are times when increased pressure can unify and make a structure (or a marriage) stronger.

Some marriages seem to encounter the ugliest of situations, including adultery or other betrayals of trust, yet the partners manage to use the experience as a turning point for addressing the problems in their marriage and moving forward. A few have even come to the point of separating or filing for divorce. Gottman (1993) reported that 75% of couples in his longitudinal study who separated eventually divorced. But that leaves as many as 25% that do not divorce. These 25% of “survivors” are marriages we know little about. Gottman suggested that marriages that are heading for divorce may be on a different trajectory than those marriages that are not. He further discussed the importance of identifying the factors that may make a difference in these marriages. In a culture where divorce has been made a fairly easy process, what makes some couples choose to stick it out?

### **Resilience Research**

Another steadily growing body of literature related to family resilience has emerged in the last decade. A few studies on buffers to divorce have also been conducted, as well as studies on healthy marriages. However, few, if any, focus on marital reconciliation. Several studies have emerged concerning marital stressors and marital satisfaction, but little is known about how couples recover from serious marital stress. Although some work has been conducted on buffers to divorce, recovering from significant marital difficulty is a virtually untouched subject.

A Google scholar search for literature using the key words “marital reconciliation” results in 913 hits; however, when the phrase “life event” was eliminated, only 20 sources remained. In the vast majority of cases, marital reconciliation is merely one of a myriad of demographic variables or is reduced to a survey item. Only 20 seem to address the issue in anything more than minimal depth.

Of the studies on marital reconciliation, most are conducted on the success of intervention programs (Amato, 2010; Binstock & Thornton, 2003; Doherty, Willoughby, & Peterson, 2011). Although these studies have begun to pave the way for studies related to divorce prevention and marital reconciliation, the nature of these studies have not covered the processes couples have used in reconciliation efforts or considered the contexts in which reconciliation occurred.

As families continue to change, it is increasingly important to evaluate processes that will support marriages. From economic, health, and well-being standpoints, families tend to fare better when parents remained married (Amato, 2000). Children and adults of divorce often experience negative consequences (Amato, 2000). Family instability also has negative effects for children (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007). Fincham, Stanley, and Beach (2007) also suggested a need for more studies focusing on strengths rather than conflict. For these reasons, it is important to consider potential characteristics that support marriages.

This study extends the body of literature in the family sciences field by exploring the potential in preventative measures of divorce and family resilience. Many potential clinical and scholarly applications exist in the findings of this study as little has been written on this subject (Hawley, 2000), as well as future applications for family sciences in general. Rarely has research focused on what makes families function well (Hawley, 2000). According to Hawley (2000), “Even the most resilient families will face adversity from time to time. It is important to know what processes make them work well or what will help them continue to grow” (p. 107). Findings from this study may also inform potential family policy studies; an area Bogenschnieder and Corbett (2010) argued that the field of family sciences needs to address more.

## **Marital Reconciliation**

According to Holeman (2003), “The formal study of reconciliation is in its embryonic stage” (p. 30). In a paper discussing the connection of evaluating both the therapeutic perspectives and theological reflections of marital reconciliation, Worthington and Drinkard (2000) also stated, “Scientific literature on reconciliation is weak” (p. 94). Although scholarly interest is beginning in this field, the area is vast for exploratory studies. Little is known about the processes couples use when attempting to reconcile their marriages.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

#### **Reconciliation**

Louisiana Civil Code considers reconciliation as the following: “The cause of action for divorce is extinguished by the reconciliation of the parties” (Louisiana Civil Code, 104). Worthington and Drinkard (2000) define reconciliation as, “The restoration of trust in an interpersonal relationship through mutual trustworthy behaviors” (p. 93). The authors further discuss that reconciliation is not the same as resolution or forgiveness and that, “Reconciliation does not imply that all differences have necessarily been eliminated, that conflict has completely ceased, that all disagreements have been worked out, or that compromise has occurred” (p.94). For the purposes of the current study, reconciliation will be operationalized as mutually agreeing to not proceed with divorce.

#### **Marital Separation**

In a study by Schindler and Coley (2012), marital separation was defined as the father leaving the marital household. Other studies consider separation as physically living in separate households (Halford & Sweeper, 2013; Kurdek, 2002). For the purposes of the current study, separation is operationalized as the formal filing of the petition for divorce.

## **Research Question**

The purpose of this study was to explore what components of the FAAR model (stressor events, resources, definitions) kept the couples from entering a state of maladaptation (divorce or perennial high conflict) instead of bonadaptation (reconciliation). Also, from an ecological or systems viewpoint, this study examined how the different systems in the individuals' (the husband and the wife) lives influence the decisions they made, and the subsequent quality of the marriage. Participants were asked to discuss how systems such as economics, support systems, religion, and family contexts were examined. Also resources available to the couples, the meanings the couples associate with their experience, and the processes they used in making their decisions were assessed. This study was exploratory in nature.

## **CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Marriage and Divorce Research**

Research has not been scarce on the subjects of marriage and divorce. In fact, In Amato's 2010 decade review on divorce related research, he stated that a search using the keyword divorce turns up over 2,000 results for just the previous decade (2000-2010) alone. With new search criteria on Google Scholar, a search of *divorce* from the years 2000-2014 brought up approximately 11,000 titles, and the keyword *marriage* brought up approximately 30,000 titles. As an institution that is such a major component of American culture, the amount of research dedicated to the study of marriage and divorce is of significant importance.

### **Marriage Research**

Marriage related research covers an array of topics and is often a cornerstone of family science research. Numerous studies have explored relationship quality, marital interaction, marital communication, parenting within marriage, timing of marriage, mate selection, division of household labor, and topics that are too numerous for the scope of this paper. While the focus of research shifts from decade to decade as certain issues become more salient and relevant to the culture at large, a large and ever growing body of literature exists related to marital topics.

As marriages have changed in the last decade, so has the focus of marriage-related research. In a decade review by Fincham and Beach (2010), the most prevalent topics in marriage-related literature were marital conflict, intimate partner violence, physical and mental health and marriage, the healthy marriage initiative, diversity in marriage, infidelity, and religion and spirituality. Although some of these themes are recurring from past decades of research, considering marriage in positive contexts, marriage education, and focusing on marriage in specific groups, such as low-income marriages, African-American marriages, and military

marriage has become a part of the literature in the last decade (Fincham & Beach, 2010). For example, Marks et al. (2008) examined strong African-American marriages. Amato and Maynard (2007) presented arguments for marriage education classes as a method for reducing the divorce rate. Fincham and Beach (2010) also pointed to increased efforts on improving standards of measurement in marriage-related research, specifically better measurement instruments for assessing marital satisfaction and the methods used to obtain data from married couples.

### **Divorce Research**

A wealth of divorce literature exists that discusses implications of divorce for all family members. Many studies have been conducted on the effects and outcomes of divorce on children and adults. Other studies have evaluated the economic effects of divorce and the relationship of divorce and poverty. Additional studies have considered the risk factors and predictors of divorce. The changing demographic trends in divorce have also been covered and most recently a surge in literature related to buffers to divorce and interventions and policies has emerged. Although the literature on divorce is extensive, several holes still exist in the data. For example, predictors of divorce have been well established, but several underlying areas are still in need of further exploration so that we can understand the characteristics of families that are at a higher risk to divorce. Demographic trends offer us evidence of which groups may be in need of more support in their relationships. In order to fully understand how to help couples avoid divorce, it is important to review the full scope of divorce literature.

### **Demographic Trends**

Several scholars have pointed to the rise in no-fault divorce laws as a key contributor to the rise in the divorce rate; however, other scholars have argued that this is not a straightforward claim because not all states adopted no-fault divorce laws at the same time, which makes the

effects on family life hard to determine (Vlosky & Monroe, 2002). Amato (2010) also pointed out that each state reports divorce numbers using differing criteria, or may not report divorce statistics at all, which makes pinpointing an exact figure for the actual divorce rate a difficult task. While the divorce rate peaked in the late 70s and early 80s, it has hovered steadily near 50%, for the past three decades with 43% to 46% of all marriages predicted to end in divorce around the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Amato, 2010). Cherlin (2010) also reported that, “Nearly all studies suggest that the lifetime probability of disruption is between 40% and 50%” (p. 405).

Divorce seems to be harder on minorities and low-income families (Amato, 2010) in that divorce rates were higher for African-Americans (55%) than for non-Hispanic Whites and Hispanics (42%). Divorce also seems to be harder on women and their children than men. Smock (1994) examined how the economic impacts of divorce affects each gender and found the consequences to be significantly worse for women than for men.

A growing number of studies have also indicated that education and economics play a large role in the decision to marry or stay single or in a cohabiting relationship, and in the decision to divorce. More highly educated people, women in particular, are marrying and staying married compared with those with less education (Cherlin, 2004; McLanahan, 2004; Wilcox et al., 2011). The economic gap between those who are never married or divorced and those who are married is continually increasing in favor of those who are married (Sweeny, 2002; Wilcox et al., 2011).

### The Rise of Cohabiting Couples

Cohabitation has been on the increase for the past several decades and is becoming an increasingly acceptable alternative to marriage (Cherlin, 2004; 2010). Once considered taboo in American culture, cohabitation is now viewed by many as a viable alternative to marriage

(Cherlin, 2004). The number of women across all age groups who reported having ever cohabited was 58% in 2008 (NCFMR, 2008). Some reports show as many as two thirds of women now cohabit prior to marriage (NCFMR, 2008).

However, much of the research on cohabiting unions find that this family form is more different from marriage than it is similar (Wilcox et al., 2011). Other researchers have argued that although many are choosing to cohabit instead of marry, marriage is still the desired outcome (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005). However, many choose to cohabit because they feel that marriage is unattainable (Edin & Kefalas; 2005; Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005). Some have documented the outcomes for both children and adults living in cohabiting homes and have found that they are more different from marriage-based families than they are similar (Wilcox et al., 2011) and that the results remain similar across generational cohorts (Single-Rushton, Hobcraft, & Kiernan, 2005). Halford and Sweeper (2013) stated, “However, the modest recent decline has been counterbalanced by rising rates of separation from cohabiting relationships” (p. 229). The study of trajectories of adjustment following couple relationship separation indicated that co-parenting conflicts were the biggest indicator of adjustment following separation (Halford & Sweeper, 2013).

### The Rise of Single Parent Families

The number of single parent families has increased significantly in the last 60 years (Cherlin, 2010) due largely to the increase in the divorce rate and the rise of cohabiting couples. As many as 41% of births now take place outside of marriage (Wildsmith et al., 2011). Some choose to have children without marriage and the number of children being born outside of marriage is more than 4 in 10 (Cherlin, Cross-Burnett, Burton, & Garrett-Peters, 2008; Edin & Kefalas, 2011). Edin and Kefalas (2011) reported that the 162 women in their study chose

motherhood, but deliberately did not choose marriage, because they felt motherhood was a role they could accomplish, but marriage was not.

Other single parent families are created by the death of a spouse, but the vast majority of single parent families are a result of divorce or dissolution of a cohabiting union (Cherlin, 2010). Research has attempted to distinguish how single parent families are similar or different from two parent families. Stacey and Biblarz (2001) reported that the gender of the parents did not matter so much as having two parents present in the home. According to these studies, single parent families are more different than they are similar to two parent families, married or cohabiting.

### **Predictors of Divorce**

Many different researchers have looked at the predictors, or at least the correlates of divorce. Bondemann, Ledermann, and Bradbury (2007) reported the results of a meta-analysis listing the reasons for marital conflict and dissolution as a) enduring vulnerabilities, b) stressful events, and c) poor adaptive processes. Amato and Hohmann-Marriott (2007) found in a study of high and low distress marriages that ended in divorce, previous predictors of divorce (such as having unmarried parents), was a greater predictor of divorce than the amount of distress in the marriage. They also stated that these predictors of divorce undermine marriage by making marriages more prone to conflict and by decreasing the commitment to relationships.

In a study of 361 individuals, Grable, Britt, and Cantrell (2007) found that financial satisfaction was a significant predictor of whether or not the participants had thought about divorce in the three years prior to the study. Other factors that participants reported contributing to their thoughts of divorce included difference in partner's age, age of the spouse, self-esteem, and employment characteristics. Gottman (1991) has had some of the most reliable empirical

evidence for predicting divorce and narrows it down to stonewalling, or shutting down, from the husband and expressions of contempt from the wife.

### Demographic Characteristics

Researchers have been able to indicate several predictors of divorce. Amato (2010) reviewed the literature and identified demographic characteristics as “marrying as a teenager, being poor, experiencing unemployment, having a low level of education, living with one’s future spouse or another partner prior to marriage, having a premarital birth, bringing children from a previous union into the a new marriage (especially among mothers), marrying someone of a different race, being in a second or higher order marriage, and growing up in a household without two continuously married parents” (p. 651). Other studies have attempted longitudinal studies in which characteristics at the beginning of marriage are used to predict marital outcomes such as marital separation or marital stability (Kurdek, 2002).

### Personal Characteristics

John Gottman has authored several books on relational characteristics of marriages that will stay together or end in divorce (1995; 1999). When evaluating a couple that is headed for dissolution, Gottman described the following as predictors of divorce: a) a harsh startup in which one or both parties immediately start their conversations with negativity; b) the four horsemen; criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling (shutting down); c) flooding, or when one party begins to overwhelm the other, which is usually evaluated in physical symptoms, such as elevated heart rate; d) negative body language; e) failed repair attempts; and f) bad memories or when couples often speak of their early days of their relationship in a negative fashion. He provided empirical evidence from his studies that are very strong predictors of divorce and has even applied a mathematical approach to divorce prediction (Gottman, Swanson, & Swanson,

2002). Fisher, Fagot, and Leve (1998) assessed family stress using a family events checklist for low, medium, and high risk couples for divorce and found higher stress levels in higher risk groups.

## **Separation**

A study by Kincaid and Caldwell (1995) interviewed 56 individuals who were separated. They found that the majority of the initiators of divorce were the women in the sample. The participants also discussed the most common issues that lead them to separation as emotional abuse, lack of love, and communication problems. Clinical depression scales were also collected and they indicated clinical depression at both the time of the interview and the time of the separation. Hewitt, Western, and Baxter (2006) also discussed difference in men and women as initiators of separation. They state, “Our findings indicate that taking account of which spouse initiates separation is important for improving our understanding of gender differences in the process of marriage breakdown, but more research is required” (p. 1165).

Amato (2010) pointed to a trend in studying divorce intervention and policies. Doherty et al. (2011) stated that their study assessing interest of divorcing parents in reconciliation was the first research data on the subject. According to their study, only 1 in 10 couples in the set of divorcing parents expressed an interest by both parents in reconciliation services. In a later study by Hawkins et al. (2012), the reasons couples gave for divorcing were compared against their openness to reconciliation. Couples were more likely to report “soft” reasons, such as not getting along, as their reason for divorcing, and couples who reported “hard” reasons, such as adultery or violence, were less open to the idea of reconciliation (Hawkins et al, 2012).

Binstock and Thornton (2003) examined the difference between separation and reconciliation in cohabiting and marital unions of young adults. Their findings suggested that a

separation due to discord was a signal of permanent dissolution, but that married couples were more stable and durable than cohabiting couples in regards to separation. Schindler and Coley (2012) assessed parent-child relationships as a predictor to marital separation using four waves of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997, in which they evaluated mother and father relationships with adolescent children. Study results indicated that greater mother-adolescent closeness predicted a greater likelihood of marital separation and greater father-adolescent relationships predicted a lower level of marital separation (Schindler & Coley, 2012).

The bulk of research on reconciliation focuses on the effectiveness of therapeutic programs. Zuccarini, Johnson, Dalgiesh, and Makinen (2013) evaluated the use of emotionally focused therapy on forgiveness and reconciliation. Worthington and Drinkard (2000) provided a six step therapeutic plan for reconciliation, but did not offer empirical evidence of its effectiveness, but do offer definitions for distinguishing between implicit reconciliation and explicit reconciliation in which they state, “Most reconciliation is implicit. It involves a restoration of interaction and (eventually) interpersonal trust without explicitly addressing the hurt, offense, or injury that occurred” (p. 94).

### **Buffers to Divorce**

Other characteristics have been reported as buffers to divorce. Religion has also surfaced in recent marriage related literature. Marks et al. (2008) found that strong African-American families use religion as one of their primary coping strategies. Other studies found that married people are more likely to choose partners with a similar level of education (Sweeney, 2002). Education also seems to be a factor in keeping marriages together. Amato (2000) reported that women with higher levels of education are more likely to get married and are less likely to divorce. Previti and Amato (2003) discussed how married couples view the rewards of marriage,

barriers to divorce, and acceptable alternatives in relation to their marital satisfaction and found that those who viewed marital cohesiveness in terms of rewards rather than barriers to divorce were less likely to be in divorce prone marriages.

### Divorce Mediation

A recent trend in divorce mediation and education has emerged in the literature. Amato and Maynard (2007) discussed the importance of including relationship education courses to young adults and marriage enrichment courses to young adults as a potential buffer towards divorce and the economic fallout that usually follows. Many authors have argued for the strengthening of marriages as a way to buffer against poverty. Haine, Sandler, Wolchik, Tein, and Dawson-McClure (2003) advocated for the use of empirically based prevention programs as a method of reducing the negative outcomes experienced by children of divorce. Cole and Cole (1999) also argued for the need to include marriage enrichment programs and prevention programs specifically in therapeutic settings, and that clinicians should be trained in such practices. Markman et al. (2004) also studied the use of the empirically tested Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program by clergy members who conducted marriage education programs and found that in the five year follow up study, 82% of respondents reported that they still used at least parts of the program in the programs they conducted. This finding suggests that empirically tested marriage enrichment programs may have potential practical applications.

The complexity of child custody cases and evidence of intimate partner violence were correlated with lower agreement between partners in a study that evaluated the outcomes of divorce mediation programs. Kelly (1996) called for more research on the mediation process as most studies focus on the outcomes of such programs. However, he did report that many studies on the outcomes of divorce mediation have reported positive findings. Bray and Jourilies (1995)

also stated, “Research examining the long-term efficacy of couple’s therapy for the prevention of marital separation and divorce is sparse but promising with respect to its effectiveness in promoting marital stability” (p. 461). The use of divorce mediation and marriage enrichment may in fact prove to be buffers against divorce.

Lucas (2005) conducted a longitudinal study in which he asked 817 German participants to rate how satisfied they were with their lives. The findings from this study indicated that life satisfaction goes down as one approaches divorce, then gradually begins to increase as time goes by. However, not all respondents returned to the baseline level of satisfaction that they reported before divorcing. The author also suggested that a possible reason is that happier people before marriage tended to stay married and that negative life events, such as divorce, may not be as detrimental to a person’s overall happiness and life satisfaction as one might expect.

### **Outcomes of Divorce**

A major debate in the culture wars of “the family” relates to the severity of divorce. Many argue that divorce is simply a blip in the road for many families, a life transition that may even improve their situations, while others argue that divorce is a potentially devastating event for all involved. Amato (2010) also stated that scholars often do not agree on viewing divorce as a crisis event, or a persistent stressor. However, a number of studies have assessed the outcomes for both children and adults following divorce, mostly from a deficit perspective. Reviewing these outcomes is important when trying to understand the process of divorce and reconciliation.

#### **Adult Outcomes**

The outcomes of divorce for adults have been well documented in the literature. Amato (2000) discussed numerous studies in which divorced people were compared to married couples. People who were divorced were more likely to have lower levels of psychological well-being

and higher levels of psychological distress, were more likely to have physical health problems, lower mortality, lower financial security, and experience more loneliness and more negative life events. Other studies have documented similar findings regarding the quality of relationships, physical and mental well-being, and financial well-being of divorced adults (Amato & Booth, 1997; Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

#### Adjustment to divorce.

As the experience of divorce is different for adults in different circumstances, so is their adjustment following divorce. Tschann, Johnston, and Wallerstein (1989) discussed predictors of adult adjustment following divorce, such as socioeconomic status, psychological functioning, social interaction with others, and relationship with ex-spouse. Amato and Hohmann-Marriot (2007) studied high and low-distress marriages and found that partners from high distress marriages reported being happier after divorce than did those from low-distress marriages. They also reported that those who initiated the divorce generally showed better adjustment following the divorce. Wang and Amato (2000) found that stressors did not necessarily affect adjustment to divorce, but that definitions and how individuals viewed the divorce and being the partner who initiated the divorce had the greatest impact on adjustment as well as being in a stable relationship or remarriage.

#### Psychological well-being.

Several studies have documented the psychological well-being of adults following divorce, many of which have reported that psychological well-being goes down. Psychological distress is often increased for children and parents following divorce (Amato, 2000; Hetherington & Kelley, 2002; Wallerstein et al., 2002). Divorced individuals are also more likely to show signs of depression and anxiety and an increase in substance abuse than married

individuals (Amato, 2010). Relationships with children, especially for fathers, seem to experience negative effects following divorce (Amato, 2005; Amato & Booth, 1997).

Wallerstein (2004) reported that many psychological issues including aggression, sleeplessness, and anxiety, were reported following divorce. Some studies have reported higher incidences of suicide for both adults and adolescents related to family breakdown (Johnson, Krug, & Potter, 2000). In fact, in her book, Hetherington (2006) reported that 7 divorced women attempted suicide over the course of her study, all after casual sexual encounters.

Physical health.

Other studies have found that divorce is also hard on the physical health of those who experience it. Physical and mental health are likely to suffer following a divorce, especially for women (Pienta, Hayward, & Jenkins, 2000; Schmeer, 2011). Amato (2000, 2010) also reported greater numbers of health problems among divorced persons when compared to married persons. Lee et al, (2011) evaluated 119 participants who were divorced or separated and found that those with higher attachment anxiety had higher blood pressure levels.

Economic well-being.

The economic well-being of divorced parents is probably one of the most considerable outcomes. Waite and Gallagher (2000) reported a steep decline in the financial well-being of women following divorce. It can also be economically devastating and is often a fast track to poverty for women and children (Smock, 1994).

Several studies have documented ways in which women tend to fare worse after divorce (Amato, 2000; McClanahan, 2004; Smock, Manning, & Gupta, 1999). Avellar and Smock (2005) reported that the dissolution of a cohabiting union also tended to have negative economic consequences for the women in their study.

## Child Outcomes

The outcomes for children whose parents divorce are also very different from those children whose parents stay together. Research does not suggest that children who experience the divorce of their parents will certainly have negative consequences. Waite and Gallagher (2000) stated, “Of course this does not mean that all children of divorce or doomed to lead substandard lives....The absence of a stable marriage is a risk factor in a child’s life, not a prophecy of certain doom” (p. 139). However, multiple studies have shown the increased likelihood for children of divorce to experience negative effects than their counterparts who live with both parents. Children whose parents divorce are more likely to obtain lower levels of education, are at higher risk of experiencing psychological problems such as anxiety and depression, and are more likely to be divorced themselves as adults (Amato, 2010). Wallenstein et al. (2002) also contributed to the literature with a 25-year longitudinal study by following nearly 60 children of divorce and intact families and reported that the effects of divorce often lingered well into adulthood. The authors stated:

Contrary to what we have long thought, the major impact of divorce does not occur during childhood or adolescence. Rather, it rises in adulthood as serious romantic relationships move center stage. When it comes time to choose a life mate and build a new family, the effects of divorce crescendo (p. xxix).

While there is much research that shows significant negative outcomes associated with divorce for children, some research is not as conclusive (Amato, 2010). Hetherington and Kelley (2002) pointed to the fact that some children of divorce are able to flourish and continue to flourish into adult life and other children suffer after event. These findings came from the waves of the Virginia Longitudinal Study which followed many children from divorced families into adulthood. They suggested that more work should be done on comparing children of divorce

who cope well and children of divorce who do not, versus comparing children of divorce and children of intact marriages.

One study using two longitudinal data sets found that adult effects of childhood divorce remain generally the same across cohorts (Single-Rushton et al., 2005). The negative effects of divorce and family instability for children and the transmission of family instability across generations are discussed by several researchers (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008).

Wallerstien et al. (2002) reported findings from a 25-year longitudinal study which began with 131 children from 60 families. Fifty-six families participated in the 18-month follow up, 58 families participated in the 5-year follow up, 54 families participated in the 10-year, and 48 families were reached in the 25-year follow up. Using this longitudinal study, the researchers were able to assess adult outcomes of children who experienced divorce. They suggested that children of divorce follow a different trajectory than children from intact families. While they recognize that some intact families are more toxic than some divorced families, the development of the children is altered by the disruption of the family. Wallerstein and colleagues reported that children who have to become caretakers of their parents, get caught in the middle of custody sagas, and have their lives complicated by custody agreements, experience life in a way that is different from how children from intact families experience life. However, Amato (2000) also noted that divorce can have very different effects on children in the same family.

Physical health.

Children whose parents divorce often experience a decline in physical health. Amato (2000) reported a decline in long term health of children whose parents had divorced. Troxel and Matthews (2004) reported that children whose parents divorce or have high marital conflict often

have poorer health due to poor health habits and to their psychological stress responses. A study of 266 university students whose parents had divorced before they were 16 found that a poor relationship with one's father (which was related to amount of time spent living with father after the divorce) predicted poorer health status (Fabricus & Luecken, 2007).

#### Mental health.

Children who experience divorce often experience an increase in psychological distress and decreases in self-esteem (Amato 2000, 2010). Strosheim (2007) compared children in a longitudinal study whose parents divorced over the course of the study to those children whose parents remained married. She reported that the children whose parents divorce showed an increase in anxiety and depression as well as an increase in anti-social behavior.

One surprising finding from the Virginia Longitudinal Study was that 10% of children from two-parent homes suffer from emotional issues. That number doubles to 20% of children experience serious emotional issues following the divorce of their parents. That number almost doubles again to 38% (almost 4 times of those children who live with their own two parents) of children have serious emotional issues when they experience multiple divorces (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

#### Economic well-being and educational achievement

Children who experience divorce or are born outside of marriage are more likely to live in poverty than children who live in two parent families by as large of a margin as 81% to 22%, respectively (Rank & Hirschl, 1999). Manning and Lichter (1996) reported that children living in cohabiting couples were more likely to be living in poverty than children living with married parents. These are also more likely to drop in educational attainment and are more likely to experience problems at school (Amato, 2010).

Amato (2010) also discussed that children of divorce are less likely to achieve higher educational attainment, which will therefore affect their earning potential as adults. Wallerstein et al. (2002) discussed that often children of divorced parents cannot afford to attend college because they do not receive financial support from the non-custodial parent after the age of 18, once mandatory child support has ended.

#### Relationships.

Children whose parents divorce are also more likely to be divorced themselves (Single-Rushton, et al., 2005). Wallerstein et al. (2000) documented many of the relationship problems faced by the adult children in her study. Many reported being skeptical of a permanent relationship, displaying trust issues, and of not wanting to have children who would experience what they had. Not only did they have issues with their own romantic relationships, they also reported strained relationships with their parents both in adulthood and as children.

#### Outcomes for Society

Divorce is not just painful for the people who experience it, but can also have detrimental effects on society in general. Divorce tends to be especially hard on women and their children economically, as it can be a fast track into poverty (Smock, 1994). There is a strong link between divorce or single motherhood and poverty (Amato, 2010; Amato & Maynard, 2007; Cherlin, 2010; Smock, 1994). Divorce is also particularly hard on minority groups (Amato, 2010) and those with less education; or the more marginalized members of society (Wilcox et al., 2011). Bianchi, Subaiya, and Kahn (1999) reported that one in five women who divorce fall into poverty. Divorce seems to be even more difficult for the populations who are already marginalized segments of society, making a difficult situation even more complex.

## Family Instability

Although Cherlin (2004) pointed to a trend in American culture in which cohabitation is looking more and more like marriage, several studies point out that cohabiting couples are more different than they are similar to married people. Wilcox et al. (2011) documented many of the ways in which family instability is bad for children and suggest that children are more likely to experience stability when they are born into a married family (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Osborne & McLanahan, 2001). Other studies have focused on what scholars refer to as “complex households,” and found that children are less likely to thrive in these family structures (Brown, 2004). Schmeer (2011), using findings from the Fragile Families Study, reported that children who live with their own married parents are often in better health than children in single-parent or divorced families. Cherlin and Fomby (2004) conducted a study of nearly 2,100 low-income families with children in three large cities to assess the effects on the entrance of a man into the family on the position of the family. Marriage accounted for a decrease in the use of public aid, such as TANF, as opposed to cohabiting couples.

Fomby and Cherlin (2007) discussed many of the negative effects that family instability may have on children, and found that the number of transitions children endure in their family life is directly related to their well-being. Family structure is also directly related to the reproduction of inequalities, as poverty is a vicious cycle not easily broken (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008).

In relation to this demographic trend, many researchers point to the benefits of improving family life and marriage. Amato and Maynard (2007) discussed the importance of decreasing non-marital births through education programs in high schools, and in strengthening marriage through marriage education classes which would also likely be a means of reducing poverty.

Considering the benefits of marriage, discovering how marriages recover from adversity may have many practical, policy, and clinical applications. Wildsmith et al. (2011) stated, “Reducing non-marital childbearing and promoting marriage among unmarried parents remain important goals of federal and state policies to improve well-being of women and children and to reduce their reliance on public assistance” (p. 5). Programs such as the Healthy Marriage Initiative have encouraged healthy marriage practices (Dion, Hershey, Zaveri, & Aveelar, 2008) and other studies have found that positive relationship qualities, even among biological parents who are not married, exhibited better parenting skills (Carlson & McClanahan, 2006).

Amato and Booth (1997) evaluated the outcomes for transitioning young adults after following them through 12 years of a longitudinal study called the Marital Instability Over the Life Course, which included 2,033 married individuals, on the outcomes the many changing family life factors had on these young adults. By comparing the two generations, they were able to get a life course perspective and were able determine long-term effects of family characteristics on children. They found that family characteristics had an influence on relationships with parents, intimate relationships, social integration, socioeconomic attainment, and psychological well-being. Bumpass, Martin, and Sweet (1991) stated:

Marriage has become a most uncertain lifetime guarantee for either parental stability for women or economic security for women and children. It seems most likely that a general awareness of this insecurity is feeding back on the institution itself, both in terms of an increased tentativeness toward marriage and, perhaps, a reduced willingness to make long-term investments in marriage relationships (p. 23).

## **Benefits of Marriage**

The benefits of marriage, or at least healthy marriage, have been well documented for both adults and children. In the following sections, the physical and mental health benefits of marriage, as well as the economic and relationship benefits will be discussed. The physical and

mental benefits of marriage for children and the relationship, economic and academic benefits will also be discussed. Lastly, the benefits that marriage has for society in general will be discussed.

#### Adult Benefits

Waite and Gallagher (2000) discussed the advantages married people often experience. According to their study, married people often experience better physical and mental health, better economic conditions, better relationship quality with their children, and experience better sex lives. These findings are substantiated by numerous studies assessing the quality of life for married persons versus divorced persons. Waite and Gallagher also reported that using the General Social Survey, 66% of married men and 62% of married women reported being “very happy”, indicating a strong link between marriage and overall happiness.

#### Physical health.

Married people often experience better physical health as well. Waite and Gallagher (2000) point to many health benefits married people experience over single people, including greater longevity. Marriage is also associated with less risk of alcohol and substance abuse (Miller-Tutzauer, Leonard, & Windle, 1991). Other studies have reported that married people experience better health and lower rates of illness, injury or disability, especially among minorities and the poor (Amato, 2000; Pienta et al, 2000; Umberson, Williams, Powers, Liu, and Needham, 2006). Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton (2001) conducted a meta-analysis documenting the many studies reporting increased physical health of married persons. However, Umberson et al. (2006) reported that marital strain also had an ill-effect on the health of both men and women, and accelerated the decline in health as one ages for which they argue against the overwhelming

literature that, “Any marriage is better than no marriage at all when it comes to health benefits” (p. 1).

#### Mental health.

Married people are more likely to report higher mental well-being. Marriage has a positive effect on mental health (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Married mothers have lower rates of depression than do single or cohabiting mothers (Williams, Sassler, & Nicholson, 2008). Marks and Lambert (1998) also documented improved psychological well-being for married persons as opposed to the divorced or single participants in their study.

#### Economics.

According to their study, married people fared better in many areas including economic well-being. Lupton and Smith (2003) reported that married couples tend to build more wealth than singles or cohabiting couples. Other studies have also documented that married men with similar education and job histories earn more than single men (Antonovics & Town, 2004). Avellar and Smock (2005) also reported higher earnings for married men than cohabiting men, but found that divorce or dissolution of a cohabiting union affected women about the same. Conger, Conger, and Martin (2010) found in a review of literature that there is an association between socioeconomic status and satisfaction in adult romantic relationships.

#### Relationships.

Many scholars point to the institution of marriage itself as a “hitting license” (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). However, several studies indicate otherwise. In a comparison of intimate partner violence by relationship type, Brown and Bulanda (2008) found cohabiters to report far more intimate partner violence than married or dating people. Aside from domestic violence, divorced and single women are four to five times more likely to be victims of violent crimes than

married women (Wilcox et al., 2011). However, Amato and Prevetti (2003) list Intimate Partner Violence as being cited as one of the main reasons given by couples seeking divorce.

### Benefits for Children

On the whole, children also benefit from living with two married parents. Although the effects on children of living in poverty have been well documented, and living with a single parent is one of the greatest indicators of growing up in poverty (Amato, 2000), there are other benefits for children who live in stable families. Children who live in homes with married parents are more likely to have greater academic success, and are more likely to graduate from college and therefore find higher paying jobs (Ross & Mirowsky, 1999). Wallerstein et al. (2002) also discussed the likelihood that support from noncustodial fathers often ends at 18, the point at which most adolescents move on to college. Children in married families are also less likely to experience psychological distress, are more likely to experience better health, and are also less likely to be victims of violence. Fincham and Beach (2010) also referenced an increase in literature that relates child outcomes to marital processes.

### Benefits to Society

Wilcox et al. (2011) posited that the growing gap between middle-class Americans and upper-class Americans may be largely attributed to the retreat from marriage. Marriage appears to reduce poverty in ways, or at least to degrees, that cohabitation does not (Manning & Lichter, 1996).

### **Marital Stressors**

Marital stress has been studied often throughout the last several decades. An ever growing body of literature examines many potential sources of marital stress, mostly related to

economics. Gottman (1999) identified the major sources of marital stress as money, sex, parenting, in-laws, work-related stressors, and division of household labor.

Other than potential dissolution of a marriage, marital stress has other consequences. Amato and Hohmann-Marriott (2007) compared characteristics of high and low distress marriages that end in divorce. Marital strain was found to have an ill effect on health in a longitudinal study by Umberson et al. (2006). Bondemann, Ledermann, and Bradbury (2007) reported findings of stressors and daily hassles on 198 couples. They reported that stressors in the marital dyad were affected by outside stressors and that daily stressors predicted less sexual activity for women and more sexual activity for men. *Economics*

Several studies suggest a relationship between socioeconomic factors and marital relationships. Conger, Rueter, and Elder (1999) created the family stress model of economic pressure to investigate couple resilience to economic pressures. Findings from the study showed that emotional distress was increased by financial distress. This in turn increased marital stress with increased conflict among the couples in the study. Dew (2007) also evaluated economic pressure and marital strain by considering assets and consumer debt in marriage and reported that assets seem to lessen economic pressure on a couple, but debt has a direct effect on marital conflict. In a later study, Dew and Yorgason (2010) focused on how the family stress model could be applied to retirement-aged couples and reported that the model applied to couples who were not yet retired or retired during the study, but not to couples who were already retired when the study began, suggesting money related stress may change for families over time. Conger et al. (2010) reported a direct relationship with socioeconomic status and satisfaction of romantic relationships. Papp, Cummings, and Geoke-Morey (2009) did not find that money was the most frequent source of marital conflict, but couples in their study reported that money conflicts were

often some of the most serious and the least likely to get resolved. Dew and Dakin (2011) reported similar findings in their study of 3,861 couples who reported that financial disagreements often led to specific patterns of conflict.

Other studies have indicated that finances are directly related to marital satisfaction. Individual spending behaviors were found to influence relationship satisfaction in a study by Britt, Grable, Nelson Goff, and White (2008). Archuleta, Britt, and Grable (2011) found that financial satisfaction was positively associated with marital satisfaction and an indicator in whether or not a person decided to leave or stay in a marriage. Similarly, Grable et al. (2007) reported that, of the 361 participants in their study, those with higher levels of financial satisfaction were less likely to have thought about divorce in the three years of the study. Peters (1993) reported that economic consequences were a significant decision making factor for women who were considering divorce.

Poverty research often discusses the economic consequences of the dissolution of marriage (Smock, 1994). One study examined how people from different SES groups were affected by divorce (Tschann et al., 1989). Several studies have identified money as a primary determinate in making the decision to marry or remain in a cohabiting relationship (Sweeney, 2002). Gibson-Davis (2009) identified money as a prime indicator of whether low-income families choose to marry and/or have children. McClanahan (2004) noted the rise in poverty related to unmarried childbearing. However, Edin and Kissane (2010) reported that the research is not all as conclusive on family structure and poverty, rather the current focus on poverty related research has focused on events that lead families to enter and exit poverty.

Division of household labor has also been indicated as a marital stressor. Arlie Hochschild's *The Second Shift* (1989), became a breakthrough study on how men and women

perceive household responsibilities differently, which she followed with a second research monograph titled *The Time Bind* (1997). In these books, she discussed that although women's participation in the workforce has increased significantly, men's participation in home and family care has only increased by about 4 hours per week. Brock and Lawrence (2008) discussed role strain in marriages with single and dual earners and buffering stress spillover in 101 newlywed marriages. They found that declines in marital satisfaction were a result of role strain experienced by the husbands and wives. Men did not report a decline in marital strain when they received support from their wives; however, wives did report a decline in marital strain when they did not receive adequate support from their husbands.

Work-related stress has also been found to be related to work-family conflict, often more so for women than men. Hill (2005) reported that men often report less work-family conflict, less individual stress, and greater life, marital, and family satisfaction than women, yet men also report more work environments that do not support family life and longer hours at work. Bernas and Major (2000) interviewed 206 participants and found that having a high quality relationship with a supervisor had complex implications for work-family conflict.

### **Marital Strength**

A growing amount of research is beginning to emerge on marital strength. In a decade review, Fincham and Beach (2010) stated that researchers are beginning to shift their attention to positive contexts rather than focusing solely on the negative contexts, which dominated previous literature. Much of the research in this area focuses on religion and protective factors as sources of marital strength.

## Religion

Religion as a source of marital strength has been a source of a few research projects. Lambert and Dollahite (2006) described how religion plays an important role in marital conflict resolution. Couples in the study reported that their religiosity affects their problem prevention, conflict resolution, and relationship reconciliation. Marks (2005) also described how marriage is strengthened through the lens of religious beliefs in a qualitative study by exploring how faith community, religious practices, and spiritual beliefs contribute to marital strengths. Couples reported many areas of their faith that contributed positively to their marriages, specifically:

- a) the influence of clergy, b) the mixed blessing of faith community service and involvement, c) the importance of prayer, d) the connecting influence of family ritual, e) practicing marital fidelity, f) pro-marriage/anti-divorce beliefs, g) homogamy of religious beliefs, and h) faith in God as a marital support (p. 85).

Another study by Marks et al. (2008) focused specifically on strong African-American marriages, in which couples were asked to discuss the processes they use to keep their marriages strong, even in the face of difficulty. Wilcox et al. (2011) discussed the decline in participation in religion as having an impact on marriage because religion often offers “moral direction and social support to both marriage and family life in this nation” (p. 6).

## Protective Factors

A few studies have attempted to identify protective factors for marriages. Huber, Navarro, Womble, and Mumme (2010) identified rebuilding the marriage relationship and maintaining kin ties with older and younger generations as important protective factors for marital satisfaction in midlife. Bernas and Major (2000) identified a good working relationship

with one's supervisor as a buffer against work-family conflict for women. Hill (2005) also reported that family to work facilitation impacted marital satisfaction for both men and women.

Previti and Amato (2003), using data from the 17-year longitudinal study entitled *Marital Instability Over the Life Course*, reported that those who felt their marriage was being held together mainly by barriers, rather than rewards, were often in relatively unstable marriages: "Those who viewed their marriages more in terms of rewards were more likely to report that they were happy in their marriage and were less likely to be acting in ways that lead to divorce" (p. 570). They also discussed factors such as believing marriage is a lifelong commitment, having children, owning a home together, having strong religious beliefs, and being economically dependent on each other. The barriers to divorce most often reported by the participants in their study were staying together for the children, lack of financial resources, religious beliefs, commitment to the norm of lifelong marriage, and maintenance of traditional breadwinner-homemaker roles.

### **Family Resilience**

Resilience is described as the ability to thrive as a result of overcoming difficult experiences (Patterson, 2002). Hawley and DeHaan (1996) defined resilience as, "The path a family follows as it adapts and prospers in the face of stress, both in the present and over time", (p. 293). However, there is still much debate on exactly how to operationalize such an ambiguous concept (De Hann, Hawley, & Deal, 2002). Many researchers in the family science field define resiliency as the outcome of overcoming challenging experience, and resilience as the process (Patterson, 2002). Several works have studied individual resilience, however, only a few studies have considered family ability to cope following crises. Hawley (2000) offered some possible clinical implications for the concept of family resiliency and the importance of

examining the characteristics of healthy family functioning instead of focusing on pathology. These clinical implications include: focus on strengths, assess reliance as a developmental pathway, search for commonalities in diverse paths of resilience, and developing a useful family schema (Hawley, 2000).

However, there are some fundamental differences in the approaches used. Patterson (2002) stated that, due to growing interest in family resilience, many discrepancies exist among experts in the field, including researchers and practitioners. These discrepancies include differing definitions of family resilience, different approaches to assessing outcomes or processes, and differing definitions of the characteristics of potential protective factors and risk exposure (Patterson, 2002). Walsh (2002) also described the impact that studying family resilience can have for both clinical and preventative purposes and also provides a family resilience framework to be used when assessing family strengths (Walsh, 2003). A more unified approach by both researchers and clinicians could benefit both groups of professionals, as well as the families they seek to serve.

A few studies and theoretical works have attempted to quantify the concept of resilience. The roller coaster model of family functioning, in which families experience a period of disorganization after a crisis and then an upward trend in functioning, was first described in a study by Koos (1946). Burr and Klein (1994) considered several different patterns of family functioning following a crisis including the roller coaster model, a no-change model, a mixed-model, an increased model, and a decreased model. Walsh (2003) created a framework of family functioning that includes belief systems, organizational patterns, and communication processes. Another study by De Hann et al. (2002) sought to develop a quantitative method of examining a number of stressors to assess the concept of family resilience.

The study of family stress is not limited to family studies or clinical disciplines such as social work and counseling. Family stress is covered by many disciplines including biophysical and medical domains that examine issues such as alcoholism and the physiological effects of living with stress. Contextual stress, such as living in violent neighborhoods or with domestic violence, is also a concern in sociology (Malia, 2007). There is a growing body of literature on family stress on an international level, as well as rapidly expanding field of study on disaster sciences that has emerged as a result of traumatic events and natural disasters in recent decades (Malia, 2007). However, social workers and family science academicians both understand the ecological perspective of studying individuals in the contexts where they exist, including their families, and the importance of studying and evaluating families in the contexts in which they exist.

The literature regarding separation and reconciliation thus far has been scant. Therefore, reviewing the literature related to marriage and divorce research and family resilience provides a framework for reviewing existing literature, as well as the lack of existing literature, on marital reconciliation. With that in mind, it is also important to view the topic of marital reconciliation within a theoretical framework as well.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **ABC-X and FAAR**

Rubén Hill's (1949) Family Stress Theory has often been referenced by researchers and professionals in connection with families who are experiencing crisis. In the ABC-X model of family stress theory, A represents the stressor event, B represents the resources the family has access to, and C represents the definition the family uses for the event. All of these components influence the X component, or the crisis. Often times, after a family experiences a crisis, their

definition of “normal” changes and it is important for them to be able to adapt to the changes (Bonanno, Galea, Bucci, & Vlahov, 2007).

McCubbin and Patterson (1983) extended the ABC-X model, developing what they called the Double ABC-X model. This was later adapted into the FAAR (Family Adaptation and Adjustment Response) model (Patterson, 1988), which began to focus on the processes families use to overcome difficult situations. In this model the double A is the stressor event plus the stressors that accumulate due to the event, double B represents the resources the family has available, plus the resources gained or lost as a result of the stressor event, and double C is the meaning the family associates with the event, as well as their perception of how they handle difficult events. These lead to what Patterson coined *bonadaptation*, or bouncing back from the situation, perhaps even stronger, which she contrasted conceptually with *maladaptation*, or falling apart.

The current study did not focus heavily on the A component, or the stressor event (i.e., the events leading up to the period of marital separation). Rather, it focused on the B components, such as the resources that the couples had available to them the resources they gained or lost as a result of the separation, and the C component, or the meanings they attached to their situation, both in separation and reconciliation. Ultimately, this study’s aim was to understand how the couples seemed to navigate to a stage of bonadaptation rather than maladaptation and whether they viewed their decision to stay married positively, negatively, or somewhere in between.

### **The Ecological Model**

The Ecological model was developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1977) as a method of explaining the importance of considering multiple contexts when attempting to understand

development and behavior. He stated that we exist in several different spheres simultaneously and it is important to consider these spheres and the effect they have on our development. Specifically designed to describe children's development, the ecological model can be applied to individual development, and to families and marriages as well.

According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), there are four levels in which we exist. First is the micro-level. This level includes those parts of our lives that we have daily, face to face contact with, specifically home and immediate family. The second level is the meso-level. This level includes the less immediate influences, but are still a part of our daily lives such as school, work, church, and peers. The third level is the exo-level, which may include things that affect us indirectly, such as parent's/spouse's work, extended family, parent's/spouse's social group, and governmental agencies we are in contact with. The fourth level is the macro-system, which includes the larger culture and sub-culture in which we reside, as well as the larger government. Each of these levels needs to be considered in context in order to better comprehend the whole developmental picture.

The ecological model can be applied to marriages as well. Just like individuals do not exist apart from the contexts in which they exist, neither do marriages. According to Bronfenbrenner's model (1977), a good marriage would be one in which all parts of the context work together. For instance, when interaction at home is good, both partners are not under strain at work, school, or have issues with children's school, they get along with each other's friends and families, and are an integrated part of the sub-culture and larger culture in which they reside.

Using this ecological model to consider resilient marriages as a strength translates almost directly to larger systems theory. The ecological framework was an important piece of the framework of this study as the various contexts in which marriages exist, as well as how those

different pieces reportedly work for or against the marriage, were considered. As it is important to identify the resources and the meanings the couples associated with their marriage, this study aimed to understand how the contexts in which marriages exist helped shape the couples' choices to stay married. Participants were asked to discuss elements from each of the different levels. Questions included discussion of support networks, the entire family unit, and cultural beliefs in general. Husbands and wives were asked to discuss any friends or family members that supported or discouraged the reconciliation, any religious or community organizations that supported or discouraged reconciliations, the husband, and wife's perceptions of the reconciliation, how their beliefs influenced their decision, and any other processes they may have used.

### CHAPTER 3 METHODS

As the focus of this project was to understand the processes couples used to successfully overcome extreme marital difficulties, a qualitative approach was used. Qualitative methods are often used to explore the meanings that people associate with their lived experiences, something that cannot be easily determined with quantified methods (Daly, 2007). Fincham and Beach (2010) called for better measures of marital studies; however, qualitative measures may assess some things that are not easily accessed through quantitative measures. Also, Crane, Allgood, Larson, and Griffin (1990) reported discrepancies in three scales that are often used in marital quality studies. As the C component of the ABC-X theory focuses on the meanings families place on stressors and family experiences, a large portion of this study focused on the meanings the respondents have associated with their situations.

According to Daly (2007), qualitative research is concerned with processes, meanings, and understandings rather than outcomes or products. The purpose of this study was to capture the processes used and the meanings associated with marital reconciliation. Strauss and Corbin (1997) stated that qualitative research is, “about persons’ lives, lived experiences, behaviors, emotions, and feelings,” (p. 11), and this meshes well with present objectives.

An important element of qualitative research is the researcher as the instrument. The first hand observation of the couples’ reactions and interactions is also important in the data collection as the couples respond to the questions. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), viewing participants in their natural environments is an important component of data collection; one that is not as easily accessed through quantitative measures. Gottman and Notarius (2000) also indicated that observational data are important when studying underlying issues in marriage and families. Cole and Cole (1999) discussed that most marriage research is based off of self-

reported data which “does not account for how each research subject subjectively decides what happiness in their marriage means to them at that point in time” (p. 273). Qualitative interviews allow for the discussion of how the subjects decide the meanings associated with their relationships. Bodenmann et al. (2007) also discussed that, “Self-reports of stress co-varied with self-reported indexes of satisfaction and sexuality, suggesting the contextual influences are broadly influential in intimate relationships” (p. 551). Previti and Amato (2003) stated, “Although rarely used, another approach is to ask open-ended questions about why people remain in their marriages. This method has the advantage of allowing individuals to describe, in their own words, the most important factors that maintain the cohesiveness of their union” (p. 561).

### **Sample**

Boss (1980) suggested that quantitative measures tend to focus on the central tendencies of a population, while qualitative research often focuses on the outliers in a population. As the majority of the research available focuses on trends in marriage, divorce, and family demographics, the current study focused on couples who do not fall in the mean of the population. A purposive sample, one that recruits participants based on specific criteria rather than aiming to be representative of the population, was used for this study.

The sample for this study included six couples who filed a petition for a no fault divorce and one couple who drew up necessary paperwork for divorce from a covenant marriage during the years 2000 to 2010 in the state of Louisiana, but who never officially requested a judgment of divorce. Interviews were conducted between September 2013, and June 2014. Bumpass et al. (1991) stated, “It is generally recognized that the date of separation is a better marker of marital disruption than is the date of divorce” (p. 26). Amato (2000) argued that divorce is a process that

“unfolds over time, beginning when couples are still married and ending years after the legal divorce” (p. 656).

Louisiana Civil Code states that for a no fault divorce, a petition for divorce must be followed by a period of living separate and apart for 12 months if a couple has children, six months if they do not have children (Louisiana Civil Code, 102). Couples who elect to marry according the Covenant Marriage guidelines in the State of Louisiana may petition for divorce only for a determined set of criteria. After three years from the date of the original petition, if a request for the judgment of divorce is not made, the process must start over again (hence the 2009 or prior date). Couples may also choose to file to dismiss the petition for divorce. As divorce laws and codes differ from state to state, recruitment was limited to residents of the State of Louisiana (from both rural and urban areas). In order to have been eligible to participate in this study, couples must also have been married 20 or fewer years.

Recruitment for couples came from communities surrounding the Greater Baton Rouge, Louisiana area. Initially, sampling began as an attempt to gain a random sample. Records of petitions for no fault divorce in the years 2006-2010 in Ascension parish were compared against judgments of divorces granted. As all of the civil records are kept in one database, the first step was searching through all of the civil cases and writing down all of the case numbers for the divorce cases. For the years 2006-2010, this was approximately 15,000 civil records. Of those 15,000 civil records, approximately 2,800 were divorces. The next step was to pull up each of the 2,800 divorce cases to search for a judgment of divorce. Of the 2,800, approximately 800 did not initially display a judgment of divorce. The third step was to pull up documents to determine if any of these were indeed divorced. Of the 800, 143 did not have any indications that they had ever completed the divorce proceedings or had an official dismissal in their records, and met the

requirements for the study. The fourth step was to verify addresses, which was done using an online white pages site. Of the 143, 65 addresses were located. Recruiting letters were then mailed to these 65 addresses. On the original mail out, 12 were returned undeliverable and two emails were received; one stating that they the couple had indeed been divorced and another stating that her husband was now deceased. No other responses were received. Phone numbers were attained for 37 couples, who were then contacted. Of these 37 couples, 12 were contacted officially. Only two agreed to participate and were part of the final sample.

The next attempt at soliciting a sample included contacting professionals in the Baton Rouge area. Phone calls were made to six divorce attorneys, eight marriage therapists, eight church leaders, three mediators, and other professionals in the area. Twelve of these professionals attempted to assist with locating potential participants by contacting clients who fit the criteria on behalf of the researcher and passing along the information. No contacts were ever received from this endeavor.

From that point, a convenience sample was sought. Committee members were contacted for assistance with personal contacts. A mailer was sent out to LSU graduate students, and personal contacts were given the information. One couple was located by the researcher's committee chair, and the remaining four couples were located by word of mouth contacts by the researcher.

A copy of the interview schedule, consent forms, and any additional information was sent ahead of time once a couple agreed to participate and an interview date was confirmed. Although not representative in nature, a purposive sample was necessary for this study because specific information was requested from a difficult to identify and access population - reconciled married couples.

## **Data**

Data collection consisted first of an approximately 20 minute qualitative interview with both the husband and the wife separately, followed by an approximately 20 to 30 minute interview with the couple together. Individual interviews with the husbands ranged from 8 to 19 minutes. It should be noted that only one husband participated reluctantly and this was the 8 minute interview. Interviews with the wives ranged from 10 to 23 minutes. Couple interview times ranged from 9 minutes to 34 minutes. Again, the 9 minute interview was conducted with the husband who participated reluctantly. All interviews were conducted by the primary researcher. Interviewing individuals separately first, in a private environment and a promise of total confidentiality within the limits of the law, was believed to elicit more honest responses than they may be comfortable discussing in the presence of their spouse. Separate interviews were also thought to alleviate any concerns regarding the power dynamic of the couple and allowed each person the opportunity to answer each question comfortably. Some researchers have argued that interviewing family members separately may produce more honest answers and allows for gender and power issues within a marriage to be revealed (Seymore, Dix, & Eardley, 1995).

In the second part of the process, interviewing both husbands and wives together allowed for more of a “whole family” approach and therefore avoided relying on one family member’s perspective (Handel, 1996). As in a study by Marks et al. (2008), interviewing married couples together provided rich and contextual data by allowing couples to each tell their own story. This approach was also suggested by Patton (1996) when conducting research related to family life because it allows for triangulation in collecting data from the husband’s perspective, the wife’s perspective, and the interviewer’s observations of the couples together. Many researchers have

cited the advantages of using couple interviews as opposed to one on one interviews in that this approach enables the researcher to capture an element of the interaction between the husband and wife that would likely not be available in one on one interviews (Babbie, 2004; Lambert & Dollahite, 2006; Marks et al., 2008). Therefore, it was thought for the purposes of this study that observation of the interaction between the couple, as well as what might be learned from the individual interviews, were equally important to the outcomes of this study.

Most interviews were conducted in a neutral, but private location, as agreed upon by the participants and primary researcher. Three interviews were conducted in a meeting room of a local library, two in meeting rooms at the participant's church, and one in a meeting room of a participant's place of employment before business hours. One interview was conducted in the home of the couple as this was the only way the husband would agree to participate in the study. A semi-structured interview schedule with open-ended questions that encouraged discussion was used (see Appendix D). The same interview schedule was used for both husbands and wives in the separate interviews. A different interview schedule was used for the couple interview. Interview questions focused on the processes the couple used when making their decisions to stay together, the meanings associated with their decisions, and the ecological systems that affected their decisions. Demographic information and signed consent forms were collected before the interview process began. Complete confidentiality was promised to participants, within the limits of the law (i.e., disclosure of hurting someone or themselves) and they were also made aware that their identity would be protected with pseudonyms and that participation was completely voluntary and could be terminated at any time. Interviews were digitally recorded.

In order to offset the potential problems of power during the couple interview, the husband and wife were both asked to answer each question individually, alternating which person answered first (Marks et al., 2008). The interviewer also wrote a brief memo immediately following the interview detailing any additional information concerning the overall impression, non-verbal components of the interview and any other thoughts about the interview itself. No compensation was offered for participation.

In qualitative research, validating an instrument is usually difficult to do. Therefore, triangulation of data, or collecting data from multiple vantage points, becomes an important strategy for increasing the reliability and credibility of data. Collecting data from both the husbands and the wives, along with the researcher's observations, provided three data sources for triangulation.

### **Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed verbatim followed by open and axial coding, both by the primary researcher. Using the methodology suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2008), coding began with line by line analysis. The major points of each response were written into the margins of the transcript. A senior undergraduate student was also asked to do line-by-line coding for inter-coder reliability to increase the validity of the study. She completed coding for the first five interviews, but graduated before the last two interviews were done; therefore, the last two interviews were coded by the primary researcher only. After initial line by line analysis, primary themes were identified based on the concepts that occurred most often. These themes were identified according to a numerical content analysis. The concepts mentioned in each response were documented and tallied. Those that appeared the most often and those that appeared to be the most salient were recorded.

Once the open and axial coding was conducted for each individual transcript, the numerical content analysis from all of the transcripts were compiled and tallied to document the concepts that occurred the most often and were the most salient across all of the interviews. These concepts were organized into three overarching themes that emerged as the most relevant.

Following analysis, each individual transcript was again evaluated. Each response that supported one of the themes was cut and pasted into a separate document to validate the themes. Once a complete list of each theme was documented with supported responses from all of the transcripts, individual direct quotes were chosen as the best ones to represent and support the themes when writing the results of the study. Transcripts were made available to the participants for review in an effort to increase credibility (Trochim, 2000).

A total of seven couples ( $N = 14$ ) participated in the interview process. Each husband and wife were interviewed separately, then they completed a third interview as a couple (for a total of 21 interviews). The couples who participated all live near a mid-size city in the South Central U.S. Each couple presented a unique situation as to why they had faced separation and considered divorce. They also offered different perspectives as to why they reconciled, both in their individual interviews and the interviews they participated in together. Each person was asked to give a brief description of the events that led to the separation in the individual interview. Although the focal period of this study was the reconciliation period and forward, this question served as a basic reference point for the point of separation.

### **Demographic Data**

The wives in the study ranged from ages 31-51 ( $M = 39$ ) and the husbands were between the ages of 32-50 ( $M = 39$ ). Husbands and wives in six of the seven couples identified as White/Caucasian, and both husband and wife of one couple identified as Pacific Islander. The

couples in the study had been married between 7-16 years ( $M = 12.6$ ). Six couples had children together ranging from 8 months to 12 years old. One wife had a child from a previous marriage, one husband had a child from a previous marriage, and one couple had adult children, both from previous marriages.

For four wives and four husbands, they were currently in their first marriages (total, not necessarily to each other); for three wives and two husbands, they were in their second marriages, and one husband was in this third marriage. Separation for couples lasted from 2-12 months ( $M = 6.2$  months).

Two of the wives had some college education, one had a two-year degree, three a four-year degree, and one had a graduate degree. One husband had a GED, one completed high school, two had some college, one a two-year degree, one had a four-year degree, and one had some graduate work. Reporting on household income, one couple stated they made  $< \$50,000$ , one couple between  $\$50,000$ - $\$75,000$ , three between  $\$75,000$ - $\$100,000$ , and two  $> \$100,000$ .

Each person was also asked if they identified with any religious affiliation. For all seven couples, the husband and wife both listed the same religious affiliation. Two couples in the study identified their religious affiliation as Baptist, two couples as non-denominational Christian, two as Catholic, and one as Mormon (LDS).

### **Limitations**

Although the findings of this study leave many open doors for future study, there are also some limitations. Qualitative interviews often lead to very rich and contextual data, but there are also limitations of using such methods.

The sample size is the first limitation. The small sample size ( $N = 14$  individuals) and purposive selection process both make the findings inappropriate to generalize to other

populations. Although the interviews are rich with data, there are limitations to what we can know from only seven couples. However, the goal of qualitative data is often transferability rather than generalizability (Daly, 2007).

The second limitation is that all participants are from the same geographic area of the country. As divorce laws differ from state to state, with some states making divorce more difficult than others, it was thought to be less complicated to keep all respondents within the state of Louisiana. However, this may also limit findings as the divorce laws themselves may play a part in whether or not a couple decides to divorce.

Demographic factors can also be considered a limitation of the study. All but one couple identified as Caucasian, the other identified as Pacific Islander. Also, all couples identified with a religious affiliation, and all were from Christian denominations. This can be a limitation because several mentioned religious reasons in their decisions and as their support groups. It is probable that there are differences between couples who identify with Christian religions versus other religions, or from couples who do not identify with any religious affiliation, especially due to the fact that religious beliefs were such a prominent piece of the reconciliation for many participants in the study. Lastly, all but one couple reported having a middle to upper-middle class income, which may have impacted the financial findings.

Another limitation of the study is that focusing only on those couples who have decided to reconcile offers no comparison with couples who experience difficult situations and then decided to go through with the divorce process. Although the focus of this study was on couples who reconciled, the decision to divorce may be based on completely different issues. There may also be fundamental differences between couples who reconcile and couples who do not. It will be important to compare these two groups in future studies.

It is also notable that many couples declined to participate or simply did not ever get in touch with the researcher once contacted. Approximately ten couples refused to participate after being contacted by either the primary researcher or a proxy (i.e., divorce attorney, marriage, counselors, etc.). It is unknown how many couples received the recruiting letter and never contacted the primary researcher. It is a fair assumption that there is a difference between couples who are willing to participate and tell their stories and couples in which one or both parties were not willing to participate in the study. These couples may indeed be the couple who feel strong and that their story is actually a source of strength in their marriage. However, as the focus of the current study emphasized a salutogenic/health-focused approach, interviewing couples who were still married and doing relatively well more than three years later was a crucial component of the study.

### **Reflexivity**

A critically important issue in qualitative research is reflexivity, or the “potential influence of the researchers biases” (Marks & Dollahite, 2001, p. 633). In the effort to be transparent, I briefly discuss my personal experiences related to the topic and my potential biases. I do so as an exercise in self-awareness and transparency so that I can check myself. I wish to be as fair and objective as possible. With that said, this researcher has been married for 19 years. Having never experienced separation or near-divorce circumstances, I do not have a personal reference point for which many of these stories may come. Not only have I never personally experienced divorce, I grew up the oldest of four children with two parents who have been married for 40 years. My husband also grew up the oldest of four children in a home with both parents who have been married for 45 years. All of our grandparents were married until they were separated by death and only one of our six siblings has been divorced. Our families

have barely been directly touched by divorce. Growing up in a long line of families who “stayed together no matter what,” whether or not that was positive or negative, has impacted how I personally view both marriage and divorce.

As divorce remains a social force that impacts the lives of many, my personal life has not remained untouched by divorce. As many people in my social circle are aware of my area of study, I am often consulted for supportive counsel during times of marital hardship, including pre- and post-divorce periods. The number of friends who have had such experiences and have divorced influenced my decision to study this particular topic, as well as influenced my views on marriage and divorce.

Having lived in a healthful relationship for many years, I also believe that life can be enriched by a stable and healthful marriage. After much research, I also believe that a home in which two parents live together in a healthy marriage is also the ideal situation for children, although there are marriages in which both the adults and children are best served by the dissolution of the marriage. Even so, my hope is to provide information that can help couples navigate difficult marital struggles and make the best and most informed decisions for themselves and their families.

## CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

Although the focus of the study was from the reconciliation period moving forward, each participant was asked in the individual interview to give a brief synopsis of the events that led up to the separation. Hawkins et al. (2012) discussed that couples may have both “hard” (e.g., violence, adultery) and “soft” (e.g., relational problems) reasons for separating. Several participants pointed to general disagreements and unhappiness in the home. However, of the seven couples, five of the couples discussed some of the “hard” reasons for separation. Four couples referenced incidences of infidelity, one couple discussed the husband’s drug use and very serious disagreements with the wife’s teenage children, and another discussed the husband’s history of sexual addiction including an arrest for solicitation of a prostitute.

For four couples in the study, separation and divorce had been a pattern of behavior, prior to a commitment to reconciling the marriage. Two couples had multiple incidences of separation; one wife stating that she left on three different occasions, the second couple had moved into and out of the same household more times than either one of them could accurately count. Two couples had already filed for divorce once before. Two of the wives also mentioned that the discussion of divorce or separation still comes up occasionally.

In the individual interviews, participants were asked who made the initial decision to separate, who filed the petition for divorce, and who made the initial decision to reconcile. The findings of the present study are fairly consistent with the literature that states women are more likely to file for divorce than men (Hawkins et al., 2012; Kincaid & Caldwell, 1995). One husband and six wives made the initial decision to separate and filed the petition for divorce. Based on the women’s reports, three wives and one husband made the initial decision to reconcile and three couples stated that it was a mutual decision. The husbands were in agreement

on the first two questions, but all seven husbands stated the decision to reconcile was a mutual agreement.

General topics that came up as points of reconciliation included still caring for their spouse and not believing in divorce. Five couples had children in the home at the time of separation, and all five of them discussed not wanting the children to live in broken homes or living with single parents; however, only two couples discussed it being a major factor in their decision to reconcile. Six couples discussed religious beliefs as a factor in their decision to reconcile.

Interestingly, when asked about finances, only one couple stated the finances played any part in their decision to separate or to reconcile, (the husband citing the cost of child support; the wife saying the losses they would incur would overwhelm them because they were in the process of building a new house). This finding contradicts the existent research which cites financial problems as a prominent factor in 89% of divorces. (Poduska, 2000), and as a factor in considering divorce (Archuleta, Britt, & Grable, 2011). However, another wife initially stated that finances were not a factor in their reconciliation, but later in the interview she did mention that they have money now, and suggested that was among her reasons for staying.

During the combined interviews, couples were asked if they had any experience with therapists. At least one person in each couple sought some kind of counsel, either professionally or from a church leader. One couple stated they had not sought therapy or counsel of any kind together, but the husband received counsel from his pastor. Two couples sought help from only a licensed therapist, three couples saw both a licensed therapist and sought counseling from church leaders, and one couple from only a church leader. The couple who sought only help from church leaders found the experience very helpful, as did the couples who sought only licensed therapy.

Of the three couples who sought both, one couple expressed many positive experiences with the therapist and very negative experiences with the church therapist; the other couple was neutral on the therapist, and expressed negative experiences with the church leader, the last couple expressed that they felt the licensed therapist and support groups they attended were more helpful than church leaders with whom they spoke with. Only one couple had attended any sort of marriage enrichment programs and offered only a neutral response to the experience.

Towards the end of the couple interview, each participant was asked to discuss three positive qualities about their spouse. This was an effort to end the discussion of a very difficult topic on a positive note. Many of the wives described their husbands as dedicated and hard working. The most common responses from the husbands were, "She's loving and caring." Many of them described each other as great parents. Lastly, they were each asked to offer advice to other couples experiencing similar situation in which they were trying to decide if they should divorce or reconcile. The most common responses were that, "It's hard work," and "Don't give up," as well as the importance of working to remove emotion, seek help, and finally, "Your marriage is worth fighting for."

### **Common Themes**

Even though each individual and couple offered unique stories and experiences, there were also some similarities between and among many of the participants. Across all of the data, there were three major themes that reoccurred often from couples discussing the experience of separating and reconciling. These themes were: support systems, outlook and attitude, and the importance of hard work in marriage. Each theme will be presented, along with more named sub-themes and illustrative, supportive excerpts from the individual and couple interviews.

## **Theme 1: Support Systems**

In the individual interview, participants were asked specifically to discuss their support systems. They were also asked to discuss perceptions of low support, if applicable. Although most discussed friends and family, other areas in which they felt support for the decisions they made during the process of separating and reconciling were also mentioned. The areas of support that were most often discussed were spiritual supports, marital therapy, and social support networks. Each of these subthemes related to the overarching theme of support will be discussed.

### **Spiritual Supports**

Ten of the participants spoke both in the individual and the couple interviews about how their spiritual life affected their decisions. Many couples discussed receiving support for their decisions from religious and spiritual activities such as attending church, Bible study, prayer, and reading the Bible. Others talked about their religious beliefs and how these beliefs played an important part in their decisions.

Participation in religious and spiritual activities.

The supportive influence of church attendance and prayer came up in eight of the interviews. Prayer was discussed as both a method used for making the decision about divorcing or reconciling, as well as a support for helping the couples get through rough transition periods after reconciliation. Ashley<sup>1</sup> [Daniel], a 31 year old married for seven years, said that after they reconciled, “We went to church and started praying together and that’s something we didn’t really do before [we split].” Ashley later added, “ I prayed basically every night...God what are you trying to teach me through this? What is it that you’re, you know, I know that you want me here, but why?””

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<sup>1</sup> All participants’ names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Elizabeth, a 51 year old married for a second time [to Kyle] for 12 years reflected,

The turning point for me was a Bible study on the book of Esther. The line that says “If I perish I perish.” I don’t know what I was afraid of. Going back in, whether, I was gonna lose who I was. Whether I was gonna give in to someone that I... in my heart felt I shouldn’t give in to... Like I’m God or something, I don’t know what I thought I was. And I just decided whatever’s gonna happen is gonna happen. I’m going... you know...we’re gonna work this out.

Several participants referred to teachings of their church or their religious beliefs as a deterrent to divorce. Amanda, a 36 year old married to Dustin for 16 years said, “I think the church, the Catholic Church, was actually a big part of it,” referring to her decision to not get divorced. Zoe, a 32 year old married for a second time for 13 years said, “I think my religious beliefs. [I] don’t really believe in divorce...unless it’s...I think that’s what...helped me want to fight for my marriage.” Helen, a 42 year old married for 11 years to Nathan said, “I mean when I took my vows it was, “Till death do us part,”... I was raised a strong Catholic, he was not raised as strong a Catholic as I am, but, yeah I mean, that plays a part in it-- definitely.”

Divine calling or intervention.

Although participation in religious and spiritual activities was a part of the story for several couples, others discussed the impact of religious factors on a deeper level. Many talked about a spiritual calling or feeling that they were not supposed to be divorced. Ashely [Daniel] said,

It was really doing what I knew I supposed to be doing. What God really wanted me to do.... We, you know, we’d still argue, we’d still, you know... but then the, the very last time that we tried, I felt it was more of a calling. It was two days before we were supposed to go to court, ... I was reading my Bible, praying, ... I felt a moving, that I wasn’t supposed to be divorced. And, my mind and my heart were just completely tearing at each other.

Later in the interview she added,

But the very last time [we reconciled] it had nothing to do with financial or any, I guess, any of the, what you might call normal reasons or logical reasons. It was all because of how I felt that...God was saying "Don't...you're not supposed to be divorced" and so, yeah, it was all spiritual. It had nothing to do with anything but spirit.

Kyle [Elizabeth], a 50 year old also on his second marriage, shared a story about several of his wife Elizabeth's experiences that she took to be "signs from God." "She kept saying, 'Lord give me a sign,'... so she went to see *Passion of the Christ* and walking out she literally ran head long into the preacher that married us, who was a great man." Elizabeth responded,

I think it was finally submitting to the will of God in my life about Kyle. Yeah, was really when God spoke to me and said yeah...this is not...you know.. I'm gonna take care of you... If you will just listen. If you'll just listen, and be obedient, I'll take care of you.

Robin, a 42 year old in her first marriage of 15 years [to Hank], also shared her story of what she considered divine intervention,

I've had, throughout these years, have been to several Christian counselors. And every single one of them has said that you have a right and wouldn't be judged if you divorced him. But in the end, when it comes down to making that actual decision, the only thing that will come to mind is that God's not finished with it yet. In other words, He's not giving me permission in my heart to do that. Every time, even now, when we have bad days, it's hard not to go file the papers, but I go flipping through my Bible, trying to find a word from God, and not one time so far has He given me any peace about filing the papers. And I think that until that day comes, when I actually have peace about filing the papers, I just won't do it.

Her husband Hank, a 43 year old who is married for the second time to Robin, said later in the couple interview, "Robin said that when she was in the hotel room when we were separated that she prayed a lot. And that God said to her, 'I'm not finished with him yet.' So if my wife wasn't seeking God's answers or God in that time we wouldn't be together."

Attending church together, praying together and individually, and religious beliefs and convictions supported many couples in their decisions to reconcile. However, in some ways, religious influences were also a factor for those couples who sought counseling and therapy.

## Marital Therapy

In the joint interviews, couples were asked specifically if they had received marital therapy or counseling of any kind and were invited to discuss that experience. All of the couples in the study had sought counseling in some form both, together and separately. Almost all ( $n = 11$ ) participants visited clergy members from their own churches; others visited licensed therapists. Participants reported mixed experiences, especially with clergy members.

### Counseling with clergy and church leaders.

Some of the experiences with church clergy members were helpful. Daniel [Ashley], a 33 year old in his first marriage of seven years said,

The only person [who] was really, was supportive really of the whole thing, that I can say, was my pastor, 'cause he was, his decision was unpopular with me. But it was the right decision, the right opinion. Everybody else didn't have a very good opinion, in my opinion. Looking back on it, nobody [else] was [saying] "Do the right thing. Stay, fight for your marriage," instead of fighting for, to win a divorce.

Zoe and Stephen, who have been married for 13 years, talked about their counseling experience with a pastor in their church. Zoe said, "Yeah, through church we met like maybe twice a month. Our pastor gave us challenges to do throughout the week.... Just going on dates and having more alone time with each other."

Others did not find church-based counselors helpful. Kyle [Elizabeth] had harsh words about a bad experience with a church counselor, "What I'm saying is when you go to a preacher that's never talked to me a day in his life and he says 'Divorce'...that's not being a Christian...that's being a joke." Dustin [Amanda], a 36 year old in his first marriage of 16 years said, "We didn't really find the therapist at church too helpful." His wife Amanda added, "[Dustin] didn't like it... but, he doesn't like counseling, but in November he actually spoke, a lot, to the [counselor], and that was shocking to me."

Counseling with licensed therapists.

Others spoke very favorably of their experiences with counseling. Even though Kyle [Elizabeth] recounted some negative experiences with counseling, he followed by also discussing positive experiences. Specifically, he said, “Having a good counselor, that [made] me realize on my own what was real and what wasn’t, ... I mean, I wouldn’t be married today if it wasn’t for [her]. [The counselor] is a fantastic lady.” Kevin, a 45 year old married for a third time to Lacey, added about their counselor, “She helps. She just, I guess makes you realize things that you’re doing wrong. We should probably go more often ‘cause it does help, I think. She’s very Godly and very wise.”

The majority of participants felt that the counseling they received was beneficial. Even though a few reported negative experiences, mostly with the clergy members and church leaders they spoke with, counseling served as another area of support for the participants. However, the impact of the social support networks in the participants’ lives seemed to be a more salient topic.

### Social Support Networks

Participants were asked about the people who supported them both in their decisions to separate and to reconcile. They were also asked about people they felt they did not receive support from. Most people discussed their support networks of family, friends, church community, etc... However, most expressed receiving more support in the decision to separate than the decision to reconcile; a key finding.

Daniel [Ashley] summed up the experience many couples reported,

Yeah, you’re looking for validation and you want sides to be drawn and you want a team to support you and say, “Oh it’s okay.” There was team Daniel and then there was team Ashley. You know.” He later added, “Everybody else was just supportive on, yeah, yeah you go, you’re gonna win this [divorce]. They were supportive in the fight, which was wrong. My pastor was the only one who did the right thing and said true support may not be popular, true support will be what’s right.

Daniel [Ashley] later explained,

I think most people on both sides of our family and friends and stuff were kind of cautious. They offered, like, a friendly atmosphere for us, but I think they were more cautious to both of us, to like, be careful, don't get hurt. We're rooting for you, probably didn't really have faith [that the] relationship's gonna work. I guess because their experience, at least for my family, it was more like, I could just tell that they said, "Well whatever you want to do" and that's kind of what their answer was. It wasn't, "Hey that's great, y'all are getting back together" you know. It was more like "Whatever you think you need to do" and "Oh okay well, good luck," you know. It was more support in rolling the dice than a belief that everything was gonna be okay.

Daniel's wife, Ashley agreed by adding,

My mom was kind of leery. She...was scared, but...she knew a lot of the details of what had happened and so she was leery of what was gonna happen when we got back together. She didn't think that I was making a good decision. She didn't understand because, it wasn't a logical choice. Um, but, I don't think anybody did [understand]. You know, we both had our sides of the story and everybody knew our own, but nobody knew the other side, and so I think, we both contributed to it, but ... nobody was really, like actively fighting against it, but nobody was like "Yes, this is what you should do."...[Nobody said] "Good for your family" you know, nobody thought that. Nobody said that, ever.

Ashley [Daniel] later added,

Everybody that I talked to was like, "Are you crazy?." You know ... "You're established, you have your job, you have everything... you don't really need him anymore"....When I told him that I wanted to get back together, he started crying... I guess even after those two months of,... after I had [continually] told him no, he still wanted to get back together.

Several people discussed losing friends and creating strained relationships with family members after reconciling with their spouses. Zoe [Stephen], who is married for the second time, recalled,

When you choose to reconcile, when people aren't really for that, you also feel ostracized by [them]...Not that they did anything [outright], not that they said anything...but, you know that most of them probably don't think that you're making a wise decision and don't think that it's going to work and so...there's a lot of lonely feeling that goes with that.

Later in the interview Zoe [Stephen] also added,

I guess my sisters, it took them a little while to accept it you know, they said it was up to me. My brothers were against [us getting back together]... Yeah, my brothers were way against it. It took them a while. They weren't okay with it... It was hard because they wouldn't call or talk to me for a little while 'cause they were upset... And they were just kind of like, "Man you can't be weak, you can't just give in like that." And it affected me, 'cause I'm close to my brothers and sisters you know.

Zoe's husband Stephen agreed that her friends and family were opposed to their reconciliation,

The only people that didn't support me and my decisions were *her* support group. Nobody wanted [it], especially when she moved away. Her friends back in our home state, they did not want us to get back together. They would tell her everything, take her to parties, and take her to clubs, just try to help her loosen up, like to help her get over me, but... like I said, it was rough. But I put myself in that spot.

Helen, a 42 year old, who separated from her husband Nathan for almost a year, had a similar experience,

I have a cousin who was there for me when this happened, but when me and [my husband] got back together, [my cousin] disconnected because she didn't think we should get back together because what he had done to me, but that was my decision.

Robin, who left her husband Hank for two weeks before deciding to reconcile, gave an account of being left by her entire social group for agreeing to reconcile with her husband,

I had friends that I had from high school that we were still friends with, that would have supported me wholeheartedly had I left. But making the decision to reconcile, every last one of them were gone. So I had to start, basically start over [socially]. It was just he and I. Really nobody else, we were shunned.

However, other couples reported feeling support to stay together. Kevin, who had been separated from Lacey for three months, discussed how his parents supported his decision to stay married, "Well, my momma and daddy, they didn't want us to get separated or divorced or nothing like that. That was the only people [who said anything to me about the separation]... That's cause they love Lacey like their daughter." Stephen also discussed his friend's support during the three months Zoe lived in another state,

Yeah, I have one specific friend who, he was just straight up with me, you know. He would just tell me what's real. A lot of people didn't want us to get back together for what I've done to my wife. I was like the worst person in the world. But there was one person that would always be there for me. He would always pick me up and we'd have long conversations on [lots of stuff]. I guess he would be more of a counselor for me, 'cause we spent lots of time together... We'd go out to lunch and hang out a lot and he really encouraged me to change my ways, change the way I am..., he was just always giving me good counsel.

Several participants admitted that they felt that they did not want to hear advice from others. Zoe [Stephen] said,

When I first found out [about the affair], like I said, I just slept. [A couple of friends] would show up, bring dinner, and two of my friends had went through like a divorce process and they just kinda helped me because I was going to go see an attorney. [They would] kinda list things down on what I'd like to do and just wanted me to be prayerful about the decision. And I had another group, same friends from here who were just really, rooting for both of us to try to make it work and all. That's all I kept hearing was just positive things about him, they were just pointing it out. They just never gave up, you know, even though I'm like, "I do not want to hear this," like, "Stop, who's side are you on?"... They were both our friends and they just supported us. My family, my parents, both our parents didn't get involved, they didn't take sides, they just supported both of us.

Elizabeth had similar feelings as she had multiple separations from Kyle,

No, when I did go back I knew that there would be a lot of people that, I knew that people would have an opinion about it and I didn't really want to hear it. I just kind of went with what was what I felt at the time.

Later in her interview, Zoe [Stephen] once again spoke about unsolicited advice from others, especially her family members.

They probably were upset with him, but they never addressed it to me. They were just like, "Try to make it, try to make things work if you can. We know you're hurt right now." My dad was just saying, "Sometimes, everybody makes mistakes, don't give up so quickly." So little encouragements like that help support me, though, I guess [at the] time,... I guess of things, where I just wanted to think negative.... "No I need you guys to support me and this is what I want. I want to get divorced and I need you guys to just help me through that you know"... I wanted to get divorced and, ... I really looked at all my options because my friends, my group of people that I was around, they were so positive. Everything was just like, man they're very religious over, in our church here, they were just like, "Just pray about it." I'm like, "I don't want to pray. I do not want to pray about this right now." I think I was so scared that I was gonna change my mind

[and],..., I didn't want anything to change my mind about wanting to [divorce]. I was determined, that's where I was going.

The support that the participants received from their spiritual and religious lives, from therapy and counseling, and from their social support networks were all fundamental parts of the reconciliation process for the couples in the study. However, as will be discussed in theme 2, several participants felt that another significant factor in the process came not from outside influences, but from within themselves.

## **Theme 2: Outlook and Attitude Regarding Marriage and Divorce**

Experiencing critical marriage problems caused several participants to re-evaluate their beliefs, values, attitudes, and opinions. Personal change and improvement emerged as a source of strength for the reconciliation process. The topic of attitude and outlook came up many times during the interviews. Several participants discussed both in the individual and the couple portions of their interviews how their attitudes and views about their relationship had changed. Most often, couples discussed social views of divorce and separation and how their views had changed, changing their focus and priorities, and maintaining emotional control in the relationship. Each of these subthemes will be discussed.

### **Attitudes Regarding Social Norms of Marriage and Divorce**

For participants in the study, reconciling their marriages included re-evaluating and/or changing their personal views on both marriage and divorce. Although six of the participants had been married at least once before, they had very different values and beliefs systems for their current marriages. But even for those in their first marriages, many reported having to change their thought processes.

Change in attitude about divorce.

A few people in the study struggled with how they perceived the social acceptability of divorce. Although most people did not feel that divorce was necessarily morally wrong for other people, it was just not what they wanted for their own marriages. However, a few people expressed strong opinions about the institution of divorce and had some strong views of divorce after their experiences. Daniel [Ashley], who has only been married once, had many things to say about what he thought of as society's view of divorce,

I guess as society, [we] have the wrong focus. We're focused on everybody else. We're focused on other people's opinions of ourselves. What am I going to accomplish? I want to leave my mark on the world, or I'm going to get everything, I'm gonna work hard and have all of this stuff and great things and, divorce is acceptable. We just view things....the grass is greener on the other side. We're so focused on somebody else that we're not focused on ourselves enough to understand what I'm doing wrong, I think. So I'm focused on somebody else's drama or somebody else's [opinion]...We gotta fight for our marriage.... I need to fight for my marriage.... divorce isn't acceptable, it's not a solution. It's a sin.... Growing up, you know, [society taught me that] divorce is, if it gets too rough, trade it in. If your wife or spouse or whatever is too rough, trade it in .Trade it in for a new model or better easier ride, and that's not the answer.

Stephen [Zoe] also said, "Yeah, I would, I guess I would be old school on that. I don't believe that divorce should ever be any way to solve a problem... I always wanted to make it work."

Change in beliefs about marriage.

For some participants, changing their personal beliefs about marriage, separating, and divorce was essential to their reconciliation. Elizabeth [Kyle] discussed how her ideas of what her vows meant, changed after her first divorce:

You know the first time I got married, you say those vows and they don't really mean anything. When I married Kyle [my second marriage], I knew that day exactly what I was saying. That this was a covenant that I was making, which is for a lifetime, which is unbreakable, and...I just knew that I couldn't [break] it. I knew that there was no way that I could break that covenant. Kyle had not done anything to warrant breaking that covenant. He had never laid a hand on me. He didn't cheat [or do] any of the things that you would think that... God might approve of a separation or divorce. Kyle had never done those things.

Amanda, although she separated from Dustin for almost a year, talked about her changing idea of what happiness in a marriage meant,

So I think if more people would just realize that stuff's not gonna be glossy and glittery and there's gonna be some hard times, they'd be happier... and I think some people just, they need to realize too, somebody else can't make you happy. You have to make yourself happy.

Kyle [Elizabeth] said, "But these days too, you realize that, when things don't go right, it's really nobody's fault. It's life."

The term "statistic" came up many times when referring to divorces and single parent or broken homes. Some even discussed how not wanting to be a part of the "statistics" or having their children growing up in broken homes impacted their decisions. Amanda [Dustin] said,

I think now we're just so much more cautious of each other's feelings... We value marriage so much more than we ever had before, 'cause before was like, this is not gonna happen to us. You always hear it in stories and stuff, and now we just value our vows, our marriage, and we take it more serious.

Stephen, who had been reconciled with Zoe five years, added,

I just realized a whole lot. Like the things that she has done for me. How selfish I was for putting my... my unwanted needs [first]. I didn't need to do the things that I did, but I did them anyways. [I was] just me being selfish. [I realized] how good of a woman that my wife really is. That was really the turning point. You see a lot of broken relationships that are near to you. We have friends, we have family members who's relationships don't work out, and it's... I didn't want to be a part of that. I don't want to be that statistic, so, I really had to hunker down and really do some soul searching and find out what I really wanted, and at the end of the day, I couldn't do it without my wife.

Stephen's wife Zoe agreed,

[He] played a big part in the decision of getting back together, making it work. He was an amazing father to my children. But I think it was not wanting to be by myself. My kids, I didn't want to put them through that. I kinda went through, "Am I being selfish because?", I felt like this decision wasn't just about me, was going to affect them too. And the stress on me being a single mom, there were days when I had to take it out on them, where it was not their fault. All that took place, and my decision was on, "man is it worth it?", or do I just want to be stubborn and prove a point.

Changing viewpoints and opinions about marriage in general and the acceptability of divorce was a starting point for some participants. However, changing viewpoints and opinions within their own marriages and within themselves personally was also a common thread among the participants.

### Changing Focus/Priorities

A change of focus or priorities in the marriage was discussed by six couples. Daniel, now reconciled with Ashley for five years, called it going from a “me” to a “we” thought process. The idea of no longer making decisions based on individual desires but moving to a decision based on what was best for both of them and their marriage was a transition that several participants discussed in some form as an essential part in restoring their marriage. Daniel [Ashley] said,

I think being in that position, I kinda learned more about what’s more valuable because that was such a turbulent and humbling experience. I learned that when I went into [my new job], I wanted to be the greatest... so knowing that, I realized that if I’m not in [this job] tomorrow it doesn’t matter. What matters is that they remember me and have good memories in case something does happen, they’re always gonna think of me...but in the grand scheme of things, that’s not what’s most import. What’s most important is my family. And that’s kind of what I learned through that nightmare.

Daniel [Ashley] later added an analogy from his time in the military and explained how fighting for his marriage forced him to re-evaluate many things,

Kinda like, breaking down to rebuild something that is stronger for you. In the military they break you down and rebuild you more, better and focused. I think that was the process of breaking me down, from a selfish focused person... For God to break [me], to use that situation, to use the separation to break me down to get me out of my comfort zone to make the decision to move. He further broke me down in, while I was in Austin, to rearrange my thought process, to put me in a further uncomfortable situation where for the first time in my adult life I hadn’t worked. I had to depend on somebody else completely. And I learned at an early age through divorce of my parents that I was the only person that I could depend on. And to break that down and say well you’ve gotta depend... on [God] first, and then you need to depend on your family and your spouse. And that was just a breaking down process to ultimately I think rearrange me as a Christian and as a man, a husband and father.

Daniel's wife Ashley spoke about how her feelings and emotions changed drastically during the eleven months they were apart. She had moved to a new city and their separation had been in a continual state of conflict.

A deterrent to get back together was again feelings... the fear of if I got back together with him what was gonna happen? Would we still have this, this cycle of stuff? Would he want to move to Austin, because I wasn't willing to come down here. ... everything that runs through your mind. I knew ... what I wanted to do, which was get back together with my husband and stay in Austin. I didn't know how he was gonna react to that when I told him. But he started crying, he said that he wanted to come and that he'd move... I told him, I know this is scary. And he's like "no it's not" and that's when I realized I wasn't scared. I wasn't resentful anymore. I really hated him. Literally I mean after he took the kids I felt hate towards him. I hated that I hated him, but the way I felt was as if somebody had died I guess. Just hopelessness. Just so... my heart literally hurt, so that was a big deterrent, like fear and hurt and resentment. And as soon as we talked, all of that just went away. I felt no hatred, no anything towards him.

Elizabeth [Kyle], the oldest wife of the participants (51), added how time itself can play a role in changing attitudes and outlooks, and why that is important to understand in a marriage.

Well, time changes you as a person, it changes your view on the situation sometimes.... Something that's relevant right now is not gonna be relevant in six months or six years, and this is a life. When you make a commitment to be married, that's a commitment, whether it's before God or just before a judge, and if you're just gonna throw that commitment away you're throwing every commitment you ever make away.

Ashley [Daniel] also said, "I think it was, for me personally, it was a gratitude thing. I felt that God had called me to restore our marriage, [and then] He restored our marriage." Nathan, who was separated from Helen for almost a year, stated, "I mean, it was kinda my fault looking at it the way I did. I know [our daughter] was sick for a while, but I guess I coulda tried to deal with it, talk to her about it. I didn't really say a whole lot. I guess I held [my feelings] in too long."

Changing personal attitudes and outlook became an important part of the process for the participants. However, for some, changing those attitudes involved changing how they responded to difficult situations as well.

## Improved Emotional Control

Changing focus and priorities included changing response patterns to conflicts and to communication patterns. Improved emotional control was a major facilitative factor for several couples' reconciliation. After the many hours of fighting and arguing, learning to keep excessive emotion to a minimum reportedly proved to be helpful in the reconciliation process. In the joint portion of the interview, Kyle and Elizabeth gave an account of how things had changed in their marriage's emotional climate. Kyle said, "One or two things that somebody can do I think [to help a lot is] calm down first. Don't let emotion [overpower you], try to take emotion out of it." His wife Elizabeth added,

I think we both made a conscious effort to stop and ... think before we spoke... [and to] stop doing extreme thinking, like everything isn't black and white. If we disagree on something it's not the end. And I think that was a lot of our problem was, we'd have a disagreement and I'd be like "That's it." But, we don't yell at each other anymore. We don't cuss at each other anymore. I don't storm out anymore.

To which Kyle responded, "She don't storm out of the house anymore and I don't storm out the house anymore. We might have to separate five or ten minutes but then, it's all good."

Zoe also talked about the importance of dealing with her anger towards Stephen appropriately, "I think we had to set those ground rules, because I didn't want to take it out on anyone else. ...I didn't want to be mad at the world."

## Communication patterns.

Improving the way the husbands and wives communicated with each other was another important factor in tempering how they related to each other. However, communication was not an important component of the reconciliation process. Kevin [Lacey], who had been married twice before, spoke of the need for improving communication skills, but was still uncertain about how effective communication skills are at improving a marriage. He stated, "Communicate, but

we don't communicate still. Does anybody communicate? I asked that question to people that's still married, "You talk to your wife" uh... 'Very little.' That's why I ask that question all the time."

Stephen and Zoe also discussed how their communication patterns had changed as a result of their reconciliation, and Stephen offered advice to other couples,

Just to listen more. That's all. That's mainly for me. I had to just listen more. And not react to what she was saying. I had to just let her get, get her feelings out there in the open without me having to say anything. Just, you know, and be more supportive instead of arguing towards one another.

His wife Zoe, agreed,

Yeah, I think we are just trying to stay close to each other now and have open communication. You know, we're more watchful about what we say to each other, where before we used to just kind of argue in front of [the kids] and now we're more kind of like, "Wait, we'll talk about it in the [other] room.

In connection with the second theme, (Improved Outlook and Attitude), we have reviewed three related subthemes: (a) attitudes regarding social norms, (b) changing foci and priorities, and (c) improved emotional control. We now turn to the third and final major theme, the importance of hard work in marriage.

### **Theme 3: The Importance of Hard Work in Marriage**

The final theme that came up throughout many of the interviews was the concept of hard work. Although "marriage is hard work" is almost a cliché, many participants discussed the reality of having to really work, especially during the reconciliation process. Several couples discussed going through difficult life events as opportunities for growth personally and for their marriage. Likewise, many couples discussed the period of reconciliation as a source of growth also. Many couples discussed that they made multiple attempts at reconciliation, but that it was worth the hard work. Therefore, the subthemes for theme 3 are; (a) difficult life experiences, (b)

personal and marital growth, (c) multiple attempts/rough start, (d) it's worth the fight, and (e) grand gestures.

### Difficult Life Experiences

All but one couple in the study said that they had been through difficult life experiences, other than their separation, during the period of reconciliation. Most of them they expressed how these difficult life events had actually drawn them closer together. When Ashley and Daniel reconciled, they moved to a new city. Daniel attempted to find work but was never able to, so they moved back home. He discussed the stress of his new job at length during his interview. However, Ashley said of this experience,

I think our relationship really ... bonded a lot more when [Daniel started his new job]. That's when...I felt, really, a lot closer to him.... I don't know what it was about that experience that really bonded me to him. I mean before I was committed, but I just felt more of a bond...It was really hard but, it really did bond us together more. Going through something hard I guess, and I think I grew up a lot. I felt like I needed to be there for him.

Another husband, Kyle, expressed similar sentiments when an injury forced him into early retirement shortly after his reconciliation with Elizabeth,

Major things in our life have drawn us closer. Her mother passing away, I was there for her through every step of the process, to help her through it. With me it was a severe injury that she was with me every step of the way... Elizabeth went with me the last time to see my general practitioner and that day, it was, devastating for me, but she was there with me. I think it scared her a little bit too...I guess we've learned that, unlike our previous spouses, that we weren't going to run out on each other.

Elizabeth added, "Yes, he had spinal cord surgery in 2010 and that's when we started living under the same roof again."

Kyle later discussed how the small issues always seemed to turn into big conflicts, but when he and Elizabeth faced major life circumstances, they faced them together:

To me, the decisions to separate were always a lot of little stupid crap. Getting out of control. Not dealing with it. Tabling it, shelving it, not dealing with it, making the same little mistakes over and over and over again. Major things, to me, brought us closer together.

For Lacey and Kevin, who had been married 14 years, Hurricane Gustav, which hit the Baton Rouge area and destroyed their family home, was the catalyst for their moving back in together and attempting reconciliation. Lacy said,

We had started ... talking and trying to figure it all out. But the main thing, the main reason, it's not like we ever discussed it, was something that happened. Hurricane Gustav hit at that time, and we lost our home, which was our family home, and at that time I was renting a trailer. We had the kids every other week, but we would stay at the family home. Like when it was his week he would stay there and when it was my week I would stay there, but we all ended up moving into the trailer where I was renting. So our reconciliation wasn't... it just happened.

Even though the majority of the couples faced some difficult life situations and felt that facing those situations together aided their marriage, they were asked specifically about how they viewed the difficult life situation of separating and facing a potential divorce.

#### Personal and Marital Growth

Although a marital separating can be a traumatic and difficult life period, for the purposes of this study, the separation and reconciliation period were singled out as a separate category. During the couple interview, participants were asked to discuss the meaning they associated with their separation and reconciliation. Specifically, they were asked if they felt like the process had served any purpose in their lives and marriages. Several couples felt like the process of separating and reconciling had made them stronger or closer and that they had experienced growth both individually and as a couple.

For most participants, the events surrounding their separation and reconciliation were pivotal periods in their lives. Robin [Hank] offered a statement that summed up the experience to her,

It was a negative experience and it was tough to go through, but it sent me on a journey, a spiritual journey like no other. And had it not, it was the big bang that formed the world that I live in now. So, ... though it was a negative experience, something positive came out of it.

Helen [Nathan] expressed similar sentiments, "I'm thankful for negative experiences because you learn from them."

Daniel [Ashley] discussed how the period of life around the separation influenced how he views difficult situations in general now,

Any trials that come along develop you as a person and an individual to deal with the next trial. There's always gonna be trials. So, having come through these trials and understanding that, well the next trial is gonna be okay, no matter, regardless of the outcome, God ... ultimately we are His children and it's gonna be okay, no matter what that trial is. I'm either gonna overcome it or succumb to whatever that trial is. Or, we're not gonna come out the other side of it the way we came in.

Ashley [Daniel] responded by saying, "You know it's the, like he said, I mean the breaking down. He changed me a lot too...we're just two completely different people." Elizabeth [Kyle] also expressed how the struggles they faced helped them grow together, "Well, I think every experience probably has a positive spin on it. I think had Kyle and I not gone through some of the things we went through, we would not be as close as we are now."

However, some participants, particularly some of the husbands, reported that although something positive came from the experience, they still felt like it was an ultimately negative experience. Dustin [Amanda] answered, "Well, I don't like to think back to that time either, but I probably did grow from it." Then Amanda responded, "I think we just have more invested now." Stephen [Zoe] said,

I don't think I wish it upon anyone, but it's helped. It's helped us become stronger and strengthened our bond between one another. Our communication has been a lot better, so in a way, it's helped us. It's helped us out a lot.

And Zoe agreed, "Yeah, so, that part was, those experiences were rough, but I guess it helped us." But in her individual interview, Zoe said,

When I left, I think that time apart from each other helped us think, even though it was a rocky road, it kind of helped show him, “Okay she’s not playing around.” He said when I left, he felt like he had to lose everything to realize what he was left with which was nothing. And for me, just leaving and clearing my head and trying to pick myself back up, I think that was the best decision I ever made, even though not everyone agreed. That was the best decision I could have made to save our marriage...that little separation.

But Zoe also added, “I couldn’t have made it without Stephen. I am who I am today because of the struggles that we’ve had, and our marriage is as strong as it is because of the things that we’ve endured.”

Only one couple felt that enduring marital separation and reconciliation had not changed them or their marriage. They both reported feeling as if “things had just gone back to the way they were before [the separation].” Although the other couples in the study felt they had derived at least some measure of growth in their marriage after having been reconciled for several years, the majority of them reported a difficult transition period during the initial phase of the [final] reconciliation.

#### Multiple Attempts/Rough Start

Piecing their marriages back together proved to be a somewhat trying task for the majority of the couples in the study, especially in the early stages of deciding they were going to stay together. Although starting over was the decision each couple made, they did not report a “second honeymoon” phase following that decision.

For all but one of the couples in the study, the separation and reconciliation process was *not* a one-time event. They had attempted separation, reconciliation, or both multiple times. They also discussed the difficult transition period they experienced once they decided they *were* going to make their marriages work. Ashely [Daniel] said,

I think it taught me a lot of patience. Because when we first got back together,... it was really, really hard when he didn’t have a job or was in school, and I think it taught me to trust God. Once you take that step and you know, okay, this is what you’re supposed to

do, and things are still going crazy, but, you know, okay well God did this for a reason. And so, yeah it taught me, obedience, it taught me to trust God.

She also said, “Well, I mean we tried several times and never really... it never really worked. We never really...nobody moved anywhere, nobody did anything big.” Daniel [Ashley] added to that saying,

I guess the first two times that we tried to reconcile, I...was thinking, The children are gonna grow up without a father, or not their father and I don't want, you know, you see so many broken families, you just, I don't want that for my children.” Not to say that it doesn't work perfectly for some people, but it's just, I didn't want them to go through that. So yeah the first few times I think we tried because of different reasons. But the very last time it had nothing to do with financial or any, I guess, any of the, what you might call normal reasons or logical reasons. It was all because of how I felt that, you know, I felt that God was saying “don't...you're not supposed to be divorced.”

Ashley [Daniel] later added,

The first three months were hell because he didn't have a job ...but the plan was he was gonna start school and so for three months he wasn't able to start school either, and he couldn't find a job for a whole year, which was what brought us back here. Yeah, nothing but God, because, like I said, the first three months were just really, really hard. I mean we could've just...separated at that point again

Kyle [Elizabeth], although he had been divorced once before, expressed similar feelings about the process,

It just wasn't an instantaneous thing, like I said, it took me a lot of work, over a long period of time, to fix what was wrong with me. I mean, that's part of reconciliation. Divorce is the easy way out, that's a lazy person, a coward. Stephen and Zoe also discussed the difficult transition period. Stephen recalled,

Yeah, I'd say it was slow and gradual at first. She was pretty set on staying away and not coming back, but the more conversations we had and also just, me trying to do my part in trying to prove to her that she's all I needed [helped us]. [I kept] continuing on to prove that,... and just making her feel like she's the only one that I need.... She eventually was feeling it, I guess and came back to me.

Zoe added,

Not at first. Like when I got back, we were on a roller coaster ride, like we were getting divorced every other month. But, man, I think through prayer, church, they helped us ... see the positive things in making this work and worth fighting for [our marriage].

Zoe later added,

[It was hard] just trying to figure out how to put it together, how to even talk to each other. Anything and everything seemed like it was a reminder of [our hard times]... If he was on his phone, everything, anything triggered [the bad memories]. We were at each other's throats and, he was patient with me at first, and then it just seemed, like "Why can't you just get over this?" It was just a month into us coming back, and by the summer of that year, we were getting divorced again.

Two wives expressed that divorce was occasionally still a topic in their home. Lacey, who has been married to Kevin for 14 years, said, "It was probably rocky. The first few months were just kinda still... I don't know." Her husband Kevin expressed similar thoughts, "I don't know. I mean we got along for a while. I mean we got along great for a while. Like you do when you first meet each other. It's just hard."

Amanda discussed at length that divorce occasionally came up, even though she and Dustin have remained married for 16 years, "I think it's a vicious cycle. It comes around every seven to eight years." Later she added,

I was just ready for a fresh start. But we really weren't seeing eye to eye on a lot of things. Not, not fighting, just existing. I actually went the lawyer in January of 2002 and she told me to come back when I was more ready to do this because she could tell that I really wasn't ready to do it, and ...by June things really hadn't gotten better six months later so, I filed papers.

At the end of the interview she also said,

I've talked about separation since then, a few times, just recently also ...probably about once a year, at least. Mostly on odd years though. But um, (laughs) we go through cycles. 2013 was horrible, like 2001 was horrible, and I think 2002 I just hadn't recovered enough and that's why I just said "It's over." ...Odd years are just horrible for us. Which probably doesn't make any sense, but.... It's like a cycle.

Even though many of the couples discussed their difficulty at the start, they also discussed ongoing conflicts and problems they faced as well. However, the overwhelming

majority of participants felt that even though their marriages weren't always easy, there was indeed a pay-off for their hard work.

#### “It's Worth the Fight”

To end the interview, couples were asked to give advice to other couples experiencing similar situations. All couples expressed that they felt it was worth the fight. They were proud of what they had overcome to save their marriages. Their message was almost unanimously, don't give up. Ashley's [Daniel] statement summed up the experience for the couples who were thriving, “Because ultimately, [I] look at where I am now, you know. We're doing awesome.” Two other couples, however, discussed how sometimes they still are not sure if they are going to make it, despite their hard work.

Kyle and Elizabeth had indeed already talked to other couples in similar situations and told them two things, first, “Anything worth having is worth working for” and second,

It's a job. It's a job. It's a pretty easy job these days. Before, God it was one of those jobs that you hated every morning. I mean ‘God I gotta get up and go to work. Crap!’ These days you wake up it's like, “Oh yeah, I love my job”.

Elizabeth added,

Well, like any job, some days are better than others. You still have days where nothing goes right. But you don't quit the job...if you were ever truly in love, you got to understand that it's not easy. If you, if you really want it, you gotta work for it.

Kyle added, “It's hard work. And it don't happen overnight. You have to know what you want, you have to be dedicated to it, you gotta work hard and realize that you can't change another person. You can only change yourself.” Elizabeth said, “And if you truly love somebody, it's a job, it works. It's never easy. But the benefits of being loved and having somebody in your life that loves you, anything worth having, is worth working for.”

Zoe [Stephen] talked about the reconciliation being a lengthy process and emphasized,

It was not gonna happen overnight ... We made that decision not knowing what was going to be ahead of us. We knew it was gonna be hard, we did not know it was gonna be a roller coaster ride. It really took both of us....being real humble...

In their individual interviews Robin and Hank, who have been married for 15 years, both talked about how they still have to work hard at staying together. During her interview, Robin said, "I decided before I got married... that my marriage would be more like my grandparents marriage, and that we would stay together through it all. It gets harder and harder to do that, the older I get." In his interview, Hank said, "I don't want to be a single person again... So whatever it takes...I'm not gonna do that."

Hard work, consistent effort, and making changes were a part of the process for several of the couples in the study. But for several participants, the hard work came in bigger measures than others. Some participants had made big moves or a grand gesture in an effort to repair their marriages.

#### Grand Gestures

In the joint interviews, couples were asked if they remembered anything they or their spouse had done that significantly changed the direction of the relationship. Many participants mentioned a big move or grand gesture by their spouse that was taken as a sign of love and a move towards reconciliation. For two couples being interviewed, they actually proceeded right up to the divorce before calling off the proceedings. Ashley and Daniel were three days before their court date. She shared their story,

I knew ...what I wanted to do, which was get back together with my husband and stay in Austin... And got back together... we called our lawyers and let them know that we weren't gonna do anything [further], you know, [but] we actually had to go to court. We went there, let the lawyers know, and they took care of the rest.

Another couple, Elizabeth and Kyle had lived apart for a significant portion of their marriage. Elizabeth had filed for divorce from Kyle once before and they decided to reconcile.

The second time she filed for divorce from Kyle, she was actually sitting in the court room and decided she couldn't go through with it. Elizabeth also shared their story,

Literally we were sitting in the court room and they called my name and I looked at my attorney. He had his back, of course, to the court room, and I was looking at him [waiting] for him to turn around...they called my name again... and he turned around and I just looked at him and shook my head. And he turned to judge and said something, and I couldn't hear him and then I got up and walked out into the ladies room. My sister followed me. I was crying. I said, "I can't do it." She said, "Don't do it. Who says you have to do it." So I gathered ...my father was there with me and my sister was with me and... my niece was with me. I'm not sure why she was there. Support, I guess. And, we left. We went and had breakfast and I sent Kyle a text and said, "I can't do it." And we had not spoken in probably six months.

For two other couples building or moving to a new home was the grand gesture. For two wives, they viewed this as a sign of starting over, an indication of new beginnings. Amanda [Dustin] said,

I know for me with Dustin it was him working on the house that showed [me] a lot. He [had previously] remodeled his mom's house. Two years before that, and he was gone [a lot working on it]. When he wasn't off, he was over there, which I understood. He had to help his mom and dad out, and he did that. But when he put that energy into here into our dwelling, it made a difference [to me].

Lacey also said, "It was September, and in November he started... building a house for us."

For Zoe and Stephen, the grand gesture was simply coming back home. Zoe moved to her home state when she decided to separate from Stephen. After a few months, he went to try to convince her to come home. When asked about her big gesture, Stephen answered,

Coming back home to me...Just showing that she wanted to make it work. Not only that, just being thousands of miles away from me and, for her to, I mean she was free to do whatever she wanted and... she stayed true to me, she stayed faithful to me, so that there just showed that she was, she was willing to make it work and I was too.

Zoe also answered,

I think Stephen was making those changes. Anything I asked him to do he tried to do times ten. Sometimes he just felt like nothing he was doing was good [but] that was my fault because I just kept expecting more and more, and I knew he was making those

changes to try to make thing work with me. I guess the more he stayed consistent about it, I just knew we were gonna make it work and it was gonna be okay.

Stephen added, “Nothing was going to stop me from trying. I was gonna try every little thing that I could in order for me to make this relationship work. And if she didn’t meet me in the middle then that’s her decision.”

The importance of hard work in marriage is the third major theme of the current study, including the subthemes; difficult life experiences, growth, multiple attempts/rough starts, worth the fight, and grand gestures. The three major themes of Support Systems, Outlook and Attitudes, and The Importance of Hard Work in Marriage are woven throughout the interviews of all seven couples; however, there are a few non-findings that are worth mentioning.

### **Outside of the Themes**

There is often much to be learned about what participants do not say, as well as from what they do convey in interviews. Equally as important as what is said verbally in the in the interview, much can be derived from non-verbal cues such as body language and interaction. Two of the biggest surprise non-findings in the current study were that (a) very few participants had any plan, either formal or informal, as they entered the reconciliation period, and (b) although finances are often considered one of the most serious catalysts for marital problems, money was not a factor for participants in this study. Each of these non-findings, as well as the couple interactions, are discussed below.

#### **We Don’t Have a Plan**

Couples were asked during the joint interview if they had a specific plan of action. For most couples, the answer was no. However, having a course of action seemed to help some couples. For these, setting up some ground rules or having a specific set of plans for the

reconciliation was an important part of the process. Both Robin [Hank] and Lacey [Kevin] insisted that their husbands attend therapy with them before they would consider reconciliation. Robin also discussed insisting on going to church and to group therapy as well. Helen [Nathan] also discussed wanting to move further away from her in-laws.

For other couples it was not about rules, but about moving forward. Amanda [Dustin] said,

Well we had talked about, when we got back together, starting to have kids, and we started remodeling the house too. Cause it [didn't feel] like ours. I think building that together helped too. We had a project to work together. It was something for us to do together. And you could see the fruits of the labor, and I think that's what we needed.

Zoe and Stephen discussed the rules that they set up before she moved home. She said, "Yeah, that was our process, ...I said 'Look I'm gonna try not to bring it up, but if I do have those moments and melt down, [then] he was gonna just reassure me that we were gonna be okay.'" And the later she added,

Yeah, we're constantly making sure, we got our [together time] dates every... before it was like, we'll get it in when we can. Now we're just on top of [it]... making sure we have our little time. And you know,[when we are out together] we don't even talk about the kids... we're more open, we're more honest to each other than we were before. I feel like we talk about anything and not hold back.

Although having a plan of action was not a factor for reconciliation in the majority of the couples, setting up a few "rules" or agreements did seem to be a benefit to the couples who utilized them. This was surprising, considering the number of behavioral changes that were made by the participants without explicitly stating that they would do so. However, this was not the only unexpected response given in the interviews.

#### Finances

In the joint interview, couples were asked specifically if finances were a factor in their decision to reconcile. The response was overwhelmingly "No." The one exception was Hank and

Robin. Robin discussed how after reconciling (for the first time), she discovered that Hank was having an affair and she officially drew up paperwork again to file for divorce. However, they were in the process of building a home and would have lost over \$50,000 if they divorced at that time. Hank also added in his interview that he had looked at the numbers of what his child support would cost him and decided that he could not afford to live on his own and pay child support.

The only other mention of money came from Amanda. When initially asked if finances were a factor in her decision to reconcile, she said “no.” However, later in the interview she said, “We went through a lot of years where we didn’t have money. And he didn’t work as much as he does now. And I was more of the breadwinner... I want my fair share.”

Considering the issues that did *not* affect the decision making processes for the couples in this study is as important as considering the factors that *did* affect the decision making processes. To recap, important additional findings included couples’ reports that: (1) they did not have a plan, (2) communication was *not* a key to the reconciliation, (3) that finances had very little to do with the decision to reconcile, and (4) that children were a factor, but not the sole purpose for reconciliation. Even so, all of the above are based on participants’ verbal reports. It is also important to consider not only what the participants did not say, but their non-verbal communication during the interview as well.

### Couple Interaction

A third data point from the interview process comes from the interviewer observations during the interview process. In general, the women appeared a lot more at ease discussing the separation and reconciliation than the men. Several of the men seemed very uneasy to start the interview, but once they started talking, they visibly became more relaxed and candid with their

answers. Two husbands never really fully relaxed and one admitted once the recorder was off that he did not want to come and this was not a topic he wanted to discuss with a stranger. His answers were never really open and he was very agitated throughout both the individual and the joint interview. Another husband stated, once the recorder was off, that he was worried he was going to have to say everything was his fault, but he did not mind answering the questions he was asked. Indeed, he seemed relieved. For all of the couple interviews except the one previously mentioned, the couples were very relaxed together. They touched, smiled at each other, and spoke favorably towards each other. They seemed to discuss their experience with an air of “we have overcome” and a sense of pride. Not surprisingly, for the one couple who did not seem comfortable during the interview, the wife asked me to confirm that her answers were confidential because things were still “not great” between them. Her husband was also the husband who was agitated throughout the interviews.

Although this was a difficult subject for many to talk about, with the exception of two husbands, most seemed to open up pretty quickly. Another husband seemed very embarrassed as if he were wondering if his wife had shared all of his secrets with me, but later in the interview, even he shared his story on his own. Again, almost all participants seemed comfortable enough and visibly relaxed, and began to share their stories. Kyle’s quote seemed to sum up how the majority of the participants felt about their experience, “And if you truly love somebody, it’s a job, it works. It’s never easy. But you know, the benefits of being loved and having somebody in your life that loves you, anything worth having is worth working for.”

## **CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS**

The factors that lead couples to experience serious enough hardship to take the legal steps towards divorce is a multi-faceted area of study. The factors that lead these couples to reconcile their marriages can be even more complex. Because each marriage is unique, so are the factors contributing to both separation and reconciliation. Although each of the seven couples presented unique situations, issues, and experiences, there were a few common threads among them. Their

stories offer valuable insight into the thought processes and decision making factors that are associated with their reconciliation.

Although higher levels of shared religiosity have been repeatedly cited in the literature as being a support of strong marriages (Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Mahoney, 2010, Marks, 2006a; Marks, 2006b), less is known regarding whether religion is a buffer for divorce, per se (Marks, 2005). Specifically, the role religiosity plays in the decision to separate, divorce, and/or reconcile is a scarce topic in research. Religious and spiritual issues seemed to play a salient role in the decision making process for many—even most—of the participants in this study, which is consistent with some previous research. Several couples discussed a “divine intervention” or feeling that God did not want them to divorce. Support from church members, attending church together, prayer, and Christian counseling came up in many of the interviews as both a decision making factor and as a support to their decisions. Phrased differently, couples seemed to benefit from multiple dimensions of religion (i.e., beliefs, practices, and faith community; Marks et al., 2011).

Many participants stated that therapy was considered a support; however, it was not the most important issue in reconciling. Even though only one couple considered attending therapy a major factor in the decision to reconcile, all couples who attended therapy did find it at least somewhat beneficial. It is interesting to note that the negative experiences reported tended to involve clergy members. Conversely, two husbands *did* feel like the counsel they received from their respective clergy leader was supportive and helpful. Much of the current literature on marital reconciliation focuses on the success of intervention programs (Amato, 2010; Binstock & Thornton, 2003; & Doherty, Willoughby, & Peterson, 2011), which have been proven to aid

some of the marriages in the respective studies; however, to this researcher's knowledge, no studies have look at the effectiveness of marital counseling with clergy members.

A significant finding of the study is that more couples found support in their decision to separate then their decision to reconcile. Interestingly, the majority of the folks who discussed loosing friends or having strained relationships were the ones who discussed having disclosed more information about their marital problems with their social networks. The question was not specifically asked as to the amount of information they disclosed, but could be the topic of possible future study. This finding suggests that the resources available (social support or lack of support), are in fact important components to consider in how a marriage responds to stressors (marital hardships), and whether or not they enter a state of crisis (Patterson, 1988). Also, by considering an ecological perspective, the marriage unit can be influenced at both the meso-level (family and friends) and exo-level (family and friends of spouse) (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Changing foci and priorities were mentioned by almost every individual and couple in the study. Particularly noteworthy were the notions of bucking social trends and "not being a part of the statistics" as well as changing from focusing on two individuals to one couple. Discussions of "just because it's okay for the rest of society doesn't make it okay for me" came up numerous times. Two of the husbands explicitly voiced a moral objection to divorce, calling it a "sin" or a "coward's way out." Even though a few adopted this view of divorce, most did not express that divorce was "wrong" or a "sin", but that divorce was simply not the path that they wanted for themselves or their children. This finding is an example of how the macro-system (society and culture at large) of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological theory can influence the decisions made in a marriage.

Many couples expressed a growth and meaning they developed as part of going through marital difficulty. Several couples discussed having overcome difficult periods and managing to keep their marriages together as a source of strength. According to McCubbin and Patterson (1983), being able to associate meaning to stressor events can aid in keeping the stressor from developing into crisis. This ability to be able to look at their struggles as source of growth contributed to the “it’s worth it” sentiment that many of the expressed.

Another compelling finding of the study is that for many couples the reconciliation period was just as difficult as separating. Each couple discussed some level of difficulty once they decided they were going to reconcile and there was no “second honeymoon” phase. This finding has particular clinical implications for therapists working with couples in the fragile state. Binstock and Thornton (2003) discussed the lack of literature available on multiple attempts at reconciliation and stated that reconciliation is not necessarily an indicator of marital stability, citing that only one-third of reconciliation attempts are successful (Wineberg, 1996). Although little literature is available on this particular topic, Amato (2010) argued for better understanding of the process of divorce due to the fact that it is not exactly a linear process. Perhaps the same could be determined in the study of reconciliation.

As discussed by Sells et al. (2009), couples tend to fight and engage in conflict in a set pattern and that pattern can be predictive of marital quality. The findings of this study are consistent with the literature, in the respect that the majority of the couples found it necessary to change not only their behavior patterns, but their patterns of conflict as well, as part of the reconciliation process.

Perhaps what speaks more to the importance of the findings is what the couples did *not* say. Although the couples who had children talked about not wanting their children to grow up in

a broken home, only one couple expressed that the children were the major deciding factor in the reconciliation. Also the reports that finances were not a dominant factor to all but one of the couples, is an important finding. This is inconsistent with the literature that suggests barriers to divorce such as “staying together for the children” and finances play a huge part in the decisions to separate (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Archuleta et al., 2011). The findings of this study suggest that perhaps there are deeper issues that keep couples from ending their marriages than the pragmatic reasons noted in the majority of the research.

Not having a plan is also an important non-finding. Very few of the interviews discussed having concrete a plan to put their marriages back together. In fact, several couples referred to “winging it” or “going with the flow.” One couple discussed having some “ground rules” for communication and made it a point to consistently go on dates together. Another couple discussed that they would give their current situation one year, then reassess what they would do at that time. A third couple discussed remodeling their home and starting a family, or working together toward a common goal. These were the only mentions of specific planned actions taken to reconcile. Having a “shared family vision” has been identified as a key to healthy marriages (Marks et al., 2011). As might be expected, every couple in the study referred to the beginning phase of the initial reconciliation as a difficult period. However, focusing on something other than their marital problems also seemed to help the reconciliation period.

Lastly, communication skills came up in the interviews mostly as a by-product of the reconciliation process, not as a factor contributing to the reconciliation. Although popular culture self-help marriage advice tends to emphasize improving communication skills and conflict resolution skills as an important (and often, *the* most important) component in strengthening or saving marriages, the scholarly literature does not agree. Gottman (1999) discusses how most

conflicts (about two-thirds) in marriage are *not* resolvable through communication, while a minority (about one-third), are resolvable. Accordingly, a vitally important task in marriage, according to Gottman (1999), is to determine which issues *are* resolvable and those that are not. Continuing to communicate about the unresolvable issues does not aid in marital conflicts and can indeed exacerbate tension and problems.

### **Implications**

There are several practical and scholarly implications that arise from this study. The following will be discussed respectively: (a) *Scholarly and Research Implications*, (b) *Clinical and Practical Applications*, and (c) *Recommendations for Future Research*.

#### **Scholarly and Research Implications**

Research implications include a need for further examination into the issues that keep the couples considering divorce together. No real process revealed itself as to the steps couples take to reconcile their marriages. The effectiveness of therapeutic approaches has been evaluated in previous studies, but not necessarily in terms of day to day, practical applications. Sells et al., (2009) discussed the need to evaluate intervention into the process of repetitive conflict patterns. Considering the specific behavioral changes in the reconciliation process is a potential area for future research.

There are also a few areas in which the findings from this study contradict current literature; particularly in the area of finances and children (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Archuleta, Britt, & Grable, 2011). The current findings suggest that the factors couples use to decide to reconcile their marriages are deeper than pragmatic considerations. Uncovering some of these deeper issues could potentially create an entire new body of literature on understanding divorce.

How religiosity specifically affects decisions to stay together or divorce is another area of possible research. Previous research has suggested that religiosity is a component in the quality of marriage (Marks, 2005; Marks et al, 2011). As many of the participants in this study discussed religious and spiritual reasons for their decisions, further investigation into exactly how religiosity influences this specific decision is needed. Investigation of how people who do not consider themselves religious differ from people who do, and how they make their decisions differently should also be considered.

### **Clinical and Practical Applications**

Practical implications for professionals might come from the reports of experiences the couples had with therapists, particularly through churches. As several participants discussed negative experiences with clergy members, it may be important to consider the training clergy receive in the area of marital counseling.

Helping couples formulate a plan and create some common goals may perhaps be a therapeutic approach to help with the transition and during the highly difficult early stages of the reconciliation process. Those couples who discussed having a common goal, shared how working on something together helped them during the reconciliation period. Perhaps this can be attributed to taking the focus off of the marital problems. Helping couples find a shared vision could be a valuable technique.

Helping individuals learn how to create goals for the marriage, as well as individual goals, also seems to be a pronounced need for couples like those in the study. Openness to both personal and spiritual growth was discussed by several participants in the study. Assessing common goals for the marriage, openness to growth, and clarifying underlying beliefs about marriage and divorce can all be considered as part of the therapeutic process.

It is also noteworthy that for all but one couple, staying together was a source of pride—pride in the marriage; pride that they had overcome challenges together and were stronger and closer because of their experience. No one described the current state of their marriage as problem free, but each of them discussed a new commitment to how they handle problems within their marriage. Many studies have stated in the importance of focusing on what families do well (Crespi & Howe, 2001; Hawley & DeHaan, 1996; Patterson, 2002; Saleebey, 1996; Walsh, 2002). Helping couples focus on their strengths can be utilized as a therapeutic approach.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Holeman (2003) suggested that including both theological reflections and therapeutic perspectives were important in the process of marital reconciliation and even suggested that “While theological studies rarely find a voice in secular psychological literature, discussions about forgiving and reconciling present an opportunity for such interdisciplinary scholarship (p. 32). He also stated , “The formal study of reconciliation is in its embryonic stage” (p. 30), suggesting the need for more study on this topic. The findings of this study include many conversations regarding the roles that religious beliefs and personal convictions play in the reconciliation process. Further studies specifically focusing on the religious and spiritual nature of reconciliation are recommended, as well as how those couples who identify themselves as religious differ from couples who do not identify with a religious affiliation.

Several other topics for future research can be gleaned from the findings of the current study. Future studies on how religious leaders approach counseling with couples in their congregation may also be warranted, due to the negative experiences many of the participants in this study reported. Other recommended areas of study include how specific behavioral changes

influence the decision making process and identifying the deeper, less pragmatic factors that lead couples to reconcile.

Lastly, as the sample in the current study was small and purposive, future studies on larger, representative samples targeting specific areas of decision making process should be conducted. Also, as the decision to reconcile is one that can always be changed later, longitudinal studies are also suggested; both to determine if couples have remained married, and to determine if the factors that influenced the initial decisions to stay together and the meanings they associated with this specific time in their marriage are still relevant.

Amato (2000) stated, “The polemical nature of divorce scholarship makes it difficult to write on this topic without being identified as either a conservative or liberal voice” (p. 1270). I agree that this is a subject in which it is difficult to separate one’s political views from. However, Fincham and Beach (2010) report that in their decade review of literature pertaining to marriage, they found that, “The increase in self-consciousness among researchers regarding the social and political context of research that has been less obviously present in previous decades” (p. 631) was one of the current trends in in the literature.

Advocating for legislation that makes divorce more complex or more difficult to attain is not the aim of this study. Divorce is a tool that allows people to make the decisions that are in their best interests. Implying that one should stay in a situation that is harmful to them either physically, mentally, or emotionally is also not an intended purpose of this study. A miserable marriage can make all members of a family miserable. However, I do believe that marriage is a choice and in many cases so is divorce. The aim of this study, rather, is to better understand and to equip vulnerable marriages with the right tools so that many of these marriages will be able to be made stronger by their troubles instead of calling it quits. The pain associated with divorce for

all members of the family may outweigh the fight that goes with learning to keep it together. Most importantly, I personally believe that a healthy and happy marriage can be a cornerstone to happiness and fulfillment. A goal of this study is *not* to pass judgment on those who choose divorce, but to discover information that may help more couples exercise other options before making a life changing decision.

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## **APPENDIX A. RECRUITMENT LETTERS**

### **Appendix A.1 Letter to recruit participants**

My name is Hannah Plauche. I am a doctoral student at Louisiana State University. I am working on a research project that will assess the processes couples use when deciding to reconcile their marriages. We are inviting you to participate in this study because you filed for a no-fault divorce in the state of Louisiana, but never completed the divorce proceedings.

Participation in this study may require approximately 90 minutes of your time. If you agree to participate, you will both (husband and wife) be asked to complete an interview with the primary researcher (each

lasting approximately 30 minutes) as well as an interview together (approximately 30 minutes. Questions I will ask will include topics such as:

- (1) Tell me about the events that led up to your decision to reconcile your marriage.
- (2) Did you seek counseling? If so, what kind? Was that mostly helpful or unhelpful? How and why?
- (3) Was there anyone in particular who supported you in your decisions to reconcile? Give me an example of how this person supported you.
- (4) Do you feel your marriage is different now than before you decided to file for divorce? Please tell me how.

I know that you are a busy person: therefore, I will send you the questions and any related materials ahead of time by e-mail or by post, in order to expedite the interview.

Please know that your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Your responses will be digitally recorded and immediately saved into a secured laptop that will place all your information under an identification number, eliminating any identifiable information such as your name. All information will be kept strictly confidential. We will combine your responses along with those from other couples who participated in the study. When reporting the findings, only pseudonyms will be used.

Your participation in the study is important to us. Please contact me if you are interested in telling your story.

Looking forward to speaking to you,

Hannah Plauche

### **Appendix A.2 Letter to recruit participants: Attorneys**

My name is Hannah Plauche. I am a doctoral student at Louisiana State University. I am working on a research project that will assess the processes couples use when deciding to reconcile their marriages. We are inviting couples to participate in this study who have filed for a no-fault divorce in the state of Louisiana, but never completed the divorce proceedings. I am contacting you to request assistance in locating potential participants for this study.

Participation in this study involves both husband and wife completing an interview with the primary researcher (each lasting approximately 30 minutes) as well as an interview together (approximately 30 minutes). Additional parameters of my study are that the original petition for divorce was submitted in

2010 or prior and that they have not been married for more than 20 years. Questions I will ask will include topics such as:

- (1) Tell me about the events that led up to your decision to reconcile your marriage.
- (2) Did you seek counseling? If so, what kind? Was that mostly helpful or unhelpful? How and why?
- (3) Was there anyone in particular who supported you in your decisions to reconcile? Give me an example of how this person supported you.
- (4) Do you feel your marriage is different now than before you decided to file for divorce? Please tell me how.

Please know that participation in this study is completely voluntary. Responses will be digitally recorded and immediately saved into a secured laptop that will place all information under an identification number, eliminating any identifiable information. All information will be kept strictly confidential, within the limits of the law. We will combine responses from all couples who participated in the study. When reporting the findings, only pseudonyms will be used.

I understand that attorney-client privilege cannot be compromised in any way. If you are aware of any clients who might be willing to tell me their story, I would appreciate it if you would have them contact me. I believe couples who have experienced this situation have important information to tell which could impact how we view marriage and divorce.

Looking forward to speaking to you,

Hannah Plauche

## **APPENDIX B. STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT**

Consent Form for Participation in a Dissertation Research Study

Louisiana State University

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**Researchers:** Hannah Plauche (225)247-0480, hplauc3@lsu.edu

**Study Title:** The Hard Decisions: A Qualitative Study of Marital Reconciliation

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*The Hard Decisions* is a qualitative doctoral research project that will assess the processes couples use when deciding to reconcile their marriage after considering divorce. We are inviting you to participate in this study because you filed a petition for no fault divorce in the state of Louisiana, but did not finalize divorce proceedings.

This letter is intended to give you information about the study. Above you will find the contact information for the research investigator who will be able to answer any of your questions about the research itself, research procedures, your rights as a participant, and research related risk at any time.

Participation in this study may require approximately 90 minutes of your time. The researcher will interview husband and wife separately (each lasting approximately 30 minutes) and then interview the couple together (approximately 30 minutes). Interviews will be conducted at an agreed up neutral location with access to private facilities (such as the LSU campus or a public library). Topics covered will include decision making processes, resources available to the couple, and meanings associated with the decisions surrounding divorce and reconciliation.

As with all parts of this research study, you have the option to decline. Your answers to the questions will be recorded digitally and will immediately be saved into a secured laptop that will place all your information under an identification number, eliminating any identifiable information such as your name or your spouse's name. All information obtained from you will be kept completely confidential, within the limits of the law. All data will be stored in the researcher's office in a locked file cabinet. Only the researcher and her research assistants will have access to the data.

We will use the information from all the participants to uncover any common themes among couples who decide to file for divorce, but then later decide to reconcile. When reporting findings only pseudonyms will be used. Your feelings and experiences are valuable to us. While you may not directly benefit from this research, your participation in the study may help us to improve the quality of other marriages that are experiencing similar situations.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate in the study. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the

researchers or Louisiana State University, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. We believe there are no known risks associated with this research study; however, a possible inconvenience may be the time it takes to complete the study.

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered either before agreeing to participate in or during the interview. You may also call (225)247-0480, the researcher, Hannah Plauche, at any time if you want to voice concerns or complaints about the research.

This research has been approved for human subject participation by the Louisiana State University Institutional Review Board. Please contact the Louisiana State University Institutional Review Board at (225) 578-8692 if you wish to talk to someone other than the research staff to obtain answers to questions about your rights as a research participant, to voice concerns or complaints about the research, or to provide input concerning the research process.

**Please check the statements below:**

We have been given a copy of the consent form that provides contact information if I have a question \_\_\_\_\_

Please check below if you have read the consent form, have had any questions or concerns addressed by the researcher, and agree to participate in this research project:

We will participate in the interview \_\_\_\_\_

***Participants:***

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature of Interview Participant*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature of Interview Participant*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

***Researcher:***

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature of Researcher*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

**APPENDIX C. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

**Appendix C.1. Demographic Questionnaire**

Marital Reconciliation Study- Demographic Questionnaire

Age: Wife \_\_\_\_\_ Husband \_\_\_\_\_

Race: Wife \_\_\_\_\_ Husband \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Years Married \_\_\_\_\_

Is this first Marriage    Wife yes/no    Husband yes/no    (If no, what number)

Children: yes/no:

If yes, how many?

Ages of children:

Are all children from this union? Yes/No (if no, which marriage/union)

Highest degree of Education completed

Wife:

Less than high school

Complete high school

Some college

Two year technical degree

Four year college degree

Graduate/professional degree

Husband:

Less than high school

Completed high school

Some college

Two year technical degree

Four year college degree

Graduate/professional degree

Religious Affiliation

Wife \_\_\_\_\_

Husband \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation:

Wife \_\_\_\_\_

Hubannd \_\_\_\_\_

Average annual household income

< \$50,000

\$50,000-\$75,000

\$75,000-\$100,000

>\$100,000

Approximate Date of Separation

Approximate Date of Divorce Filing

Approximate Date of Reconciliation

**Appendix C. 2. Characteristics of Survey Respondents (N = 14).**

Respondent Characteristic	Husbands	Wives	Couples
Age			
30-39	3	3	
40-49	3	3	
50-55	1	1	
Race			
White/Caucasian	6	6	
Pacific Islander	1	1	
Marriage Order			
1 <sup>st</sup> Marriage	4	4	

2 <sup>nd</sup> Marriage	2	3	
3 <sup>rd</sup> Marriage	1		
Highest Level of Education			
Less than high school	1		
Completed high school	1		
Some college	2	2	
Two year technical degree	1	1	
Four year college degree	2	3	
Graduate/professional degree		1	
Average Household Income			
< \$50,000			1
\$50,000-\$75,000			1
\$75,000-\$100,000			3
>\$100,000			2
Religious Affiliation			
Baptist			2
Catholic			2
Mormon (LDS)			1
Non-denominational Christian			2
Average Number of Years Married			12.6 years
Average Months of Separation			6.2 Months

## **APPENDIX D. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

### **Appendix D.1. Interview Schedule for Individual Interviews**

Will start with a brief description of project and collection of demographic data.

1. First, I would like to know a brief history of how you came to the decision to separate. Although the focus of this study will be from the reconciliation period moving forward, can you give me two minute version of the events that led up to your separation.

2. Who made the initial decision to separate; you , your spouse, or did you mutually agree upon it? Who actually filed the petition for divorce? Who made the initial decision to reconcile?
3. Now I would like to ask you about how you came to your decision to reconcile. Tell me a story about the turning point, if there was in fact one. Was there a particular epiphany moment or a series of events? I would like to know about the events that lead to your decision to reconcile.
4. Can you tell me, in your own words, what the major factors in your decision to separate and your decision to reconcile (*Probes: We know people reconcile due to children, money, loneliness, etc...would you say any of these apply to you?*)
5. Specifically, can you tell me if finances played a part in your decision to reconcile? If so, how?
6. Okay, now I would like to know about your support systems. Were there particular people or groups of people who helped you in your journey? Give me some specific examples of how they supported you and how their support impacted your decisions.
7. Were there people who did not support you in your decisions? Tell me how.
8. Can you tell me about anything that was a deterrent in your decisions? Anything that helped support your decisions? Tell me how?

### **Appendix D.2. Interview Schedule for Couple Interview**

1. I would like to know about the process you used to make your decision to reconcile.
  - a. Did you seek therapy? If so, was it through church, a therapist, or other?
  - b. Tell me about that experience.
  - c. Was that mostly helpful or unhelpful? How? Why?

- d. Did you attend any formal marriage enrichment program? Was that mostly helpful or unhelpful? How? Why? Can you give me a specific example?
  - e. Did you follow any specific plan of action?
  - f. Can you identify any other specific actions you took?
  - g. Can you remember something you or your spouse did that significantly changed the direction of the relationship?
2. Some see difficult life events as turning points and ultimately positive experiences. Others may see difficult life events as negative experiences. Tell me how you view the events surrounding your decision to divorce
3. Now tell me how you view the events surrounding the decision to reconcile.
4. How would you say your marriage is different now than it was before you initially decided to file the petition to divorce?
  - a. Describe how your relationship has changed.
  - b. Describe how your family life has changed. Tell me a story about how things are different.
  - c. Give me three positive qualities about your partner.
5. What advice would you give to other couples experiencing a similar situation in which they are trying to decide to divorce or reconcile?

## **VITA**

Hannah Pearce Plauche is the daughter of Sam and Beverly (Tookie) Pearce. She grew up in Evergreen, Louisiana, the oldest of four children. She is married to Scott Plauche and has two children; a daughter, Isabelle (Izzy) and a son, Eric. They currently reside in Zachary, Louisiana.

Hannah graduated from high school in 1993 from the Louisiana School for Math, Science, and the Arts in Natchitoches, Louisiana. She received a B.S. from Louisiana State University in the School of Human Ecology in 1997 and an M.S. from Louisiana State University in the School of Vocational Education in 2000.

She entered the Ph.D. program in January, 2010 in Human Ecology. She has worked as a graduate assistant as an assistant to the Editor of the *Journal of Financial Counseling and Planning*, and as a teaching assistant, beginning in the School of Human Ecology, and later moving to the Finance Department in the E. J. Ourso College of Business at LSU.