

2022

## Experiences of Maritally Satisfied Black American Couples Serving in Law Enforcement

Amanda Davis-Buie  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Health

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Amanda K. Davis-Buie

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## Review Committee

Dr. Cynthia Briggs, Committee Chairperson, Counselor Education and Supervision Faculty  
Dr. Corinne Bridges, Committee Member, Counselor Education and Supervision Faculty  
Dr. Brian Hutchison, University Reviewer, Counselor Education and Supervision Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost  
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University  
2022

Abstract

Experiences of Maritally Satisfied Black American Couples Serving in Law Enforcement

by

Amanda K. Davis-Buie

MS, North Carolina State University, 2005

BA, Elon University, 2003

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Counselor Education and Supervision

Walden University

November 2022

## Abstract

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of maritally satisfied Black American couples when at least one partner is serving in law enforcement. Members of law enforcement, Black American couples, and members of the counseling profession can gain knowledge from the answering of the research question. A family strengths perspective was used to provide a framework to study the phenomenon of marital satisfaction from a positive perspective. Six Black American couples, who are satisfied in their marriage and employed in law enforcement for a period of at least 6 months during their marriage, participated in interviews. The data analytic procedures centered around the development of an organizing system with a focus on the sober reflection of the lived experiences and identifying emerging themes. The findings indicated that through a strength-based approach, it is possible for Black American married couples to maintain marital satisfaction while enduring the stress of negative circumstances. Themes were identified that enhance marital satisfaction and can be implemented in the relationships of couples working to heal their marriage. The potential social implications of this research study include filling an absence in counseling literature and change for families and communities overall by aiding individuals in building stronger marriages, which ultimately leads to stronger communities.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my magnificent husband Raschard, and my three intelligent and beautiful children – Nyla, Alani, and Raschard Jr. – my greatest motivation. My precious Raschard, I do not think it is possible for you to know how much I love and appreciate you. Yahweh knew exactly what he was doing when he placed you in my life. He knew that I needed you more than I needed breath. You have loved me unconditionally since day one and every day, without fail, you demonstrate your love and desire for me. I could not ask for a more perfect partner than you - the one I have already been gifted. Thank you for supporting me through life and loving me the way that you do. I love you more!

Nyla, Alani, and Raschard Jr., you have inspired me to pursue my degree of Doctor of Philosophy. You are my precious reminders that anything is possible in life especially if we have faith in the outcome. Yahweh gifted your father and I with three precious gifts that give to us continuously. You are priceless beings with peaceful, virtuous, and loving spirits that fill our lives with immense joy. I am exceptionally blessed to be your mother. Thank you for making our family remarkable. I love you unconditionally!

I want to dedicate this work to my tremendous family beginning with my parents – Robert and Christina Davis. They are magnificent human beings that have inspired me and supported me my entire life. They have raised eight wonderful human beings and I am blessed to be one of them. I would like to highlight my brother Jamari as he has been a constant source of support throughout my academic and professional journey. He is a

brilliant man who constantly pushes me to be better and to do better. Much of my success I owe to him as it is the result of his generosity and his belief in me. I am incredibly thankful to have him as my brother and friend.

I would like to thank the rest of my family for their patience and love – Greg, Kimani, Tiffany, Ethan, Kiah, Zachariah, and Isaiah. I would also like to thank my amazing Aunts – Earlene, Darcia (Sissy), Anisia (Niecy), Terri, and Darlene, and Uncles – TJ, Pete, Francel, Leonard, Earl (Man), Greg, and Great Uncle Jack. I am blessed to be supported by an amazing tribe.

I would like to thank my two very best friends – Destiny and Karin. These beautiful ladies have been by side for much of my life. They have pushed me through long tearful nights, and they have always encouraged me and believed in me. I am blessed to have my girls beside me as we walk through life together. I am also grateful to have my friend Emily, who has been a true treasure in my life for many years. She is a gem, and I am very blessed to have her walk beside me.

Lastly, I would like to thank my Strength, Love, and Motivation Team – Tatyanna, Kayla, Darryl, Rachel, Angel, and Kiwanis. They have encouraged me and supported me as I ended my academic journey. They are a tremendous group of clinicians, and I am blessed to have them on my team.

My heavenly father has blessed me with numerous people in my life and it is through him that I was able to complete this work. I thank him for his love and his guidance! I love you Yahweh and I love all of you!

## Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge several people who have helped me complete my dissertation. First, I would like to acknowledge Dr. Cyndi Briggs – the Chair of my Dissertation Committee. You are a phenomenal and brilliant woman with immense patience and kindness. I am so grateful for you and your unwavering belief in my work. You are an amazing Committee Chair, and I am so blessed that you said yes to chairing my committee. Thank you!!

I would also like to acknowledge my methodological expert – Dr. Corinne Bridges. Dr. Bridges you have been a constant throughout my doctoral journey. You have challenged me to be better and I have grown under your instruction. Thank you for your guidance and for teaching me the beauty within qualitative research.

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Brian Hutchison – my University Reviewer. You are very kind and encouraging and I appreciate your positivity. Thank you very much for being a part of my magnificent academic team.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge a several powerful individuals who have influenced my life immeasurably. Dr. Savitri Dixon-Saxon – you are amazing! The incredible Mr. Karl Liedtka – my academic journey was propelled because of your belief in me. Mrs. Elaine Rife, Mr. Damien Terry, Ms. Beverly Swiadas, Ms. Pamela Walker, Dr. Jaci Verghese, Dr. Katherine Coule, Mrs. Carrie (Leger) White, and Mr. Karlos DelToro - thank you for being so motivating and for believing in my potential from the day you met me. You have had a great influence in my life, and I am forever grateful to



you for the positivity and love. I thank you all for your tremendous generosity and the knowledge you have shared with me.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### Introduction

A healthy relationship between a married couple is a prime source of emotional, physical, and mental support for both partners. Marital satisfaction is a protective factor that benefits mental health, promotes life satisfaction, work, and social life balance (Tavakol, 2017). Ashkzari et al. (2017) found in their study that greater job satisfaction was an important factor in determining marital satisfaction. Kazempour and Sabet (2018) shared that marital satisfaction is a key indicator of life satisfaction as it affects mental health, income, academic achievement, and job satisfaction. While there exists a robust body of work examining marital satisfaction as a whole, there is less research available that examines marital satisfaction for particular demographics of the population. For some couples, marital satisfaction may be harder to achieve and maintain due to stressors brought on by career choices, including law enforcement (Kirschman, 2018). Black Americans in particular bear the stress of being born into a society that predicates black and brown bodies as deviant, which leads to immense stress (Menakem, 2017). The stress of being Black (St. Vil, 2014) and the additional stress of working in the field of law enforcement (Kirschman, 2018) may influence the marital satisfaction of couples that fall within this demographic.

There is a dearth of research about how being a member of law enforcement affects the marital satisfaction of Black American couples. Most of the research addressing the psychological, emotional, and relational effects of working in law enforcement on the satisfaction of marriage has focused on a general population of law



enforcement couples. Thus, the findings from this study fill a gap in counseling literature pertaining to the marital satisfaction of Black Americans with the influence of a career in law enforcement on their marriage.

In this qualitative study, I identified factors that contribute to marital satisfaction through interviews with married Black American couples, where both partners identify as Black, with at least one partner serving in law enforcement. St. Vil (2014) stated that identifying factors that contribute to marital satisfaction is critical in meeting Black Americans' marriage and family needs. Klumpp (2018) shared that in comparison to other races in the United States culture, Black Americans marry less and divorce more. Further, marriage quality for Black Americans is lower than that of Whites, and sadly their marriages are less stable and more prone to conflict than White marriages (Klumpp, 2018). Research focused on racial disparities in marriage spans more than 50 years, yet reasons for differentiated outcomes by race have not been found (Klumpp, 2018). Understanding these disparities is critical as the marital relationship provides a structure for the familial establishment, and through example, future generations learn from observing marital relationships (Janjani et al., 2017). The potential social implications of this research study include filling the absence in counseling literature and increasing marital satisfaction for Black American couples that have a partner in law enforcement. Researchers such as St. Vil (2014) and Marks (2008) stated there is a need for this kind of study to provide resources for counselors who may not be prepared to help Black American couples affiliated with law enforcement.

In Chapter 1, I will discuss the background of marital satisfaction in law enforcement and share the problem statement of the study. I used hermeneutic phenomenology as a method for the study. In this chapter, I will also describe the purpose of the study, research question, and strengths-based framework. I used van Manen's (2016) approach to guide my design and analysis of the study. I will discuss the nature of the study, definitions, and assumptions aligned with the research. Lastly, I will discuss the scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study.

### **Background**

Marital satisfaction plays a vital role in the well-being of families and individuals. However, job stress is a potential threat to marriage (Roberts et al., 2013). Researchers found an adverse connection between work-family conflict and marital satisfaction (St. Vil, 2014). Law enforcement occupations in particular carry high stress loads and create work-family conflict due to many factors including unpredictable schedules, emotional stress, and public perceptions and interactions (Kirschman, 2018). In addition to these stress factors, Black Americans in law enforcements experience additional stressors such as racial epithets, discriminating hiring practices, lower salaries, false performance evaluations, and the lack of promotions to discriminate against minorities (Repasky et al., 2020). For Black American law enforcement officers, the additional stressors of racism lead to enhanced work-family conflict, that then lead to adversity jeopardizing marital satisfaction. By studying Black American couples that have worked through or circumvented work-based adversity, mental health professionals can help other couples do the same.

Marks et al. (2008) pointed out that scholars typically view Black families from a negative perspective that accentuates problems and pathology, contrary to the experiences of many Black Americans in well-functioning marriages. Research on the positive experiences of Black American marriages is lacking (Marks et al., 2008). Roberts et al. (2013) shared that a potential risk to sustaining a positive, emotionally rewarding marital environment is occupational stress, but does not include the additional stressor of race. To help fill this gap in the literature, I explored how the Black American experience in law enforcement influences marital satisfaction. I assessed the essence of their relationships and developed the tools to increase positive experiences.

Pollock et al. (2014) used a strengths-based conceptual framework to view family as an identifiable system rather than a collection of individuals and found many positive and protective factors of Black American families. Pollock et al. (2014) found that close and flexible family relationships lead to lower individual perceived stress levels. Pollock et al. (2014) filled a gap in the literature with regard to using a strength-based perspective to increase understanding of family functioning within Black American families. I expanded Pollock et al.'s (2014) research by revealing how race and occupation affect family dynamics.

Researchers have shown the bidirectionality of the work-family conflict (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Hughes & Parks, 2007; Voyandoff, 2005, as cited in St. Vil, 2014). St. Vil (2014) discussed how work-to-family conflict arises from job conditions, and conditions in the home lead to family-to-work conflict. Mitchelson (2009) and Hammer and Thompson (2003; as cited in St. Vil, 2014) disclosed that perceptions of work-family

conflict decreased marital satisfaction and increased divorce. St. Vil (2014) revealed how Blacks in America must deal with conflicting messages from multiple cultural values, causing difficulty in prioritizing and balancing work and family. St. Vil (2014) shared that researchers used Anglo-American samples for most of the research conducted concerning work-family balance and marital satisfaction. My study explored marital satisfaction through the lens of Black American couples, and counselors can utilize the research developed to meet the critical needs of Black Americans' marriages and families. My study also explored marriage quality and stability for Black American couples in law enforcement and the racial disparity, according to Klumpp (2018), that has existed for over 50 years.

There is a large body of research examining marital relationships challenged by work-related stress and how the stress affects their marital satisfaction (Krannitz et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2013; St. Vil, 2014). However, there is a lack of research concerning the role race plays on the marital functioning of couples with one member in law enforcement and how they achieve marital satisfaction, with so many stressors potentially harming their marital functioning. There are many Black Americans experiencing well-functioning marriages, yet there is a dearth of research on the positive marital adjustment, happiness, and satisfaction of Black American marriages (Marks et al., 2008). I contributed to the literature by exploring marital satisfaction of Black American couples with a member in law enforcement.

### **Problem Statement**

Karaffa et al. (2015) and Roberts et al. (2013) described law enforcement work as being physically and emotionally exhausting which can lead to mental health concerns including relatively high prevalence rates of depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), alcohol as a means of self-medicating, and work–family conflict (Karaffa & Koch, 2016). In addition, stress from police work can cause a potential risk to sustaining a positive, emotionally rewarding marital environment (Karaffa et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2013). Dyadic data supports the relationship between marital satisfaction and law enforcement work-related stress (Brimhall et al., 2018).

Though Black Americans make up 13.8% of police officers, research examining the relationship between marital satisfaction and law enforcement stress in Black officers' marriages is extremely limited (Dainton, 2017; Kelly et al., 2013). Research is warranted as these Black law enforcement officers and their families have increased exposure to toxic social and physical environments due to discrimination including but not limited to, wealth inequality, racial achievement gaps (educational disparities between various ethnic groups), and racial profiling (Martin & Varner, 2017). Black Americans are substantially more likely to experience poverty, racial discrimination, and unfair treatment, and live in single-parent homes (Lincoln & Chae, 2010, as cited in Vaterlaus et al., 2015). These chronic conditions of discrimination, in addition to the typical stressors of police work, further threaten marital and family health (Walsh, 2016).

Because of the unique needs of married Black American police officers, counselors need to be equipped to support these clients and their families in maintaining a

healthy family structure. Unfortunately, police officers may be reluctant to seek professional help if they are struggling with emotional and marital strife. Studies indicate that police officers have a lack of confidence in psychologists, psychiatrists, and therapists due to a belief that the professional service provider is unable to fully understand the stress of the police job (Tucker, 2015). Due to a healthy marriage serving as a foundation of the family, as it is a critical component of a productive society, police officers struggling in their marriage need to feel comfortable reaching out to counselors for assistance (Little, 2016; Tucker, 2015).

There is a dearth of research about how being a member of law enforcement affects the marital satisfaction of Black American couples. Most of the research addressing the psychological, emotional, and relational effects of working in law enforcement on the satisfaction of marriage has focused on using general population samples of officers without disaggregating by race or ethnicity. Less attention has been devoted to the qualitatively unique experience of Black American marriages (Dainton, 2017; Kelly et al., 2013). As a result, not enough is known about how Black American couples are affected by the husband or wife's work in law enforcement. As St. Vil (2014) observed, without such information pertaining to the consequences of working in law enforcement for Black American couples, counselors are less effective when working with this population. St. Vil (2014) examined the effect of work-family conflict and work-family balance on the marital satisfaction of Black American marriages. (St. Vil, 2014) uncovered a disadvantageous connection between work-family conflict and marital satisfaction. It is crucial to consider the positive attributes of the Black American

officers' marriages, so the strengths of their marriage can be shared and implemented into the marriages of other Black American officers ineffectively dealing with work-related stressors in their marriages. I conducted a hermeneutic phenomenological study with the family strengths perspective as a supporting theory and collected data about maritally satisfied Black American couples that have at least one partner serving in law enforcement.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand and interpret the experiences of Black American married individuals who experience marital satisfaction when one partner has a career in law enforcement. I used the hermeneutic phenomenological approach to gain in-depth insight into the subject of marital satisfaction to understand and how my participants constructed reality.

### **Research Questions**

What are the experiences of maritally satisfied Black American couples when at least one partner is serving in law enforcement?

### **Framework**

#### **Phenomenology**

I completed this study using the family strengths perspective. Edmund Husserl created realistic phenomenology and transcendental phenomenology (Smith, 2016). Martin Heidegger developed hermeneutic inquiry. Heidegger differed from Husserl because he wanted to know more than a person's description of a phenomenon, he wanted to know their interpretation (Dowling & Cooney, 2012). Heidegger's attention

was on the process of understanding the experience and the nature of being (Dowling & Cooney, 2012). Heidegger did not agree with the concept of bracketing and argued that a researcher cannot separate description from his or her own interpretation. Heidegger felt that the researchers' beliefs were a part of being and added to the richness and complexity of experience (Dowling & Cooney, 2012). Heidegger's theoretical teachings were based on people being a part of the world from which they are inseparable (Heidegger, 1962). Because hermeneutic phenomenology is used to focus on the personal experience of individuals, I used this philosophical theory to search for in-depth answers about my study participants' experiences.

### **Family Strengths Perspective**

The family strengths perspective is used as a conceptual framework to discover the strengths in a relationship. DeFrain and Asay (2007) defined the family strengths perspective as a positive and optimistic worldview or orientation toward families and life. The researchers grounded their study by including more than 21,000 family members in 27 countries (DeFrain & Asay, 2007; DeFrain & Stinnett, 2002). Researchers using the family strengths perspective do not ignore family problems, but they do not view the families through the problems they are facing. Instead, they focus on families and their connections and capacities for handling life's circumstances (DeFrain & Asay, 2007).

I used the family strengths perspective as a lens for this study to focus on exploring the strengths and positive qualities of the martially satisfied couples. By focusing on the strengths instead of the problems and failings, researchers can understand how families function when facing inherent and external difficulties (DeFrain & Asay,



2007). The family strengths perspective is used to focus on how families overcome challenges (Marks et al., 2008). My goal for this research was to explore the experiences of martially satisfied couples through qualitative interviews.

### **Nature of the Study**

I used a hermeneutic phenomenological research approach to gain deeper insight into the subject of marital satisfaction, to understand and explore the perceptions of the lived experiences of the participants on an interpretative level, and to understand how the sample constructed reality. I used van Manen as a hermeneutic expert, as he teaches that phenomenology is an undertaking of sober reflection on the human lived experience (van Manen, 2007). Van Manen shared that the reflection on the lived experience must not only be thoughtful, but free from “theoretical, prejudicial and suppositional intoxications” (van Manen, 2007, p.12). In using hermeneutic phenomenology, I focused on interpreting the meanings found in data about the phenomena studied. My focus was on understanding the meaning of experience by searching for themes and working with the data in an interpretive manner (Dowling & Cooney, 2012; Moustakas, 1994), as I sought to understand the intention and meaning behind the experiences of my research participants.

### **Definitions**

*Behavior-based:* The conflict demonstrated through the change in personality and behaviors in the home and results from the incompatibility between law enforcement officers’ role in the home and their role at the workplace (Armstrong et al., 2015).

*Family Strengths Perspective:* A positive and optimistic worldview or orientation toward families and life (DeFrain & Asay, 2007).

*Law Enforcement:* A body sanctioned by the state to enforce laws and apprehend those who break them.

*Marital Satisfaction:* An individual's attitude toward their marriage and fulfillment with marital life (Janjani et al., 2017). This will be determined by the participant.

*Systemic Racism:* How racism is entrenched and practiced within organizations and societies and fuels discrimination in economics, education, entertainment, labor, law, politics, religion, sex, and war.

*Warrior culture:* A group that consists of occupational groups that serve under high levels of stress and are frequently witness to inhumanity (Malmin, 2013). The warrior culture communicates a tenacious form of resilience that requires individuals to be "tough guys who suck it up, ignore pain, move on, and just take it like a man; suppress their emotions and soldier forward" regardless of the stress they are enduring or the trauma to which they are being exposed (Malmin, 2013).

*Work and Family Conflict:* Law enforcement officers experiencing crises from within the family influencing work behavior and or performance (Kirschman et al., 2014; Nohe & Sonntag, 2014).

*Work-on-Family Conflict:* Law enforcement officers experiencing crises from work that effects their families and or their social lives (Kirschman et al., 2014).

### **Assumptions**

The data collection for this study involved participants self-reporting their marital satisfaction and their experiences within their marriage in relation to serving as a law enforcement officer. I assumed that marital satisfaction exists in these couples in central Pennsylvania. I assumed that both partners would be honest in expressing their feelings of satisfaction in their marriage and honest as they reflected on their marital experience in relation to one partner being employed in the field of law enforcement. I also assumed that the couples that I interviewed would be forthcoming in sharing how their race has influenced their marital experience and their role as a law enforcement officer.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of my research was the marital satisfaction of Black American couples with the influence of law enforcement on their marriage. St. Vil (2014) and Marks et al. (2008) discussed the need to broaden the understating of marital satisfaction in Black American marriages and the need to view Black American marriages from a strengths-based perspective. A potential delimitation of the study was the range of years of the marriages I explored in the study. A couple married for 1 year may have a different experience than a couple married for 10 years. Also, interviewing only heterosexual Black American couples, where both members identify as Black, in Pennsylvania was a delimitation. I chose to interview only heterosexual Black American couples because from my point of view, including multiracial couples, discrimination and cultural issues related to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer plus (GLBTQ+) couples in law enforcement is worthy of separate study.

### **Limitations**

Qualitative research can be subjective and conventional standards of validity are difficult to apply (Hughes, n.d.). Being aware of trustworthiness throughout the research will increase the validity of my study and one way to do this is using memos (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I addressed the four elements of trustworthiness described by Loh, (2013) as : credibility, transferability, conformability, and dependability. Threats to validity, as described by Maxwell (2013), for my research study included descriptive validity, reactivity, and interpretation validity because I conducted interviews for my research. To address credibility, validity, and bias, I used member checking, memos, and an interview protocol as trustworthiness techniques. Reactivity of the participant of the study was also a possible threat to the validity of my study. I cannot change the reaction that I may get from a participant, but I can be sure to be aware of how my presence may influence the study participant as Maxwell (2013) referenced in his work. I can ensure interpretation validity by capturing what my study participants say and not inferring my understanding as Maxwell (2013) shared in his teachings.

The presence of the researcher has a profound effect on study participants, and there are also possible issues of anonymity and confidentiality when discussing specific findings (Hughes, n.d.; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I required that participants were married Black American law enforcement officers, which was a specific population. This was an inherent limitation due to the exclusion of individuals that did not meet these criteria.

Self-reporting is another limitation to consider for this study as the participants are going to self-report their experiences surrounding the phenomenon of study. I was

diligent in making sure the participants had a clear understanding of the phenomenon. Due to the study being qualitative, the results may not be generalizable to other members of law enforcement and to Black American couples that do not have a member working in the field of law enforcement. Hermeneutic phenomenology acknowledges and makes consideration of researcher bias but is still considered a limitation. I have personal experience with my research topic, so it was imperative that I put safeguards into place to minimize and reduce the potential for bias to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. I refrained from interpreting participants' responses based on my personal experience or understanding of the phenomenon. The precautions I used will be discussed in Chapter 3.

### **Significance**

There is potential for making an original contribution to the literature in the counseling field as there is a gap in the literature pertaining to the marital satisfaction of Black Americans, and an absence when considering the influence of a career in law enforcement. There is a need for more research on the marital satisfaction of Black Americans. Currently, Black Americans are less likely to seek counseling than Caucasians, and this is something that needs to change because of racial violence, discrimination, and the weaponization of Whiteness and privilege (Alvarez et al., 2016; McDermott et al., 2017). The racialized trauma that Black Americans endure needs to be addressed so healing can occur for Black families (Menakem, 2017).

As counselors, we can aim to change this imbalance by working more effectively with Black Americans by being better prepared and culturally competent. Counselors are mandated to demonstrate competence with diverse clients, groups, and communities and

the *Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies* were created to address the needs of diverse populations. Multicultural perspectives should be embedded into the work of counseling professionals (Ratts, 2016). The research I obtained from my exploration of Black Americans' marital experiences can assist counselors and prepare them to be knowledgeable in counseling Black American couples.

The experiences of the study participants revealed the intricacies of Black American marriages which will increase the knowledge base of counselors to enhance their work with Black American couples. The understanding received from illuminating the experiences of Black American couples in law enforcement who experience marital satisfaction can enhance the understanding and training of counselors. Researchers such as St. Vil, (2014) and Marks et al., (2008) stated there is a need to broaden the understating of marital satisfaction in Black American marriages. Roberts et al. (2013) demonstrated the strain a career in law enforcement can put on a marriage. Understanding the experiences of Black American couples in law enforcement who experience marital satisfaction can lead to increased knowledge of the functioning of marital relationships. The marital relationship carries such vital importance in society because it provides a structure for the familial establishment, and through example, future generations learn from observing marital relationships (Janjani et al., 2017).

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I introduced the topic of research and shared background information on marital satisfaction in law enforcement, and the need for more research to be completed focusing on the marital satisfaction of Black American couples serving in

the field of law enforcement. I shared that my study was conducted utilizing hermeneutic phenomenology with Max van Manen as my hermeneutic expert. I included important definitions, assumptions, delimitations, and limitations in this chapter as they are significant to the research study. In the following chapter, I reviewed relevant literature that examines the influence of law enforcement and race on marital satisfaction. I also reviewed the stresses and subculture of law enforcement employment, how counseling is viewed in law enforcement culture, discrimination and mental health within law enforcement, and marital satisfaction.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Law enforcement work creates unique stressors that may strain marital relationships and compete with family needs (Karaffa et al., 2015). There are several studies in which researchers examined marital relationships challenged by work-related stress and how the stress affects couples' marital satisfaction (see Krannitz et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2013; St. Vil, 2014). However, there is a lack of research in which scholars explore the influence of workplace stress on the marital satisfaction of Black American couples, specifically workplace stress resulting from a career in law enforcement. With Black Americans representing 13.3% of law enforcement officers, Black Americans are the second most common ethnicity in law enforcement (Data USA, 2018). It is important for researchers to explore the experiences of the Black American law enforcement population, so their needs can be properly addressed.

Counselors will benefit from learning how Black American couples coping with the stressors of race and the occupational stressors of a career in law enforcement have achieved and maintained marital satisfaction. The data collected from my study can be used in counselor education programs by instructors to enhance training programs. The goal of the instructors in counselor education programs is to develop counselors that are multiculturally competent. The multicultural competency should include the preparation of counselors to help Black American couples who feel their marital satisfaction is diminished as a result of law enforcement career stress. This study is even more important given the racial climate in society. In spite of an increase in attention to the



plight of Black American law enforcement officers, there has been surprisingly little research on the effects of being a Black American law enforcement officer and marital satisfaction. To date there is not one research study in which the author focuses solely on the marital satisfaction of the Black American law enforcement officers or identifies interventions to achieve marital satisfaction for this population.

In this chapter, I will review the relevant literature for a study of the influence of law enforcement and race on the marital satisfaction of Black American marriages. In this review, I will cover the demands and subculture of law enforcement work, racism and mental health within law enforcement, law enforcement and counseling, and marriage expectations and satisfaction. In this chapter, I will also cover the family strengths perspective to study the phenomenon of marital satisfaction from a positive perspective.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

To ensure that my research is precise and comprehensive, I completed an exhaustive literature review. I used physical and virtual libraries to access information pertaining to my research study. I explored library catalogs, databases for articles, and Google Scholar. I eliminated articles that were not peer-reviewed. The databases that I used were Academic Search Complete, Education Source, ERIC, PsycARTICLES, PsycBOOKS, PsycEXTRA, PsycINFO, ProQuest Central, SocINDEX with Full Text. I also directly researched journals including *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, *Family Process*, *Journal of Human Behavior in The Social Environment*, and *The Journal of Humanistic Counseling*. I also accessed Walden

University Library's Publications database to find dissertations to use as resources for my research. I use key words and Boolean terms when I complete a search for resources including *Black Americans in law enforcement, Black culture and therapy, Black police and discrimination, police in therapy, Black American marriages, black marriages, Blacks and marriage, black couple in law enforcement, first black police officer, first-responder and marriages, history of Black Americans in law enforcement, law enforcement and marital satisfaction, law enforcement and marriage, marital satisfaction, marital satisfaction and Black American marriage, marital satisfaction and black marriage, Marital Satisfaction Scale, marital satisfaction and counseling, marriage and police, police marriages, and strength-based approach and marriage.*

## **Theoretical Foundation**

### **Framework**

#### *Family Strengths Perspective*

I used a family strengths perspective to study the phenomenon of marital satisfaction and to provide a theoretical foundation to discover the strengths in the relationship of the couples that participate in the study. DeFrain and Asay (2007) defined the family strengths perspective as a positive and optimistic worldview or orientation toward families and life. The researchers grounded their study by including more than 21,000 family members in 27 countries (DeFrain & Asay, 2007; DeFrain & Stinnett, 2002). Researchers using the family strengths perspective do not ignore family problems, but they do not view the families through the problems they are facing, but instead focus

on families and their connections and capacities for handling life's circumstances (DeFrain & Asay, 2007).

The family strengths perspective has numerous principles, and I applied several to this study including (a) families, in all their remarkable diversity, are the basic foundation of human cultures; (b) all families have strengths, (c) strong marriages are the center of many strong families; (d) the relationship between money and family strengths is tenuous; (e) strengths develop over time; (f) strengths are often developed in response to challenges; (g) strong families don't tend to think much about their strengths, they just live them; and (f) strong families, like people, are not perfect (DeFrain & Asay, 2007).

DeFrain and Stinnett (2002) pioneered the work in family strengths research. They did not follow the norm of relying on deficit-focused research on marriage. Instead, they used the family strengths perspective to focus on how couples maintain strong marriages despite facing overwhelming challenges including contemplating divorce (Tulane et al., 2011). Stinnett et al. (1981) asserted that if researchers only study problems, they will only find problems, as one of the premises of the family strengths framework. Within my study, I highlighted Black American couples who experience marital satisfaction, despite the numerous challenges they face internally and externally. I wanted to explore how they maintain their marital satisfaction under the pressures their marriage may face due to a career in law enforcement.

Hopkins-Williams (2007) and Marks et al. (2008) shared that research on Black American marriages should use a strength-based model to fill the gap in research pertaining to the positive attributes and strengths of Black American marriages. Marks et

al. (2012) shared that there is value using a salutogenic approach where the focus is on strengths and positive. I used the family strengths perspective to provide a focus on how the couples obtain marital satisfaction despite the challenges they face (DeFrain & Asay, 2007).

I used the family strengths perspective as a lens to analyze data (Stinnett et al., 1981) for my study to focus on exploring the strengths and positive qualities of the martially satisfied couples instead of focusing on why marriages fail. Focusing on the strengths, instead of the problems and failings allows me to have an understanding of how families function when facing inherent and external difficulties (DeFrain & Asay, 2007), which makes using martially satisfied couples vital for the use of the family strengths perspective. The family strengths perspective is used to focus on how families overcome challenges (Marks et al., 2008). My goal for this research is to examine the experiences of martially satisfied couples collectively through qualitative interviews in which the influence of working in law enforcement on their marriage will be addressed.

### *Phenomenology*

The nature of my study is qualitative with a hermeneutic phenomenological research approach. I used a hermeneutic phenomenological research approach to gain deeper insight into the subject of marital satisfaction, to explore the perceptions of the lived experiences of the sample on an interpretative level. I used phenomenology to aid me in understanding how the sample constructs reality as demonstrated in work by Patton (2015). In using hermeneutic phenomenology, I focused on interpreting the meanings found in data about the phenomena. My focus is on understanding the meaning of

experience by searching for themes and working with the data in an interpretive manner as demonstrated by Dowling & Cooney (2012) and Moustakas (1994), as I seek to understand the intention and meaning behind the experiences of my research participants Moustakas (1994) demonstrated using hermeneutic phenomenology to explore the qualitative complexities of human experience. I used the hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative approach to aid me in understanding the point of view of the study participants and the cultural and social forces that may influence their point of view as determined by Moustakas (1994).

Martin Heidegger developed hermeneutic inquiry to explore a person's interpretation of phenomena. Heidegger's attention was on the process of understanding the experience and the nature of being (Dowling & Cooney, 2012). Heidegger's theoretical teachings were based on people being a part of the world from which they are inseparable, as this is where people exist and partake in experiences which influences how they view experiences (Heidegger, 1962). Because Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on the personal experience of individuals, I used this philosophical theory to search for in-depth answers, as I explored the qualitative complexities of my study participants' experiences on an interpretative level as demonstrated by Heidegger (1962), but from a strengths-based perspective lens

Hermeneutic phenomenology has three key constructs: (a) fusion of horizons, (b) dialogue of questions and answers, and (c) the hermeneutic circle as a process of understanding (Higgs et al., 2012). For Gadamer, a pivotal figure in the expansion of 20th century hermeneutics, a horizon constitutes one's worldview (Knotts, 2014). Individuals'

worldviews encompass their experiences, and Heidegger believed individuals could not bracket their experiences as there is no way to separate yourself from being within the world (Heidegger, 1962). The state of being in the world is referred to as *Dasein*, (which translates directly to "existence") refers to the ontico-ontological position held only by human beings (Heidegger, 1962). Gadamer taught that the horizon is subject to growth and revision, as well as interaction with other horizons (Knotts, 2014). This process is referred to as *fusing horizons*, and it involves an understanding occurring between minds, and growth in one's awareness and pursuit of truth (Knotts, 2014). The fusion of horizons occurs through a dialogue of question and answer (Knotts, 2014). The hermeneutic circle is a process of understanding that is used to aid individuals in making sense of the world around them. An individual's foresight or fore-conceptions, a guiding claim that determines one's sense of being, is revised as the individual begins to understand and interpret the world view of others or their horizon. I used the hermeneutic phenomenological framework as a lens for my study by applying the three constructs of the approach. As Higgs et al. (2012) stated, following the three constructs deepened my reflection of rich textual data with accounts of my samples' lived experience (Higgs et al., 2012).

### **Review of the Literature**

There are numerous stressors experienced by Black Americans working in law enforcement, potentially harming marital functioning. These include occupational stress, poor communication and disagreements over financial management exacerbated by the nature of the job, unfair treatment within the law enforcement culture, racial

discrimination, and racial residential segregation (Leslie & Young, 2015; Roberts et al., 2013). Due to unique job-related challenges, couples may find their marriages in a vulnerable position if one or both partners are employed in law enforcement. The psychological and organizational demands of working in law enforcement can interfere with quality of the interactions of the couple (Karaffa et al., 2015).

### **Law Enforcement Work: Physically and Emotionally Exhausting**

Law enforcement work is considered one of the most stressful occupations, as officers are subjected to a range of organizational and work-related stressors that are not experienced by most people working outside the profession (Karaffa et al., 2015). Karaffa et al. (2015) and Roberts et al. (2013) described law enforcement work as physically and emotionally exhausting which can lead to mental health concerns including relatively high prevalence rates of depression, anxiety, PTSD, substance abuse including alcohol as a means of self-medicating, and work–family conflict (Karaffa, & Koch, 2016). In addition, stress from police work can cause a potential risk to a positive, emotionally rewarding marital environment (Karaffa et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2013).

Empirical evidence supports the relationship between marital dissatisfaction and law enforcement work-related stress (Brimhall et al., 2018). Law enforcement officers also are regularly challenged with the unnerving tasks of exercising discretion when responding to ambiguous circumstances and constantly controlling their emotions (Kirschman et al., 2014; Kirschman, 2018). A primary stressor that law enforcement officers share is the possibility of danger; the significant others of law enforcement officers also stated the possibility of danger as a primary stressor in their relationships

(Brodie & Eppler, 2012). Law enforcement officers are continuously exposed to pressure, strain, stress, and trauma which can take an emotional and physical toll on the officers as well as contribute toward PTSD, depression, alcohol abuse, sleep disturbances, and burnout (Karaffa et al., 2015; Lawson et al., 2012; Menard & Arter, 2013).

Law enforcement officers may experience emotional exhaustion due to being routinely exposed to human distress (Karaffa et al., 2015). Law enforcement officers are also emotionally exhausted and stressed due to dealing with the unending public scrutiny and often hostile public opinion. Karaffa et al. (2015) also discussed that law enforcement officers that experienced high levels of fatigue, feelings of low self-efficacy, and cynicism also perceived their spouses to be significantly concerned about the affect the job is having on the officer's well-being. When law enforcement officers bring stress and behaviors from work into the home, they may experience difficulties in their family relationships. St. Vil (2014) discussed how work-to-family conflict arises from job conditions, and conditions in the home lead to family-to-work conflict. Family members of the law enforcement officer may become the focus of displaced work stress and frustration. The displaced stress may ultimately negatively influence the officers' marriages if it is not appropriately addressed (Kirschman et al., 2014).

Long shifts, irregular shifts, and mandatory overtime greatly affect the law enforcement officer's essential need for sleep, potentially impairing his or her ability to recover from work demands. A lack of sleep can significantly increase the risk of overall burnout in law enforcement officers. Peterson et al. (2019) researched various dimensions of police burnout and discovered in their study that almost half of the officers that



participated in their study had high depersonalization at 42.6%, low personal accomplishment at 40.7%, and 23.8% experienced high emotional exhaustion.

### **Conflict of Law Enforcement Work and Family**

The occupational stress that comes from being a law enforcement officer involves a myriad of responsibilities and limited resources that directly affect the family unit, and ultimately the marital relationship. The responsibilities of law enforcement officers vary from shift work to mandatory overtime. Long hours and shift work can involve day, night, long duration shifts, long work weeks, as well as rotating, fixed and irregular shift schedules (Kirschman, 2018; Peterson et al., 2019). Over the years, law enforcement officers have evolved from traditionally working eight to 10 hour shifts to compressed weekly schedules, which may require a law enforcement officer to work 11, 12, and 16-hour shifts (Peterson et al., 2019).

Quality time with family can be hard to obtain when working various shifts and extended hours and may cause difficulty for couples and families to plan for activities including school and social events (Kirschman et al., 2014). The requirements of duty and its unpredictable nature can lead to frustration especially for the officer's significant other. For example, working night shifts makes attending sporting events and or school activities impossible, which places the responsibility of attending these events and caring for young children on the spouse of the officer (Brodie & Eppler, 2012; Kirschman et al., 2014). Some officers work overtime hours and second jobs to supplement the income of the family and which leaves even less time for them to spend with their family (Brodie & Eppler, 2012).

Law enforcement officers may experience work-family conflict when their role expectations from their job do not align with their family's expectations (Armstrong et al., 2015; Karaffa et al., 2015). There are several organizational stressors the officers have to deal with including making decisions under persistent scrutiny from command staff and administration, lack of career advancement, inadequate pay, a strict hierarchy and bureaucracy, a lack of feedback, consultation, communication, and support (Armstrong et al., 2015; Brodie & Eppler, 2012). Roberts et al., (2013) shared that a potential risk to sustaining a positive, emotionally rewarding marital environment is occupational stress, but does not include the additional stressor of race. Kirschman et al. (2014) found in their research that law enforcement officers may also experience discrimination, favoritism, limited family-friendly policies, and an unbalanced workload distribution. The discrimination and favoritism seemingly affect the Black American law enforcement officers on a deeper level than White officers due to the disparagement they face as well frequently being overlooked for promotion (Conti & Doreian, 2014; Repasky et al., 2020; Rojek & Decker, 2009; Wilson & Wilson, 2014). The level of stress experienced as a result of facing discrimination at work, can lead to mental health symptoms and disruption in the balance of work life and family life (Pieterse et al., 2012). Balancing work life and family life is a critical issue, because participating in role expected by family, can be made more difficult by participating in roles expected by the job and vice versa (Karaffa et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2015; Nohe & Sonntag, 2014).

Work and family conflict can manifest as family-on-work conflict, which involves law enforcement officers experiencing crises from within the family influencing

work behavior and or performance (Kirschman et al., 2014; Nohe & Sonntag, 2014).

Work and family conflict can also manifest as work-on-family conflict, which involves law enforcement officers experiencing crises from work that effects their families and or their social lives (Kirschman et al., 2014). Work-on-family conflict can be time-based, or strain based including scheduling disruptions of family events, job stress influencing family interactions, and family and work roles not being in sync (Armstrong et al., 2015; Karaffa et al., 2015).

### **The Subculture of Law Enforcement**

Law enforcement officers, similar to military armed forces personnel, and other emergency first responders, are a type of occupational group that participate in a warrior culture (Malmin, 2013). The warrior culture type occupational groups all serve under high levels of stress and are frequently witness to inhumanity (Malmin, 2013). The warrior culture communicates a tenacious form of resilience that requires individuals to be “tough guys who suck it up, ignore pain, move on, and just take it like a man; suppress their emotions and soldier forward” regardless of the stress they are enduring or the trauma to which they are being exposed (Malmin, 2013). The salient construct of the subculture within law enforcement involves silence and denial of serious mental health issues (Bishopp & Boots, 2014). Living by the code of the warrior culture can make asking for help a very difficult thing to do (Malmin, 2013). The assimilation to the warrior culture involves behavior and personality changes resulting in behavior based and work-family based conflict (Armstrong et al., 2015; Brodie & Eppler, 2012).

### ***Behavior and Personality Changes***

Law enforcement officers sometimes acquire new personality characteristics after becoming immersed in the culture of the department or barrack, which may contribute problems in the marriage (Karaffa et al., 2015; Smith, 2015). Law enforcement officers have a unique status and social role that is distinct from other occupations, which may contribute to a subculture that consists of norms and values unique to police work which may impact officers' personality at home and include authoritative demands, overprotectiveness, or cynicism (Barlow & Barlow, 2018; Henry, 2004; Karaffa et al., 2015; Kirschman et al., 2014). Remaining in control of one's emotions at all times is a crucial part of law enforcement officers training (Blum, 2000; Karaffa & Koch, 2016). While emotional control is beneficial in the work of law enforcement as it allows for effective response to traumatic situations, it can also lead to emotional detachment from other aspects of non-work-related life (Kirschman, 2018; Karaffa et al., 2015). Also, law enforcement work requires the officers to be authoritative as they take charge of situations, interrogate individuals, and assert superiority at times in an aggressive manner (Kirschman, 2018; Karaffa et al., 2015). When these behaviors are demonstrated in the home, they may not be received well by spouses or children due to the officers demonstrating a lacking empathy and positive listening (Kirschman, 2018; Karaffa et al., 2015).

### ***Behavior-Based Conflicts***

The conflict demonstrated through the change in personality and behaviors in the home is behavior-based and results from the incompatibility between law enforcement

officers' role in the home and their role at the workplace (Armstrong et al., 2015). Law enforcement officers may interrogate their family members or give orders instead of nurturing or demonstrating compassion. Behavior-based conflicts are especially difficult for law enforcement officers because the training they receive for their position serves them well in the professional capacity, but can be detrimental in the home (Kirschman, 2018). A complaint shared sometimes by spouses is the law enforcement officer has an inability to "turn off" their authoritarianism and emotional control (Kirschman et al., 2014). The law enforcement officers are placed in a difficult position because the behavior they are trained in and encouraged to use at work – emotional control and authoritarianism, is most likely not welcomed in their homes and may lead to discourse (Kirschman, 2018; Karaffa et al., 2015).

### ***Work-Family Conflict***

When law enforcement officers feel the need to hide their emotions, they endure greater work-family conflict (Armstrong et al., 2015). Law enforcement officers may develop an "us versus them" mentality also as a result of law enforcement culture promoting a perception that their peers are the only reliable source of support for them (Karaffa et al., 2015). Law enforcement officers may be apprehensive in sharing with their spouses due to not wanting to subject them to accounts of violence, suffering, and other disturbing events; they may also assume that non-law enforcement officers may not understand the experiences they face at work (Armstrong et al., 2015; Karaffa et al., 2015). The emotional restriction officers practice is not in alignment with the qualities of

successful relationship including open emotional communication and the willingness to compromise (Armstrong et al., 2015; Karaffa et al., 2015; Kirschman, 2018).

### **Racism and Mental Health within Law Enforcement**

Black American law enforcement officers are likely to encounter cultural prejudices at the inception of their career during their academy experience (Conti & Doreian, 2014). Conti and Doreian (2014) discussed that within the academy training curriculum traditional cultural prejudices are reinforced, which inhibits the programming changes that need to be made. The philosophical principles used to design the systems at work in policing are the same ones underlying the existent racism (Conti & Doreian, 2014). The cultural prejudices experienced by Black American cadets may be encountered throughout their career as many have reported dealing with biased racial views, discrimination, and poor racial representation throughout their careers (Repasky et al., 2020).

### ***Discrimination at Work***

In the 1950s, Black American law enforcement officers began to attain marginal headway in the police profession (Conti & Doreian, 2014). During the 1950s, the presence of Black American law enforcement officers accounted for approximately 3.6% of urban officers and this would not have been possible if not for pressure from the Black American community and liberal members of the majority population (Conti & Doreian, 2014). Sadly, the small progress being made in diversifying law enforcement did not result in harmonious racial integration (Smith et al., 2015). Black American law enforcement officers were subjected to formal organizational segregation, which meant

they were given assignments in Black American neighborhoods and were prohibited from arresting Whites (Conti & Doreian, 2014). Black American law enforcement officers were also subjected to a debasing set of regulations concerning when they were allowed to wear their uniforms (Conti & Doreian, 2014). Kuykendall and Burns (1980) (as cited in Conti & Doreian, 2014) discussed how many Black American officers also were not allowed to drive squad cars, wear their uniforms to or from work, patrol White neighborhoods, and they absolutely could not arrest White people. If Black American officers were allowed to be promoted to higher rankings, depending on the department where they worked, they were prohibited from supervising uniformed White subordinates (Conti & Doreian, 2014). Even as Black American law enforcement officers became more visible and vocal in their agencies, their impact was still generally ignored by White researchers and public reviewers (Wilson & Wilson, 2014).

Generally, White law enforcement officers held biased racial views, and the majority expressed a reluctance, and at times, a refusal, to partner with Black American officers, which was reinforced in some departments until the mid-1960s through the segregation of patrol cars (Conti & Doreian, 2014). The majority of law enforcement commanders protested to having Black American subordinates and disclosed that they were stricter when dealing with Black American in comparison to their White subordinates (Conti & Doreian, 2014). Throughout much of American history, Black American law enforcement officers experienced rejection by the White public and their counterparts, White officers (Repasky et al., 2020). Repasky et al. (2020) shared that police departments may use racial epithets, discriminating hiring practices, lower salaries,

limited admittance to the most desirable work assignments, false performance evaluations, and the lack of promotions to discriminate against minorities.

### ***The Struggle for Racial Representation***

In the 1960s, the civil rights movement was a catalyst for the vitality of racial representation in police departments for the improving community relations. The need for racial representation led to Black Americans entering law enforcement in more significant numbers resulting in a representation of 6.4% of law enforcement officers nationally (Conti & Doreian, 2014). The increase of minority admission into law enforcement was the result of a political necessity and not due to a progressive shift in the thinking of members of the organization (Conti & Doreian, 2014). The lack of progressive shift meant that Black American law enforcement officers continued to be challenged significantly in the field of law enforcement (Conti & Doreian, 2014; Repasky et al., 2020).

A recent example from popular culture further humanizes the racism experienced by Black American police officers as these systems were integrated. Ron Stallworth, known as the Black Klansman, shared in his memoir about the racial discrimination he endured as recently as October of 1978. He was warned by James Woods, the only black man involved in Stallworth's hiring process, of the racism he was likely to endure. James Woods was a civilian employee as he worked as the personnel manager for the city and was tasked with helping the police department boost minority recruitment, particularly Black Americans, through a cadet program (Stallworth, 2014). Four years after the program's inception, no Black Americans had been hired (Stallworth, 2014). Ron



Stallworth was Colorado Springs police department's first Black American hire and Woods warned him during his interview that he was going to face a system that was "inherently biased against and prejudicial toward blacks" (Stallworth, 2014, p.8).

Stallworth was also interviewed by two White men, the assistant chief of police in charge of personnel and the captain of the uniformed Patrol Division, one of whom asked him how he would respond to various scenarios involving Stallworth being referenced as the pejorative "nigger" by department personnel or citizens while performing his duties as an officer (Stallworth, 2014).

The integration of the 1960s was a first step, but racism persists in law enforcement today. Minority recruits have shared that traditional police environments have been uncomfortable and hostile (Conti & Doreian, 2014). Minority officers hold a disproportionately low number of command positions and there are also a disproportionate number of internal complaints filed against minority officers, which is an indicator of employment discrimination (Conti & Doreian, 2014; Repasky et al., 2020; Rojek & Decker, 2009).

Studies have shown that within contemporary law enforcement, racial minorities are still severely underrepresented (Wilson & Wilson, 2014). With the continued use of unproductive recruiting strategies, results are still consistent with minimal response (Wilson & Wilson, 2014). Researchers have also found that within law enforcement, race is a determining factor of guilt and or the degree of penalty being applied (Rojek & Decker, 2009). Rojek and Decker (2009) also found that minority officers are more likely to be documented negatively by police supervisors, and minority law enforcement

officers experience the prolonged existence of both elusive and prevalent forms of discrimination with the law enforcement workplace (Wilson & Wilson, 2014).

The effects of racism on the mental health of Black American law enforcement officers directly penetrates the marital satisfaction of a couple. The experiences of the law enforcement officers, that involves prejudice and discrimination as stressors, spill over and contaminate the quality of the relationship (Doyle & Molix, 2014). Bryant et al. (2010) described the significant gap in the literature pertaining to the effects of discrimination creating distress in both marriages and families, but the research that is available states that discrimination was found to be associated with impaired marital quality (Trail et al., 2012; Doyle & Molix, 2014).

### ***The Mental Health Effects of Racism in Law Enforcement***

Individuals who are victims of racial discrimination often experience substantial psychological stress and suffer from mental health problems (Willie et al., 2013). Racism is a major source of stress for many Black Americans and as a result it is the origin of many of their mental health problems (Willie et al., 2013). Black American law enforcement officers are dealing with racially based stress in various ways as a result of their occupation. Studies have consistently found that Black American law enforcement officers experience more feelings of criticism than their White colleagues, and with White males holding the majority of command positions the inclusion of Black Americans may be challenged and sabotaged (Conti & Doreian, 2014; Repasky et al., 2020; Rojek & Decker, 2009; Wilson & Wilson, 2014). On the other side of law enforcement are civilians, and while Black American officers are known to be more

outspoken on matters concerning race, they may still be viewed as traitors by members of Black American communities (Wilson & Wilson, 2014). Some members of the Black American community believe that all law enforcement officers are “blue” and as a result, demonstrate hostility toward Black American law enforcement officers and refer to them as hypocrites and traitors of the Black American community (Paoline Iii, Gau, & Terrill, 2018). Many Black American law enforcement officers, especially those serving in smaller agencies, feel like outsiders or second-class citizens due to the mistreatment they may receive in Black American communities, and the uncertainty of the relationships between Black American law enforcement officers and their agencies (Paoline Iii et al., 2018; Wilson & Wilson, 2014).

Researchers have found the lack of support Black American law enforcement officers experience is a potent stressor, as well as race relations, with discrimination producing limited career advancement opportunities (Wilson & Wilson, 2014). Soto et al. (2011) concluded in their research that minorities who experienced race-based discrimination had significantly higher odds of experiencing generalized anxiety disorder due to race-based discrimination being a statistically significant predictor of GAD for Black Americans. Soto et al. (2011) also shared that Black Americans experience high rates of generalized anxiety disorder due to being exposed to racial discrimination or microaggression. Racial microaggressions indicate subtle attacks or invalidations levied against an individual because of their race or ethnic group membership (Soto et al., 2011).

Pieterse et al. (2012) found similar results in their study as they found that for Black American adults, perceived racism may cause mental health symptoms similar to trauma and could also lead to some physical health disparities between Black Americans and other populations in the United States. Soto et al. (2011) discussed Black Americans experiencing racial battle fatigue as a result of racial discrimination. Smith et al. (2007) concept of racial battle fatigue is defined as “the result of constant physiological, psychological, cultural, and emotional coping with racial microaggressions in less-than-ideal and racially hostile or unsupportive environments” (p. 555). As a result of chronic racial microaggressions leading to racial battle fatigue, many Black Americans experience extreme stressful, exhaustion, and minimization to their sense of control, comfort as a result of their environment. Racial battle fatigue also leads to feelings of loss, ambiguity, strain, frustration, and injustice (Smith et al., 2007).

Racism plays a serious role in the mental health of Black Americans as it influences many aspects of their lives, including their marriage. Jenkins et al., (2020) discussed a national survey that found that almost 50% of Black participants reported at least one major experience of discrimination, and 71% of Black participants reported experiencing discrimination sometimes or often. Discrimination can lead to psychological distress (Jenkins et al., 2020) and poor relationship quality (Trail et al., 2012). The Mundane Extreme Environmental Stress (MEES) theory conceptualizes that Black American families are faced with ever-present encounters with racism and discrimination (Jenkins et al., 2020). Dealing with racism and discrimination is stressful and it can gradually diminish a persons’ cognitive and emotional resources, which may result in a

lesser capacity to manage family stressors and magnifies the stressors negative implications (Jenkins et al., 2020; Lincoln & Chae, 2010).

Numerous law enforcement officers experience PTSD as a result of their exposure to violence. In general, first responders may experience lasting negative physiological and psychological effects, but the duties of law enforcement officers are more extensive than the duties of other first responders (Bishopp & Boots, 2014). Law enforcement officers not only aid the injured and contain dangerous situations, they also investigate the crimes, photograph evidence at the scene, take witness statements, make arrests, comfort victims, and other tasks, all of which require them to become intimately involved with the crime. Between seven and 19 percent of law enforcement officers display signs of PTSD as compared to the general public in which 3.5 percent show signs of PTSD (National Police Support Fund, 2019).

Another disorder that is prevalent within the field of law enforcement is depression. Individuals exposed to disturbing situations are diagnosed for depression at a higher rate than individuals who have not been exposed to disturbing situations is at an increased rate in individuals who have experienced disturbing situations (Bishopp & Boots, 2014). Law enforcement officers experiencing depression do not always seek the treatment they need due to the subculture of law enforcement, which perpetuates the issue of the increased rate of suicide among law enforcement officers (Bishopp & Boots, 2014). When law enforcement officers are experiencing clinical depression, any stress they encounter during their shift may exacerbate their depression and lead to suicidal ideation (Bishopp & Boots, 2014).

In the general population, depression is less prevalent among Black Americans in comparison to White Americans but tends to last longer for Black Americans and may be a chronic stressor in Black relationships (Walton & Shepard Payne, 2016). Due to racial battle fatigue, which compounds existing stressors and creates the conditions for mental health disorders, Black American officers may be at higher risk for experiencing depression in relation to occupational stress (Smith et al., 2007; Soto et al., 2011). Individuals experiencing depression or depressive symptoms are more likely to engage in negative cognitive appraisals and display interpersonal vulnerabilities that create stressful interactions between married couples, which in turn increases distress within the marriage (Jenkins et al., 2020). Jenkins et al., (2020) also stated that the stressful interactions can aggravate depressive symptoms for each partner, and the depressive symptoms can erode the relationship satisfaction, which in turn becomes relationship dissatisfaction, which increases depressive symptoms.

Suicide is prevalent in the field of law enforcement, and this is demonstrated in the fact that the number of police officers who die by suicide exceeds triple that of law enforcement officers who were fatally injured in the line of duty (Hillard, 2019). In the general population, 13 per 100,000 people die by suicide and in law enforcement, 17 per 100,000 officers die by suicide (Hillard, 2019). Scholars speculate that law enforcement officers may develop suicide ideation as a response to their recurring exposure to traumatic events (Bishopp & Boots, 2014). Law enforcement officers are exposed to human devastation on a daily basis, and studies have shown that the exposure in addition

to easy access to deadly weapons and intense stress may lead to the suicide statistics society is witnessing (Hillard, 2019).

Black American law enforcement officers experience the same increased mental health risks as their non-minority coworkers including generalized anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and suicidal ideation. In addition, racial battle fatigue compounds existing stressors and creates the conditions for mental health disorders (Smith et al., 2007; Soto et al., 2011) which can further exacerbate marital concerns. Since researchers have found that discrimination is a pervasive stressor infiltrating Black American marriages adding increased tensions and psychological distress, it is imperative that the stress caused by racial discrimination is addressed (Lincoln & Chae, 2010). Racial discrimination has a direct impact on the mental health of the couple, which in turn, influence the health of their marital relationship (Hammett et al., 2016).

### **Law Enforcement, Marriage, and Mental Health**

Marriage is a valuable union as it provides stability to individuals, children, families, and the community (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Healthy marriages can lead to better environments due to married couples building more wealth than single or cohabiting couples, and households with two parents are a better environment for children to be raised in than non-married households (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010).

Curran et al. (2010) discussed the cultural implications of what family means as the family appears to be the primary cultural setting in which individuals develop and

learn the meaning of marriage. Curran et al. (2010) discussed that one of the most common limitations of research on marital meaning is the lack of sample diversity. Curran et al. (2010) shared that many studies focused on marriage and its meaning consist of White college students. Studies completed by Mitchelson (2009) and Hammer and Thompson (2003) (as cited in St. Vil, 2014) disclosed that perceptions of work-family conflict decreased marital satisfaction and increased divorce. Since marriage plays an important role in building culture and community, but the studies on marriage have been homogenous, the views of Black Americans concerning marriage are underreported. This lack of information is detrimental as it prohibits counselors from accessing the information necessary to develop the cultural competence necessary to serve Black American couples effectively.

### ***Marital Satisfaction***

Marital satisfaction can have a profound positive effect on people regardless of culture. Janjani (2017) shared that an “individual’s satisfaction with marital life is considered as family satisfaction, which in turn guarantees the concept of life satisfaction, and facilitates the growth and excellence, and material and spiritual progress of society” (p. 90). The marital relationship carries such vital importance because it provides a structure for the familial establishment, and through example, future generations learn from observing marital relationships (Janjani et al., 2017). Researchers found an adverse connection between work-family conflict and marital satisfaction (St. Vil, 2014). Married couples that deal with more stressful events, show greater decrease in marriage satisfaction (Neff & Broady, 2011).



### ***Marriage Expectations and Satisfaction Among Black Americans***

Vaterlaus et al. (2017) studied the meaning of marriage and marital expectations for Black Americans and discussed that a common limitation of research on marital meaning is the lack of diversity of the sample. Vaterlaus et al. (2017) shared that research on marriage has primarily focused on White, college-aged, Americans' expectations of marriage. Vaterlaus et al. (2017) shared that married Black Americans experience higher levels of well-being than unmarried Black Americans demonstrating that marriage is a protective factor for individual psychological well-being. Many Black American individuals do not get to experience this protective factor due to a fear of having an unhappy marriage, as they tend to agree that remaining unmarried is better than being unhappily married (Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Black Americans in comparison to White people are more inclined to marry at a later age and spend less time married (Vaterlaus et al., 2017). In spite of the potential benefits of marriage, Black Americans report the lowest levels of marital satisfaction in comparison to other racial and ethnic groups (Jenkins et al., 2020, St. Vil, 2014, & Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Black American marriages, in comparison to other racial and ethnic groups have the highest divorce rate, the highest rate of never married persons, and the lowest marriage rate overall (Vaterlaus et al., 2017).

**Factors Affecting Marital Quality.** St. Vil (2014) examined the effect of work-family conflict and work-family balance on the marital satisfaction of Black American marriages. The results of the study uncovered a disadvantageous connection between work-family conflict and marital satisfaction (St. Vil, 2014). St. Vil (2014) also found

variances in “work-family factors that predicts husbands’ versus wives’ marital satisfaction” (p.208). St. Vil (2014) shared that several studies reveal that overall, Black Americans report experiencing lower levels of marital satisfaction than other races (Broman, 1993, 2002, 2005; Bulanda & Brown, 2008; Trent & South, 2003, as cited in St. Vil, 2014). St. Vil (2014) shared that racial differences in levels of marital satisfaction are unexplained and stressed the importance of identifying factors that influence Black American marital satisfaction to promote strong, lifelong marriages. St. Vil (2014) stressed the importance of completing additional studies on marital satisfaction and how work-family balance and work-family conflict influence it. St. Vil (2014) also discussed the scarcity of research “pertaining to Black Americans, marital satisfaction and work-family balance” (p. 210). There is a need for identifying factors that contribute to marital satisfaction in Black American marriages due to Black Americans reporting the lowest levels of marital satisfaction in comparison to other racial and ethnic groups (St. Vil, 2014).

Barton et al. (2018) discussed the mistrust of service providers, due to the mental health stigma, still posing barriers to Black Americans who experience psychological distress seeking help. Barton et al. (2018) also shared that culturally informed relationship interventions may circumvent barriers normally associated with treatment and may increase relationship quality while also providing indirect benefit to the couple’s mental health. In addition to using culturally informed relationship interventions, Jenkins et al., (2020) shared that clinicians working with Black American couples should consider spouses’ racial identity, discrimination experiences, the couple’s satisfaction,

and mental health symptoms. These factors may influence both spouses individually and their relationship (Jenkins et al., 2020). Black American couples who feel their marital satisfaction is diminished as a result of law enforcement career stress need to have counselors available to them that they can trust, and that can help them navigate marriage struggles including work-family balance.

One barrier to understanding marital satisfaction of Black American couples lies in the research approach itself, which reflects systemic racism. Marks et al. (2008) completed a strength-based study of Black American marriages that identify as strong, happy, and enduring in response to scholars stereotypically viewing Black American families from a “deficit perspective” that emphasizes problems and pathology (p. 172). By researchers viewing Black American families from a “deficit perspective”, which is a view that individuals from certain cultural groups lack the capacity to succeed due to their cultural background (Silverman, 2011), they are focusing on the negative aspects of Black American marriages. The purpose of Marks et al. (2008) research was to determine how many Black Americans experience well-functioning marriages and examine the strengths of their marriages. Marks et al. (2008) found that the individual-level resources, interpersonal resources, social and economic resources of the couples outweighed their barriers because they were able to grow from the strength of each other and overcome barriers together. This particular study was the result of Black college students asking about the lack of research on strong, marriage-based Black families. These Black college students shared their response to the minimal research that was

available as discouraging, so Marks et al. (2008) were encouraged to complete a strength-based study.

Marks et al. (2008) discussed various resources that help couples overcome barriers, and one common barrier that was discussed is finances. Dew et al. (2017), through a strength-based approach, studied the role finances can play as a stressor on marriage. Dew et al., (2017) discovered in their study that strong Black American marriages could endure financial issues while maintaining strong relationships. Dew et al. (2017) results support this project on marital satisfaction in Black American marriages and the role that finances can play as one of many stressors in a marriage. Therefore, the Dew et al. (2017) study is an example of how it is possible for Black American marriages to maintain marital satisfaction while enduring the stress of negative circumstances. It is almost inevitable that at some point married couples will endure a form of adversity, and counseling programs must train counselors to serve couples of all cultures in their time of need. Kennedy and Ruggles (2014) shared that it is vital for married couples to know how to deal with stress in their relationships effectively, because discourse in marriage may cause great turbulence in family life and result in the dissolution of that marriage.

**Communication, Respect, Trust, and Faith.** Curran et al. (2010) studied the meaning of marriage for Black Americans including the importance of trust as an interpersonal resource that enabled strong, happy, and enduring marriages. Marks et al. (2008) shared that insufficient trust, family-related stress, and work-related stress cause detriment to Black American marriages. Communication, trust, and respect are important components of marital satisfaction (Ledermann et al., 2010; Dew & Bradford, 2013).

Researchers have shared that marital communication is linked with marital quality, satisfaction, and trust (Ledermann et al., 2010). Marital satisfaction and shared trust will provide a supportive environment (Curran et al., 2010). Dew and Bradford (2013) found that demonstrations of respect were positively linked with marital satisfaction and negatively related to marital struggle and the possibility of divorce.

Marks et al. (2012) discussed the importance of faith in Black American marriages and families and found that Black Americans view marriage as a sacred vow and considered religion the core of life for some families. Marks et al. (2012) found through their study that spiritual beliefs reportedly effected the participants, their families, and their marriages in numerous ways. A significant conclusion of the study was the heart of religious experience for the participants, faith-centered Black families, was the belief that individuals can apparently establish, develop, and receive blessings from a relationship with the heavenly father. Marks et al. (2012) shared that they found that their participants believed that their relationship with the heavenly father positively influenced their relationships with their wives, husbands, and children.

Olson et al. (2015) results indicated significant relationships between religiosity and marital satisfaction. Religiosity also safeguarded against negative effects of risk factors including previous divorce, high-stress marriage, and spousal forgiveness (Olson et al., 2015). Olson et al. (2015) was able to see through their research that religiosity increased marital satisfaction and marital resiliency.

### ***Stressors of Black Americans in Law Enforcement Marriages***

As discussed above, there are many factors that affect the quality of marriage in a positive and negative manner. One negative factor that greatly influences marital satisfaction is stress. The stress that law enforcement officers endure at work increases their risk for negative health and psychosocial outcomes, as well as decreased marital satisfaction. Tuttle et al. (2018) found that the stress and the organizational and operational career demands are definitely associated with negative marital functioning. It is important for law enforcement officers and their spouses to have effective coping strategies to deal with issues that may arise due to the occupation. When researchers studied emotions in couples that have at least one partner serving in law enforcement, they found that the fatiguing nature of their work leaves the couple at risk for negative outcomes (Tuttle et al., 2018). Tuttle et al. (2018) also found that law enforcement officers and their spouses experience a social/emotional spillover as a result of the mental and emotional stress of the occupation. Tuttle et al., (2018) concluded in their study that the everyday stress from working as a law enforcement officer as well as the officer's inability to leave work at work can be maladaptive for the functioning of the relationship. If couples are equipped with coping skills and strategies to increase marital satisfaction, it will also aid them in improving their mental wellness as marriage has a protective effect on mental health (Lincoln & Chae, 2010; Vaterlaus et al., 2017).

Mental health is one of many aspects of life that is improved by a satisfying marriage as discussed in this chapter, demonstrating the importance for counselors to be prepared to help all couples achieve marital satisfaction. However, due to the lack of

research focusing on Black American marriages, especially from a strengths-based perspective, counselors may be ill-equipped to support these couples. As I explored the lived experiences of Black American couples, with at least one partner in law enforcement, my intention was to understand and interpret the experiences of Black American married individuals who experience marital satisfaction. Identifying factors that contribute to marital satisfaction is critical in meeting Black Americans' marriage and family needs, as my findings will inform therapeutic interventions designed to increase marital satisfaction among Black Americans couples experiencing the stress of a career in law enforcement on their marriage.

Another stressor experienced by law enforcement couples are the emotions they endure in relation to the occupation. A common and consistent complaint of law enforcement officers' spouses is their belief that the officer's career is more gratifying than the spouse and or family, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy and exclusion (Karaffa et al., 2015). As a result of feelings of inadequacy and exclusion, the spouse may begin to experience resentment, which they passively express leading to the officer spending more time at work engaged in more occupational activities with co-workers (Karaffa et al., 2015). Spending more time at work and away from home reinforces the problem existing in the home, and it extends the distance between the officer and spouse (Karaffa et al., 2015). If couples deal with stress in a negative manner, the couple may internalize their emotions negatively, which will alter the way they respond to each other and comprehend adverse events in their relationship (Neff & Broady, 2011). It is essential for married couples to know how to effectively deal with stress in their

relationships, because discourse in marriage may cause great turbulence in family life and then the dissolution of that marriage (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014).

Karaffa et al. (2015) shared that 38% of the spouses of law enforcement officers reported the officers keep things to themselves instead of sharing what is on their mind with their spouse. The study also reported that 28% of spouses reported that law enforcement officers take work home, and 48% of the law enforcement officers reported that at times they take their stress out on family and friends (Karaffa et al., 2015). Kelly et al. (2013) explained that from a historical and contemporary systems perspective there is a uniqueness of Black American couples and families. The Black American experience has influenced the functioning of Black Americans and their family dynamics. St. Vil (2014) revealed how Black Americans in America must deal with conflicting messages from multiple cultural values, causing difficulty in prioritizing and balancing work and family. While the concept of family is universal, “what constitutes family, and how family relationships are determined, is profoundly culture bound” (Franklin & James, 2015, p.158). Due to the influence of culture and experience, Black American marriages have a uniqueness that influences their marital satisfaction and the family dynamics. Yet, due to the lack of representation within previous samples (Franklin & James, 2015), these dynamics have not informed counselor training. Thus, developing an understanding of Black American marital satisfaction is critical to ethical counseling practice.

Roberts et al. (2013) discussed the effects of stress as it diminishes cognitive, emotional, and regulatory resources needed for engaging in meaningful, corresponding emotional exchanges. Roberts et al. (2013) discussed how researchers describe the work



of police as causing marital distress, due to law enforcement being a physically and emotionally exhausting occupation. Roberts et al. (2013) discussed how law enforcement personnel might hide their true feelings and use the strategy of “keep things to self” to fight work-induced stress.

Clearly, there are distinctive and unique marital concerns for Black American couples impacted by a career in law enforcement. Regardless of the efforts of law enforcement personnel to keep stress out of the home, their spouses will likely feel the effects of the stress because the stress and emotions of partners are closely linked (Roberts et al., 2013). In spite of the significant and unique needs of Black American couples in law enforcement, there remains a dearth in the literature. In the study by Roberts and colleagues (2013) Black Americans only made up 11.8% of their study sample. While their study helps to give readers an understanding of the bearing a job in law enforcement can have on marriage, it does not give the reader an understanding of how being a Black American in law enforcement can cause more stress on an individual. St. Vil (2014) shared that researchers used Anglo-American samples for most of the research conducted concerning work-family balance and on marital satisfaction. Clearly, additional research on Black American-specific concerns is warranted.

### **Law Enforcement and Counseling**

Police officers who seek counseling often cite familial issues as a presenting problem (Barlow & Barlow, 2018). Some of the common issues causing dysfunction in police families include work–family conflict, occupational stress, and personality changes, and domestic violence (Barlow & Barlow, 2018). For Black American law

enforcement officers, the common issues are capitalized by systemic racism, as their families, like many Black American families, may be encountering issues including racist hiring practices, wage gaps, educational disparities, and race-based challenges at work (Feagin, 2006). The tolls of vocational stressors combined with systemic racism can cause distress within the familial unit. Occupational stress decreases positive interactions between partners, which makes it difficult for them to sustain satisfying relationships (Roberts et al., 2013). Suicidal ideation, burnout, and other serious issues may lead to decreased efficiency at work, family problems, and personal stress that can be detrimental to the officer's psychological health but can be addressed directly through counseling (Roberts et al., 2013).

There is limited research in the research literature regarding coping strategies used by law enforcement officers and their families (Karaffa et al., 2015). One study found that law enforcement officers' spouses reported coping strategies including the officers internalizing what is bothering them and taking their stress out on friends or family (Karaffa et al., 2015). Karaffa et al. (2015) also shared that spouses of law enforcement officers reported that the officers did not utilize the services of a mental health professional and reported that overall, the strategies that were being used were ineffective. Karaffa et al. (2015) went on to share that a common coping style utilized by law enforcement officers, referred to as "rugged individualist" mostly ineffective, and shared that this coping style involves emotional exhaustion, alcohol use, and depersonalization.

Counseling can help couples develop healthier relationships and strategies to increase positive interactions between the officer and their partner, which is found to lead to lower-levels of work-family conflict (Armstrong et al., 2015). However, there is a dearth of information that directly addresses the stressors of Black American couples in law enforcement. These couples are less likely to seek treatment due to the warrior culture connected with law enforcement and the due to Black Americans underutilizing mental health services (Curtis-Boles, 2017; Malmin, 2013; Mental Health America - MHA, 2015). Although Black Americans are at high risk for mental disorders due being overrepresented in vulnerable categories, they are less likely to seek treatment due to barriers including stigma, insensitivity in the mental health system, racial bias, and cultural incompetence of providers (Curtis-Boles, 2017; Mental Health America - MHA, 2015). Studies have identified stigma, insensitivity to Black individuals utilizing the mental health system, racial bias, and cultural incompetence of mental health providers as key obstructions to mental health service utilization in the Black community (Curtis-Boles, 2017).

### **Summary**

This chapter was written to highlight the importance of the current qualitative research study and to highlight the gap in the research literature concerning the lived experiences of Black American couples related to marital satisfaction and law enforcement. The discussion began with the stressors of law enforcement, the subculture, and racism and mental health within law enforcement. The research revealed that law enforcement officers suffer from various mental health issues at higher levels than the

general population. The research also demonstrates a correlation between race and mental health and the influence of mental health on marital satisfaction. In this chapter, the marital expectations and satisfaction for Black Americans were also investigated as factors including communication, respect, trust, and faith were explored in reference to their role within a relationship. This study is essential as it uncovered the strengths of Black American marriages that have at least one member serving as a law enforcement officers.

Black Americans are less likely than Caucasians to seek treatment, although they are more likely to experience mental health issues as a result of living daily with experiences of racism and discrimination (Alvarez et al., 2016; McDermott et al., 2017). Black Americans make up 13.3% of law enforcement officers (Data USA, 2018), so if and when they decide with their spouse to participate in counseling, they should receive culturally competent services that include interventions and techniques that can be shared with them to help them obtain marital satisfaction. I used the hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative approach to research the phenomenon of marital satisfaction and interpret how Black American couples understand the construct of marital satisfaction and sustain it under the influence of the stress of a career in law enforcement. Through this approach, I was able to gain deeper insight into the subject of marital satisfaction, to understand and explore the perceptions of the lived experiences of the sample on an interpretative level, and to understand how the sample constructs reality.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of Black American couples, with at least one partner in law enforcement, pertaining to marital satisfaction. The main research question was: What are Black American couples' experiences related to marital satisfaction with at least one partner serving in law enforcement? I aimed to interpret how Black American couples understand the construct of marital satisfaction and sustain it under the influence of a career in law enforcement. In this chapter, I described how I plan to collect and analyze data, the research design and rationale of my study, the methodology, and my role in the research process and the ethical procedures.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative approach was the chosen approach for this study as it was the most appropriate approach to explore the lived experience of marital satisfaction because, according to Moustakas (1994), it supports exploration of the qualitative complexities of human experience. My goal was to interpret how Black American couples understand the construct of marital satisfaction and sustain it under the influence of the stress of a career in law enforcement. I used the hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative approach to increase my understanding of the study participants' point of view and the cultural and social forces that may influence their perspectives. According to Patton (2015), phenomenological design allows researchers to understand the perceptions of the participants' lived experiences on an interpretative

level. Using hermeneutic phenomenology, I focused on interpreting the meanings found in data in relation to my phenomena. Through the analysis of the text, I looked for meaning through interpretation. My focus was on understanding the meaning of experience by searching for themes and working with the data in an interpretive manner.

Hermeneutic phenomenology has three key constructs: (a) fusion of horizons, (b) dialogue of questions and answers, and (c) the hermeneutic circle (Higgs et al., 2012). I used hermeneutic phenomenology to direct the study's procedures by applying the three constructs of the approach. In accordance with Higgs et al.(2012), following the three constructs deepened my reflection of rich textual data with accounts of the study participants' lived experiences . I used van Manen as a hermeneutic expert as he teaches that phenomenology is an undertaking of sober reflection on the lived experience of human existence (van Manen, 2007). Van Manen shared that the reflection on the lived experience must not only be thoughtful, but free from "theoretical, prejudicial and suppositional intoxications" (van Manen, 2007, p.12). Molley et al. (2018) shared van Manen's six step approach to hermeneutic phenomenology and they are as follows:

- 1) Turning to the nature of lived experience.
- 2) Investigating experience as we live it.
- 3) Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon.
- 4) Describing the phenomenon in the art of writing and rewriting.
- 5) Maintaining a strong and orientated relation to the phenomenon.
- 6) Balancing the research context by considering the parts and the whole.

I followed these steps to complete the study with the understanding that van Manen (2003) endorses phenomenology as “a human science and is delimited as natural science, because the object of study are the structures of meaning of the lived world” (p.30). Viewing phenomenology as a human science, permits researchers to process and comprehend the meaningful situations of the humans and to expound upon functioning in the lives of humans.

### **Research and Interview Questions**

Moustakas (1994) shared that the primary research question in a hermeneutic phenomenological investigation derives from a strong and personal interest in a particular issue. An interpretive phenomenological study can be used by a researcher to serve as a guide in understanding the intention and meaning of the experiences of research participants (Dowling & Cooney, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Researchers design phenomenological study research questions to reveal the essence and nuance of the study participants’ lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Through qualitative research, I sought to gain an in-depth understanding of marital satisfaction experiences for Black American couples in law enforcement. Van Manen (2016) states that interviews used for the hermeneutic phenomenology are more conversational as they have two purposes. The first is “as a means to explore and develop a rich understanding of the phenomenon” and the second reason is to “to develop a conversation around the meaning of experience” (Lauterbach, 2018, p. 2885). Even with conversational interviews van Manen (2016) encouraged the use of semi structured interviews to help the participants revisit their experiences, so the researcher can use the

participants' memories and reflections for the study. From the interview, the intention of the researcher is to obtain experiential descriptions from participants and gain self-interpreted constructions of the participants situation (Lauterbach, 2018). Please see Appendix A to review the interview guide.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The researcher's role varies in qualitative research, pending the researcher's stance and intent (Patton, 2015). I had several roles in relation to the research I conducted, as I am a counselor, a doctoral student, and a researcher. For my study, I am serving in the role of researcher. Due to the researcher being perceived as having a higher status than the participant, a power differential is present, so the role of researcher must be made clear to the participant. I shared with participants that my role was to attempt to access their thoughts and feelings and collect data from what they shared as I searched for strengths and tools that have aided them in obtaining marital satisfaction. I also told participants that my main responsibility as a qualitative researcher was to protect participants and their data.

As a human instrument interpreting raw data for my study, I needed to remain neutral as the researcher to understand and acknowledge biases and assumptions concerning my research phenomenon. I used analytical memos/notes and reflexive journaling to track my feelings and biases, as recommended by Gibbs (2012). Using journaling, I was able to expound personal feelings and reflections on what I was looking to gain from the work I completed.



My role as a researcher was also emic as I was analyzing a phenomenon from the perspective of one who participates in the culture I am studying. Due to my role being emic, I worked diligently in curbing my opinions and expectations. I did not accept any study participants that I have a personal or professional relationship with, as that could endanger my study's validity and credibility. I sought to diligently improve my instrumentality and address potential biases from designing my questions to my data processing. I used reflexive journaling to support the tracking of feelings and biases (Gibbs, 2012).

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

For my study, the target group of interest was married Black American couples with one member of the couple currently or previously employed in law enforcement during their marriage. Both partners needed to identify as Black, and express that they are satisfied in their marriage. An additional requirement was law enforcement employment for a period of a least 6 months during their marriage. To initiate communication with potential participants, I sent an email to various law enforcement groups to contact a representative of each organization. Through these connections, I obtained permission to recruit participants who fit my study's inclusion criteria. The law enforcement organizations included the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives, the National Association of Black Law Enforcement Officers, Inc., and the Blacks in Law Enforcement of America. I also used LinkedIn, social media, my professional network, and snowball sampling. My sample size was twelve participants as I reached saturation at

6 couples. Van Manen (2014) dissociates saturation from phenomenology, but instead encourages full and rich personal accounts from examples that highlight the phenomenon of focus within the individual accounts.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

After the study participants receive the informed consent form via email, they were asked to respond to the email with “I consent” before participating in the study. I used 60-minute semi structured qualitative interviewing as the data collection procedure for my study because I was looking for participants to describe the experience they lived through as instructed in van Manen’s (2016) teachings. To ensure trustworthiness, I consistently kept each interview at 60 minutes. I listened for the participant’s description of their experience including their state of mind, how they were feeling, their mood, and their emotions (van Manen, 2016). Van Manen (2016) also shared that participants should focus on a specific example or occurrence of the object of experience that stands out for its distinctness.

Due to COVID-19, I asked potential participants if they were comfortable completing their interviews remotely using Zoom and I used the imbedded recorder in my computer. I recorded the interviews because I wanted to be able to listen to the interviews for data analysis purposes. I debriefed the participants and expressed appreciation of their choice to participate in the study. Also, I answered any questions they had and gave them my information to contact me in the future in case they think of any questions later. If the participants wanted to talk privately about their rights as a participant or any negative parts of the study, they could contact Walden, as I gave them

the contact information for the Walden University's Research Participant Advocate. I notified the participants that I may contact them later for additional questions or to perform member checking using a narrative representation to increase the trustworthiness of the study. I used an open-ended format for data collection to provide participants with an opportunity to share their in-depth and holistic perspectives and experiences as van Manen (2007) expressed the importance of participants shared lived experiences and meanings in a phenomenological study.

All participants will complete an informed consent form; they will be told verbally and in writing in their invitation that their participation is entirely voluntary, and they can choose to end their participation at any time. I will keep all the data collected from participants on a password-protected data storage device. I will maintain confidentiality, as stipulated in my consent form, to protect participants' privacy. I will maintain the data on an encrypted data storage device from the data collection to archiving. I will delete the data from the external hard drive after five years as required by Walden University. Reports coming out of this study will not share the identities of individual participants. I will not share details that might identify participants. Participants are essential to research as they are the experts for the phenomenon that I am studying. I will do everything in my power to protect their privacy. It is also essential that I follow the IRB guidelines and stipulations to ensure ethical research.

## **Data Analysis Plan**

Data analysis involves examining the philosophical character of the data which is the developing theme (van Manen, 2016). Hermeneutic data analysis centers around the reflective writing and rewriting of the phenomenological text (van Manen, 2014). Theme formulation is a part of the analysis, so researchers can meaningfully organize and interpret data, but that is only a part of the process (van Manen, 2014). Van Manen (2016) instructed researchers to avoid causal explanations, generalizations, or abstract interpretations as much as possible.

Van Manen's third step in his approach to hermeneutic phenomenology discussed reflecting on the critical themes which exemplify the phenomenon (van Manen, 2016). Van Manen taught that researchers can determine themes from reviewing transcripts and extensively writing. He shared the researcher should read the transcripts and become familiar with the text (van Manen, 2014). Van Manen recommends while reading to take notes and highlight, but he does not refer to it as coding. According to van Manen (2016), phenomenological themes are the structures of the experience, and they are created from examining the transcriptions of the interviews and writing.

I developed an organizing system for my data; since I used a phenomenological hermeneutic approach for my study, I used verbatim transcriptions to ensure and enhance my study's credibility and validity. I understood that it is vital to consider how the interview content is both heard and perceived as I transcribed for the form and accuracy of transcription as mentioned by Halcomb & Davidson (2006). After I transcribed the interviews, I reviewed my transcription while listening to the interviews to ensure my

transcriptions' accuracy. After I completed my transcriptions, I reviewed my transcription multiple times. Following the instruction shared in the work of van Manen (2016), I looked for telling, meaningful, and thematic instances in the accounts from the participants (van Manen, 2016). Adu (2013) discussed the process of understanding data in the stages of sorting, synthesizing, and theorizing.

As part of my organizing system, as I developed themes, I used van Manen's detailed or line-by-line approach (2016). I highlighted in bold what I said in the interview. I changed the color of the significant words of the transcription to red so they will stand out for easy access. I combed through my participants' answers and pulled out meaning units that I referred to as phrases/words of significance. These words of the participants were significant to the study. I copied my Phrases/Words of Significance from each of my transcription spreadsheets and created a separate spreadsheet. I aligned my Phrases/Words of Significance from the interviews with questions from Appendix A. I then studied the Phrases/Words of Significance and found underlying meanings and created themes in the form of capturing an understanding of the phenomenon as the theme is the experience of focus as described by van Manen (2016).

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Being aware of trustworthiness throughout the research increases the validity of the study, and one way to do this is by using memos after each interview to record observations and journaling (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I used memos to purge thoughts by doing write-ups or mini analyses to flesh out concepts and patterns that emerge in the data, as well as personal thoughts that may develop as a result of my personal experience

with the subject matter (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, Young, 2016). As a human instrument interpreting raw data synthesized for my study, I needed to remain neutral as the researcher in addition to understanding and acknowledging biases and assumptions I had concerning my research phenomenon. The use of journaling allowed me to expound personal feelings and reflections and what I am looking to gain from the research.

The four elements of trustworthiness for qualitative methodology are credibility, transferability, conformability, and dependability. Transferability is the applicability of the results in other contexts (Loh, 2013). Confirmability is the objectivity of the researchers while completing their research (Loh, 2013). Dependability is the reliability of the results at another time (Loh, 2013). One technique I used to ensure the quality of qualitative research is selecting a qualitative method that matches the research question and the aims of the research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Young, 2016). I chose to use hermeneutic phenomenology as the qualitative method for my study because it allows me to explore the qualitative complexities of the human experience (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Credibility**

As I intended to be cognizant of trustworthiness as I completed the study, I used analytic memos, as suggested by Ravitch and Carl (2016), as this increased the credibility of the findings. I enhanced the credibility of my study by my use of interviewing methods, reflexivity, and participant validation for my interview (Gibbs, 2012). Reflexivity affects the quality of qualitative research significantly due to the influence it has on the research. Young (2016) discusses a strategy for researchers to be transparent with how they employ reflexivity. Their reflexive approach coheres with the

philosophical assumptions on which the researcher bases his or her study. Rigor is essential for the quality of a study because not only is it ethical, but because the more thorough a study is, the easier others can understand it and duplicate (Noble & Smith, 2015). It is the researchers' job to guide the reader through the research process from the beginning to the end, including sample identification, recruitment, data collection, organization, and interpretation (Young, 2016).

### **Transferability**

I used thick descriptions to display how the research is principle-based and systematic in its processes, to help my results have transferability (Young, 2016). Thick descriptions are also useful in demonstrating rigor, which establishes credibility and trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004; Young, 2016). Thick descriptions display how the research is principle-based and systematic in its processes and helps the results to have transferability to similar contexts with similar sample populations (Young, 2016). If research is transferable, it can be used with ease in real-world settings (Young, 2016).

### **Dependability**

To increase dependability and avoid reliability issues, I documented as many steps of my procedures as possible (Creswell, 2014). Member checking, memos, and using an interview protocol increased the dependability of my study. I used the same instruments for each of my data sources, so my study has instrument consistency for dependability (Gibbs, 2012). I found prominent and frequent themes.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability is another quality check for qualitative research. Confirmability refers to the degree of neutrality in the study's findings, meaning the research is based on the participants' responses, not the researchers' bias or their reasons for doing the research (Gibbs, 2012; Shenton, 2004). I was aware of my biases so I could avoid being bias, and so I could remain neutral and objective. Techniques such as highlighting every step of data analysis completed help ensure quality because it provides a rationale for the researchers' findings (Gibbs, 2012). For confirmability, my goal was to remain neutral as the researcher, and I used notes and reflexive journaling to track my feelings and biases (Gibbs, 2012).

### **Ethical Procedures**

To maintain ethical standards and federal regulations, I received the approval of the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). I completed the IRB application and waited for approval before beginning data collection. After receiving approval from the IRB, data collection could begin, and I contacted my potential participants. Keeping in mind the participants' needs and safety, and the need for a collaborative relationship with potential participants, I reached out to introduce myself and the study. In the introduction, I ensured that the potential participants met the criteria needed for the study – married Black American couples over the age of 18 with one member of the couple currently employed in law enforcement, and they both agreed that they are satisfied in their marriage. An additional requirement was employment in law enforcement for a period of a least six months during their marriage for at least one of the



members of the couple. Once this was established, I scheduled a time to meet with each participant, at which time I had them read and sign a consent form. The consent form included a statement informing the participants that their participation in my study should pose no risk, that participation is voluntary, and the participant may withdraw their participation at any time. All information collected was used only for research and is being kept confidential. Once the study was completed, the results were shared with the participant if they desired to have them. I included my contact information in case the participant had any questions. Participants were told verbally and in writing in their invitation that their participation was completely voluntary, and they could choose to end their participation at any time.

I debriefed the participants with my expression of appreciation of their choice to participate in the study. I answered any questions they had and gave them my information to contact me if they thought of any questions later. I gave them contact information for the Research Participant Advocate at Walden University also in case they want to inquire about their rights as a participant. I also informed the participants that I may contact them later for additional questions and perform member checking. I maintained confidentiality and continue to do so, as stipulated on my consent form, to protect the privacy of participants. I maintained the data on an encrypted data storage device from the data collection to archiving. Confidentiality will be maintained, as stipulated on the consent form, to protect the privacy of participants. Reports coming out of this study did not share the identities of individual participants. I did not share details that might identify participants. Participants are essential to research as they are the experts for the

phenomenon that I studied. I did everything in my power to protect their privacy. It is also essential to notes that I followed the IRB guidelines and stipulations to ensure ethical research.

### **Summary**

Chapter three focused on the research methodology that will be utilized to conduct the research study. My research concentrated on the lived experiences of Black American couples with at least one partner in law enforcement pertaining to marital satisfaction. In this chapter, I reviewed this hermeneutic phenomenological research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, methodology, procedures for data collection, and analysis were discussed. Trustworthiness and ethical procedures were also explained as they are pertinent to the development of the study. The detailed results of the data collected will be shared in chapter four.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Black American couples, with at least one partner in law enforcement, pertaining to marital satisfaction. I aimed to interpret how Black American couples understand the construct of marital satisfaction and sustain it under the influence of a career in law enforcement. I included an in-depth review of the individuals' marital satisfaction and their perceptions of how law enforcement influences marital satisfaction. In this chapter, I outlined the results of the 12 Black American participants' experiences and concepts of marriage and marital satisfaction. The 12 participants included six heterosexual couples.

A semi structured qualitative interview was the data collection procedure for the study. I recruited participants via an email from various law enforcement agencies and organizations. I contacted organizations such as the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives, the National Association of Black Law Enforcement Officers, Inc., and Pennsylvania based law enforcement departments. I screened the participants interested in participating in the study that responded to the email.

After I screened the participants for meeting the criteria, I emailed the informed consent agreement. Due to COVID-19, I asked each of the participants to complete their interviews remotely using Zoom, and each participant agreed to meet via zoom and to have the interviews audio recorded only.

The data collection procedures I used followed van Manen's six step approach to hermeneutic phenomenology as described in Molley et al. (2018):

- 1) Turning to the nature of lived experience.
- 2) Investigating experience as we live it.
- 3) Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon.
- 4) Describing the phenomenon in the art of writing and rewriting.
- 5) Maintaining a strong and orientated relation to the phenomenon.
- 6) Balancing the research context by considering the parts and the whole.

I transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim and analyzed the transcripts using theme formulation and reflective writing and rewriting of the phenomenological text as described by van Manen, (2014). Theme formulation is a part of the analysis, so researchers can meaningfully organize and interpret data, but that is only a part of the process (van Manen, 2014). I transcribed the transcriptions verbatim to ensure and enhance the trustworthiness of the study. Hermeneutic data analysis involves the reflective writing and rewriting of the phenomenological text (van Manen, 2016). I mined for telling, meaningful, and thematic instances in the accounts from the participants as instructed through the work of van Manen (2016). Adu (2013) discussed the process of understanding data in the stages of sorting, synthesizing, and theorizing. I used van Manen's (2016) detailed line-by-line approach for my organizing system to develop themes ensures trustworthiness.

To increase the trustworthiness research, I created memos after each interview to record observations and for journaling as described by Ravitch and Carl (2016). In

concordance with Ravitch and Carl (2016) and Young (2016), I used memos to purge thoughts through write-ups and mini analyses to flesh out concepts and patterns that emerged in the data, as well as personal thoughts that developed resulting from my personal experience with the subject matter. As a human instrument interpreting raw data synthesized for the study, it was important to remain neutral, understanding and acknowledging possible biases and assumptions concerning the research phenomenon.

### **Profiles of the Participants**

I contacted nine couples via email inquiring about participating in the study. Two of the couples did not meet criteria, and one did not respond to the email sent to them. Because saturation was met with six couples, I did not pursue the seventh couple. I asked each participant to complete an informed consent and questionnaire prior to the interview. The demographic results are in Table 1. Each of the husbands are employed as law enforcement officers. The occupations of the wives varied greatly, with only one not working outside of the home. The household incomes ranged from 100,000 to over 150,000; the participants ages ranged from 30 to 54. The range of years the couples have been married is from three years to 36 years ( $M = 15$ ). All but one of the couples had at least one child ( $M = 1.5$ ), and all the participants had furthered their education beyond high school, with three obtaining graduate degrees or above. This was the first marriage for each of the participants. Six of the 12 participants shared that Christianity is their religion, two were more specific in saying they are Baptists, one said Catholic, and one said Pentecostal, and two said no religion, but that they have faith.

**Table 1***Demographic Information of Participants*

	Education	Occupation	Household Income	Age	Years Married	Number of Marriages	Religious Participation	Number of Children
Husband	BD	LEO	Over \$150,000	35-39	5	1	None	1
Wife	BD	Product Manager				1	None	
Husband	BD	LEO	\$100,000 -	40-44	11	1	Christianity	4
Wife	BD	Homemaker /Student	\$109,000			1	Christianity	
Husband	MS	LEO	Over \$150,000	30-34	3	1	Christianity	1
Wife	MS	Nurse Practitioner				1	Christianity	
Husband	BD	LEO	Over \$150,000	50-54	36	1	Christianity	2
Wife	BD	Nurse Manager				1	Christianity	
Husband	BD	LEO	Over \$150,000	40-44	13	1	Baptist	0
Wife	BD	Director of Human Resources				1	Catholic	
Husband	AD	LEO	Over \$150,000	45-49	22	1	Pentecostal	1
Wife	MD	Podiatry Specialist				1	Baptists but unsure	

*Note.* AD – Associates Degree; BD – Bachelor’s Degree; LEO – Law Enforcement Officer; MS – Master’s Degree; MD – Medical Degree; NP – Nurse Practitioner

**Couple 1**

Couple 1 has been married for 5 years and they have one pre-school aged child.

The couple were both raised in a two-parent home, and they met each other at a very young age, which the wife shared, led to “a foundation of friendship first.” The husband and wife each work outside of the home. The wife shared that they “tend to be for the most part on the same page. We share a lot of similarities as far as goals are concerned.” The husband shared that “we're complementary in terms of personalities; we're very similar because we did to grow up together; this person understands me for who I am.”

**Couple 2**

Couple 2 has been married for 11 years and they have four school aged children.

They dated in high school from 10th to 12th grade and then went their separate ways for

college. They found their way back to each other and became engaged when the wife was 29 years old, and they married a year later. The husband left for police academy a month after their wedding. The first week he was at the academy, his wife found out she was pregnant, which meant he was gone for most of the pregnancy of their first child. The husband and wife each described their relationship as a comfortable friendship. The wife shared that their background, including the amount of time they have known each other, has allowed them to build a friendship. She expressed that this friendship is more important to the marriage than the “passionate stuff.”

### **Couple 3**

Couple 3 has been married for 3 years and they have one pre-school aged child. The husband decided to become a law enforcement officer in 2011. He met his wife in 2014, 3 years into his career as a law enforcement officer. The wife is the youngest of three and was raised by a single mother.

### **Couple 4**

Couple 4 has been married for 36 years and they have two children. They married at a very young age and they both practice Christianity. The husband identifies as an “Army brat.” He shared that he lived all over the United States and abroad. The couple met in college, and they shared that something they have in common is that their fathers both lost their mothers to breast cancer. The couple shared that faith is the rock of their relationship and that something unique about them is that they eloped.

**Couple 5**

Couple 5 has been married for 13 years and they have no children. The husband was raised in a middle-class family of a Baptist faith and the wife declared that she has a very low-income background, and her faith is Catholicism. They met in college and after college decided to move in together as they both were offered jobs in the same city. After that first move, they allowed their careers to lead them. The couple shared that they have learned what to do and what not to do from observing their parents' marriages.

**Couple 6**

Couple 6 has been married for 22 years and they have one child. The husband served in the Army for three and a half years. After leaving the military, he was employed by Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) for a year. In 1996, he began working as a law enforcement officer. He married his wife in 1999, whom he met while she was employed as a police officer. The wife began her career in law enforcement, and she served in this role for 10 years before going back to medical school and becoming a Podiatry Specialist. The couple highlighted their ability to have fun together and the importance of having a companion by your side.

**Data Analysis: The Experiences and Insights from the Couples**

The couples shared openly about the foundation of their relationships, their strengths, and how trust and respect are demonstrated in their marriages. There were many similarities and differences in each of the couple's experiences. They spoke about the stress of law enforcement work, and how they overcome threats to their marriage. The couples stressed the importance of a balance between work responsibilities and family



responsibilities as well. The couples shared genuine stories that invoked great emotion. They shared wisdom and insight about their marital satisfaction, from which many emergent themes were revealed.

I found the following emergent themes in the data:

1. Strengths of the marriage, with subthemes of balancing each other, supporting each other, having history, patience, and putting each other first.
2. What makes the marriage special, with subthemes of happiness, friendship, and intimacy.
3. Respect.
4. Trust with a subtheme of boundaries.
5. Communication with subthemes of accountability and transparency.
6. Overcoming the effects of stress from a career in law enforcement with subthemes of time for decompression and coping strategies.
7. The dualism of being Black and a law enforcement officer.
8. Overcoming struggles in marriage, with subthemes of feeling of safety and security, compromise, learning from others.
9. Creating work and life balance, with subthemes of protecting your peace and economic strain.
10. The role of faith in the marriage.

The responses for each theme and subtheme are portrayed in Table 2.

**Table 2***Themes and Subthemes from Data*

Theme	Subtheme	Husband	Wife	Totals
Strengths of the marriage		6	6	12
	Balancing Each Other	2	2	4
	Supporting Each Other	3	3	6
	Having History	5	5	10
What makes the marriage special		6	6	12
	Happiness,	4	4	8
	Friendship,	3	3	6
	Intimacy	4	4	8
Respect		6	6	12
Trust		6	6	12
	Boundaries	4	3	7
Communication		6	6	12
	Accountability	6	6	12
	Transparency	3	3	6
Overcoming the effects of stress from a career in law enforcement		6	6	12
	Time For	2	2	4
	Coping Strategies	3	3	6
Dualism of being Black and a law enforcement officer		6	6	12
Overcoming struggles in marriage		6	6	12
	Safety And Security	3	2	5
	Compromise/Patienc	2	2	4
	Learning from	6	6	12
Creating work and life balance		6	6	12
	Protecting your	1	1	2
	Economic Strain	6	6	12
Role of Faith in the Marriage		6	6	12

**Strengths of the Marriage**

All the couples shared various strengths of their marriage that has helped them find marital satisfaction. There were many similarities of strengths shared between the couples, which resulted in the creation of subthemes including balancing each other,

supporting each other, having history, patience, and putting each other first. When speaking of their strengths, the wife of Couple 1 shared that “some things that I'm really good at that he's just not,” as she spoke of them balancing each other. The husband shared that their strength is their history. He stated, “having that history makes things unique between us; because we did to grow up together; this person understands me for who I am; came up together that's a little different than most people.” When speaking about what gives them strength, the husband shared,

...the level of trust that I have with her is something that I can't say that I could experience anywhere else. I cannot find that type of foundation elsewhere because of the history we have and how it was built; I would never find the level of trust in someone that I have in her.

The wife shared,

the level of trust, obviously the friendship that's there. Yeah. I guess, yeah, being able to work through issues; he's a really good provider and he's a caretaker just by his nature. He puts me and our child first; he does things and wants nothing in return.

The couple discussed not taking each other for granted and respecting each other's boundaries. They spoke about maintaining marital satisfaction through common interest, doing things at their own speed, and not trying to keep up with societal expectations, making time for each other, and giving each other space for their solo activities. The couple spoke about feeding each other's joy and how they think of each other when they are apart.

Couple 2 shared that their history is one of their greatest strengths. The wife explained that they had practice overcoming struggles since they were together for years before they married. They have learned how to navigate the difficulties of life. When speaking of their strengths, the wife shared,

I just think it helps you get through the day of the hard stuff when you have that background, when you have that foundation. Just the amount of time we've known each other, and just that friendship that we have in addition to being romantic partners. We had struggles before we got married, so we already worked through some of those hard things in life that happened. So, when it happens inside your marriage, it's just like, "Okay, we already went through something similar, or we went through something hard, so we know we can get through it." ...Were able to navigate that inside our marriage too, so I think that's really good. And that's a definite strength.

The husband shared that their strength is their history. He stated,

...cause most things in my life, I mean, I experienced with my wife basically. Being 16 till now I'm being 42, so yeah, just growing up together; everything that we've been through, that we got to experience and learn together. Like getting into the academy - I had struggles and my wife was right beside me.

The wife shared "a lot of our triumphs were together, any... and a lot of our downfalls. Like he said, any argument possible, we probably had it, so... And I believe that makes you stronger, the fact that you could come back." The couple discussed growing up

together and having prom pictures together is something that makes their marriage special.

Couple 3 shared that their strength is based in the couple's powerful communication. The wife asserted,

I would say communication. I think we communicate very well, I think, especially in the last couple of years. I will tell what's on my mind, like, "This hurt my feelings, I didn't like the way you did this." And he would say, "Oh okay, I didn't even realize," and most the time it doesn't happen again. I think in our earlier years, I wasn't as transparent about my feelings. I think we are patient with each other. Patience is a big thing, especially with a toddler and everything that's going on life, and COVID, and being married to somebody that has a new job every year and everything. We need this patience to face situations.

The husband shared that their strength is the support they provide for each other. He stated,

For me, it's support. I think all the avenues that we've been through since my wife, and I have met. Between having our son, getting married, buying a house, and then getting promoted and travelling two hours one way for work, put an eight-hour day into a 14-hour day relatively quickly, and the support from each other about every time something's happening in our... Mainly in my career at this rate, you know, she's always supportive. We absolutely communicate about everything, but the support associated with it is unmatched, because she understands that's my job.

The wife shared her strength that she attributes to their marriage comes from her faith. She shared that she prays a lot, more so than she has ever done before. She also expressed that she leans on her mother for support and that they will pray together. The husband shared that he finds his strength in his wife and from his friends. He expressed that he has a good support system that he can lean on and look up to also. He shared that his older brother has a lot of life experience, so he can turn to him for clarification and guidance whenever he needs help.

The couple shared that their marriage is special because of how much fun they have together. They expressed that they like being together every day and they are still excited to see each other after work each day. The husband expressed that what he wants he has in his wife. They respect each other's boundaries and give each other the time and space they need for themselves. Couple 4 shared that they each have a strong relationship with their heavenly father believe in Jesus, and that has been pillar of their marriage.

### ***Balancing Each Other***

Couple 2 emphasized the importance of balance in their relationship. The husband shared that even just having his wife as an example or having her as somebody he can call and just talk to like, "Well, I'm going through this," and she's kind of like, "Well, I try to do this when I'm dealing with whatever." He expressed how significant it is for him to have his wife help him refocus on what's important.

Couple 5 shared that he and his wife are "very much a team, and I think we make decisions based on being a team." He expressed that their balance does not come from necessarily what is best for him right now or what is best for her right now, it is what is

best for them both in their long-term goals. He expressed that his weaknesses are her strengths, and sometimes vice versa. He expressed that “if I’m unsure on how to handle something or how to approach something or navigate, I know that I can lean on her for that advice, for that guidance, for that balance”.

### ***Supporting Each Other***

The husband of Couple 3 shared that their strength is the support they provide for each other. The husband spoke of how they have supported each other through job changes and how they faced serious challenges when their lives seemed to change completely in a short time frame of a year. He stated,

And then when we had one year that we just... Between having our son, getting married, buying a house, and then getting promoted and travelling two hours one way for work, put an eight-hour day into a 14-hour day relatively quickly, and the support from each other about every time something's happening in our... Mainly in my career at this rate, you know, she's always supportive. We absolutely communicate about everything, but the support associated with it is unmatched, because she understands that my job.

The wife also expressed that she leans on her mother for support and that they will pray together. The husband shared that he finds his strength in his wife, his friends, and his older brother. He expressed that he has a good support system that he can lean on and look up to also.

The husband of Couple 4 shared how significant it is for him to come home after

an especially tough day at work and knowing that he is in a safe place. He expressed relief in being able to be home and “say what I want to say, and hopefully I won't be judged for what I say, but just a voice to listen and be supportive of that.” The wife of Couple 4 expressed that just by them saying the little things like “thank you” or doing things for each other that they know would be helpful to the other person helps them to strengthen their relationship.

Couple 5 referred to each other as each other's cheerleader. They discussed how they push each other and demonstrate that they want the best for each other. The wife shared, “...when I'm having a bad day, he's very much in the corner and pushing me and motivating me. And I think I do the same.” The wife shared that she is also self-motivated, and although they have a lot of family backing and a lot of friends and family support, the really focus on supporting each other. She expressed, “we have to be our best cheerleader. And if we're not, then in my opinion we're failing at marriage.” The wife also shared that she and her husband are very conscious of not pushing that button or crossing that line of, “I'm better than you. Then we're not a team, we're individuals just working together.” The husband spoke of the importance for them to remember that they are team no matter if she was the bread winner of the house, or he was the sole bread winner of the house or whatever the case. He shared that it really did not matter because they were working toward their team goal. He also emphasized the importance of remembering that they are “always equals regardless of what status, ranks or salaries, or whatever these other various materialistic titles can be, at the end of the day, we are one team.”



### *Having History*

Couple 1 discussed the importance of a strong foundation in a marriage. The husband expressed that the foundation that he and his wife have cannot be found elsewhere because of the history they have and the uniqueness of how their foundation was built. He stated, “having that history makes things unique between us; because we did grow up together; this person understands me for who I am; we came up together and that's a little different than most people.”

In reference to their strengths, the wife of Couple 2 shared that she believes having a history together creates a foundation that helps her get through a difficult day. She shared that the length of time that have known each other has allowed them to create a friendship in addition to them being romantic partners. She conveyed that the couple has had struggles before they were married, and because they have worked through them, when they encounter struggles now, they are not debilitating. She expressed, “When it happens inside your marriage, it's just like, ‘okay, we already went through something similar, or we went through something hard, so we know we can get through it.’ So, you don't just walk away at the first hard thing, because if that was the case, we probably wouldn't be married; since we've had such a long relationship.” She shared that being able to navigate adversity in the marriage is a definite strength for the couple.

The husband shared that their strength is their history. He stated,

...cause most things in my life, I mean, I experienced with my wife basically.

Being 16 till now I'm being 42, so yeah, just growing up together; everything that

we've been through, that we got to experience and learn together. Like getting into the academy - I had struggles and my wife was right beside me.

Couple 4 shared an opinion very similar to the other couples interviewed as they shared that they think their marriage is strong and special because they have been together for a long time. The husband expressed that when they got married, they had that belief that it was forever. They determined that divorce is not an option, so they work through things. They each expressed that they are not perfect but expressed great love for the life they have created together -especially for their children. Couple 5 shared that they grew up together as they were 20 years old when they met. They expressed that this felt like a whole lifetime ago and this time has strengthened their marriage.

Couple 6 shared that there are many components of their marriage that make it special. The couple shared that the strength of their marriage is based in on honesty, trust, overcoming barriers, and communication. The husband shared that he has learned to take data from their past mistakes and use that information to process their current situation. They described these learning experiences as their strength. They husband shared that their strength is the result of them being together for many years. He shared that when just starting out, it is difficult to find strengths because you find strength within your experience.

### **What Makes the Marriage Special**

Many of the participants highlighted the qualities of their marriage that they felt made their relationship distinctive. When the couples were asked what makes their marriage special, none of them hesitated to share all the reasons their union is unique.

The couples shared things including the length of time they have been together, the commitment they have to one another, their ability to communicate, the internal drive of self-motivation, how much fun they have together, and the excitement to see each other after work each day. The wife of Couple 2 shared that one reason their marriage is special is because she and her husband have prom pictures. She expressed, “a lot of our triumphs were together, any... and a lot of our downfalls. Like he said, any argument possible, we probably had it, so... And I believe that makes you stronger, the fact that you could come back.”

The husband of Couple 3 couple expressed that what he wants he has in his wife. Couple 5 shared that are not trying to keep up with the “Joneses” and they do not involve themselves in messy situations. The couple stated that they do not pressure each other to be something that are not, and they do not have a front for everybody else. They are honest with who they are and allow each other the freedom to continue to be his or herself by being true to themselves. The wife stated,

I don't find that we've ever really compared ourselves to other marriages, to other friends' relationships. I think what makes us special, is we stay true to each other and not fall into the peer pressure, or the family pressures, or the world pressures.

Couple 6 shared that their marriage is special because they always feel like they have that special person. The wife reflected on 22 years they have been together and expressed gratitude for her husband. She discussed that over the years, she has realized it is only the two of them and they have putting in the effort to make it work at all times. She shared that you always keep the other person in mind, you always want to make sure

that you are thinking about someone else besides yourself and that whatever it is that you do, reflects in a good light for her and her husband. She elaborated saying that what makes her marriage especially special to her is that she has someone who has her back and she has his back no matter what. She stated,

there's nobody, to me, who can come in between that regardless of who they are.

And it's like everybody has their moments, everybody has their issues but at the end of the day, you have that person that has your back no matter what happens. If I lose my job, he got my back. If he loses his job, I got his back. It's just like no matter what.

The husband shared that their marriage is special because he is able to accept criticism from his spouse as she can mirror for him the changes that he wants to make to become a better man. He expressed that no one knows you better than your spouse. He shared,

...to be able to get broken down in a way, meaning like she's able to tell me my deficiencies, and instead of challenging what she's saying about those deficiencies, me taking a look in the mirror and trying to rectify those deficiencies whether it's through my own or with the help of her. But that comes with time... this is now allowing me to expand and to see what you were telling me in the beginning. But now as time went on, I'm able to understand. Because you change as time goes, you have to be able to accept the criticism and you have to be able to address it, correct it and move forward. Not only does that make your marriage stronger, but I think that would make it very special because you can accept the fact that someone is telling you that you're doing something wrong or they're not

happy with something that's going on and you're self-analyzing it. ...So, if you in it to win it, you gotta be able to address or be able to adjust and I think that's where we at right now. I think that's part of why this relationship is so special.

### *Happiness*

Happiness was a theme that came up frequently during the interviews. The participants shared how happiness is demonstrated in their marriage as well as how it is achieved. Couple 2 shared that happiness is demonstrated in their marriage by them talking to others about their happiness. The wife said this is how she sees that her husband is satisfied. They spoke about the compliments they receive about how well behaved their children are and how this makes them feel good because it tells them they are doing something right. They expressed that they are happy because they are good parents together. The wife shared that they allow each other to be themselves and people can see the happiness and the satisfaction they have just being themselves.

Couple 3 shared that happiness is demonstrated in their marriage through words of affirmations like – “Hey, I’m really happy in our marriage.” The wife said that laughing together and spending time together has fueled her happiness. The husband talked about how he demonstrates happiness through performing acts of service for his wife. He stated, “happiness is it's those little things, cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, folding clothes, putting things up, trying to think of the things that she may need before she says something.” He shared just seeing how happy she was and knowing that this was something that he could do for her that wasn't ordinary, made her happy, which in turn made him happy.

Couple 4 shared that their happiness is demonstrated through their gratitude for each other. They shared they are grateful for what they have and the things they do to help each other grow. The husband shared that happiness is providing for their family and making sure the family's needs are met. He shared that happiness is the security of his family, and due to their religious faith, their belief in the Heavenly Father, and his son the Savior, he shared that they will be all right no matter what happens.

The wife of Couple 5 shared that support makes her happy. She spoke about the demands they both face for work, and how they have to make sure that they meet in the middle and have an understanding of each other's obligations. She spoke of the importance of not putting pressure on each other to live up to something that they cannot commit to. The husband shared that he really looks forward to coming home because he gets to have expressive conversations with his wife, and they can spend time together. He shared that if he sees a smile on his wife's face, then he knows he is on the right path. He stated that happiness is gifts purchased from the material side, but understanding that gifts are temporary happiness, he said that the true happiness is the comfort of no sleepless nights. He shared that they do not go to bed angry because they realize that realize that at the end of the day, their true independent happiness is incumbent upon their marriage, and how successful it is and how successful they are at it. He expressed that their marriage is a work in progress. Ultimately, he shared, they find their happiness in the marriage, by just ensuring each other's personal happiness throughout each day.

### ***Friendship***

A few of the couples shared that friendship was the key to their happiness. Couple 3 shared that their marriage is special because of the friendship they have developed. They expressed how much fun they have together and how they like being together every day. They discussed that as long as they are excited to see each other after work each day, they know that they are on the right track to their happiness.

Couple 5 shared that they waited 16 years before they chose to have children because they wanted to build their friendship through traveling and learning about each other. Couple 6 shared that doing little things, little flirty things like sending text messages throughout the day and laughing with each other has led to them becoming best friends. The wife expressed that that she looks forward to being able to sit down with him after work and relax together. Her husband shared that supporting each other through devastating losses and celebrating each other during their wins is something special between them because no one else can give them support like they can give to each other. He accredited this belief to their friendship and because of how well they know each other.

### ***Intimacy***

Intimacy was addressed by four of the six couples, but only Couple 5 spoke about it in detail. They spoke about the materialization of their affections, and they described the importance of intimacy in their marriage. They expressed that with all their occupational travel and stresses, it is very easy for intimacy to fall to the wayside. The wife expressed that it is necessary for them to set some time aside to demonstrate that

there is still a strong connection between them. She shared they also verbalize a lot as they do not ever have a phone call where they do not express the love they have for one another and also to say that they miss each other. The husband shared that it is essential that they continue to set time apart for them and he spoke about their date night. He stated that the date nights do not need to be out as they enjoy being home together. The important piece is them spending intimate time with each other and continuing to be honest with each other, and what their needs are at any given point in time.

### **Respect**

Respect has been identified as an important component of marital satisfaction (Ledermann et al., 2010; Dew & Bradford, 2013). Dew and Bradford (2013) found that demonstrations of respect were positively linked with marital satisfaction and negatively related to marital struggle and the possibility of divorce. Each of the couples spoke about the role of respect in their relationship and how it is demonstrated in their marriage.

The wife of the first couple addressed respect by stating, “when we do argue, like there's never any disrespectful name calling or anything like that; I try not to nag.” The husband shared that for him respect comes down to them understanding each other. He talked about how they work to hear the other person out before responding, and how they can usually, work out whatever the issue may be, because often it is just a misunderstanding. He expressed that neither his wife nor he likes tension or to be in a situation where there is animosity, so they work to resolve issues before they grow into something more. He shared how they work through stalemates by walking away from each other and just cooling off before it turns into destructive behavior. He shared that he



will walk away and let his wife think she won before he steps outside of himself and responds aggressively.

The wife of the second couple addressed respect in her marriage by sharing how she felt respected by her husband's understanding to her hyphenating her name and the support he gives her in her endeavors. She also shared that they respect each other to know that they are doing what they are supposed to do, even in the absence of each other. The husband shared that he knows the hyphenated name was a big thing for his wife. He expressed that he just respects his wife as he places her on the same level as himself. He expressed that he wants his kids to have the example of their parents respecting each other. He said even in dealing with their kids, they always come together and make decisions.

The third couple shared that respect is very important to them. The wife addressed respect and how for her it means that they "never hit below the belt." She shared that they never have screaming matches, they do not curse at each other, and do not call each other out of their name. She expressed that she would rather him not saying at all than to say something that will cause harm. She expressed that her husband does not handle stress well, so they have determined that they say their piece and then talk about it an hour or two later. She spoke of a line that they have developed, that they will not cross. The wife shared that she does not want to model negative behavior for their son. She also shared that she told her husband when they first met, that she would not tolerate disrespect.

The husband shared that he believes respect is demonstrated in their marriage through communication. He shared that "although I believe I'm a very good

communicator, I am normally the silent type when I'm upset and I'm angry, and that can carry from an hour or two, a week, to two weeks.” He shared that over the past year, he feels that he has done a great job of taking the time he needs to process, but then checking back to make sure that they are still on the same track. He expressed that he thinks that shows more respect and more maturity than anything else that he has done thus far.

The fourth couple addressed respect simply by saying “we just treat each other, with respect there's no other option for us.” The fifth couple shared that they do not yell at each other or curse at each other. The wife shared that they make a conscious effort not to disrespect each other. And even when they do not agree, they are conscious in how they talk to each other because they recognize that feelings can get hurt very, very quickly. The husband and wife agreed that they do not go to bed angry. They expressed they make an effort to listen to each other and to talk through any issues that may be causing a disruption in their marriage. The wife shared that they also respect what the other does occupationally. Since they both work high stress level jobs, they make sure to make space for each other to discuss their day at work, so they can let it go. The wife expressed that her terrible day is not chasing down criminals or getting shot at, but it still doesn't make it a less terrible day than her husband's terrible day. She expressed that it is important that they make sure that they understand the differences there and that it does not make one better or worse than the other. The husband shared that respect for him means respecting what each of them brings to the table. He shared that he respects her word and position. He said that they balance each other very well in that aspect as well.

He said that she is his equal and his best friend. He shared that he would never disrespect her in the action of trying to seem like she's less than him.

The wife of couple number six shared that she believes that respect is you giving space to each other, respecting the feelings of each other, and taking each other's feelings into consideration. She shared that respect is talking to each other in a “certain kind of way.” We can be upset with each other, but we never resort to just talking to each other like somebody we do not know because we are mad at that moment. She expressed that there are many ways to show respect, but she thinks that inclusiveness is an important way to do this. The husband of Couple 6 shared that respect is necessary within a marriage to keep potentially negative situations from growing worse.

### **Trust**

Trust is another important component of marital satisfaction (Ledermann et al., 2010; Dew & Bradford, 2013). Curran et al. (2010) studied the meaning of marriage for Black Americans and found that trust is an interpersonal resource that enables strong, happy, and enduring marriages. When asked how trust is demonstrated in their marriage, the couples reflected on honesty, loyalty, and boundaries. Couple 1 highlighted the concept of honesty; the husband shared that they understand the expectations of the other, and because they respect each other, they would not put themselves in any situations to not be trusted. They respect each other, and trust that each will do the right thing separate from each other, whether it is financial or social. He expressed that they established a long time ago that they will be sure things are transparent between them. He expressed that they have a mutual understanding of life.

The wife shared that they do not have insecurities and she expressed that there has never been a time where she felt the need or the desire to go through her husband's phone. She stated that she knows he is coming back at the end of the day, so she trusts.

When asked how trust is demonstrated in their marriage, the second couple highlighted the extent of time they have been together. The husband shared,

I trust my wife with my life. I'd have known her half my life, maybe more than half my life now that I'm getting old; I trust that I'm gonna be okay. That's the trust. I trust that I'm gonna be okay because she's going... She's not gonna let... She's gonna lift me up; she's gonna help me there.

The wife shared that if they did not have trust when they walk out the door, she would be freaking out. She shared that her husband calls her all the time. She expressed that when you start behaving with a lack of respect and not having trust or doing things that makes your partner question that trust, this will have negative implications in your relationship.

The third couple expressed that trust is demonstrated in their marriage through absolute transparency. The husband shared that he exercises absolute transparency because this is what grew his relationship; they treat their relationship as an open book. He talked about how vulnerable he had to be to let someone into his finance world. He spoke about how they communicate openly and even know each other's friends, as they go to the same places all the time. The husband shared that he does not have a reason to mistrust his wife, so he is not going to do so. He shared that if they do what they say they are doing, the more the trust will build. He spoke further on the topic stating that if your spouse is ultimately doing something different than what they shared with you, maybe

there is a reason for it; they will likely tell you if you give them an opportunity to do so. The husband shared that there is very little that they have not communicated with each other, and this keeps trust at a high level for them. His wife discussed the transparency in their marriage and how she feels like it has aided the couple in not having issues with trust. She stated, "He's never given me a reason to not trust."

The husband of the fourth couple shared that his goal is to not get hurt. He stated that he does everything to manage risk, so he finds himself "on the edge." He explained this by saying that when he goes out, his wife knows that he is prepared, and that he will not take a whole lot of risks. He further explained that he does not take risks that will put their family in jeopardy, and he knows that she trusts him when he goes out, so he does not do anything that would violate her trust.

The husband of couple of five shared that he believes trust involves the absence of jealousy thing. He explained that he has not worn his wedding band for the last 10 years because of a work incident. While making an arrest, an individual challenged him and threatened to harm his wife after seeing his wedding band. He shared that they demonstrate trust in their relationship and in their marriage by standing by each other and supporting each other's endeavors. The wife of Couple 5 shared that she knows that her husband is doing the right thing and that he knows that she is doing the right thing. Since they believe in each other and they communicate well, she stated that they do not have issues around trust.

Couple 6 approached the topic of trust differently than the other couples by sharing that they struggled with trust in the beginning of their relationship. The husband shared that trust is earned, and he admitted that he was “rough on the trust.” He shared,

I broke trust a couple of times along the way but that comes with being immature and then working your way up to that mature level where you finally realize, look, you only get so many shots at this trust thing and it's hard to come back from it when you mess up that trust. But when you build and you show, and you demonstrate as time go on, you start getting back that trust chemistry.

The husband shared that the building of trust takes time, and he reflected on the ups and downs of their 22-year marriage. He talked about how he needed to see things throughout his journey and how he decided he wanted a strong marriage, and he wanted things to work. He shared that he believes that there will be some breakdowns, but with communication and being honest with each other, he explained that he believes a couple can bridge the deficiencies they have thus maintaining trust. He stated that you cannot allow breakdowns in the relationship that are beyond repair. He instructed that when something happens, you need to be able to communicate and get the relationship back on track.

The wife of Couple 6 shared that she believes trust is built by giving space. She shared that trust is demonstrated when you give your spouse their space to be able to do things that they want to do without you, and you are okay with it. She elaborated that you must give them space, and not hover over them, and trust that they will make the right

decisions. She expressed that trust can be displayed in a lot of ways, but for her trust is allowing a person the space to be able to do what they want.

### ***Boundaries***

During the interviews, while some of the couples discussed trust, a subtheme developed identifying boundaries as a key component of trust. Couple 1 was very direct in discussing not taking each other for granted and the importance of respecting each other's boundaries. Couple 3 commented on how they respect each other's boundaries and give each other the time and space they need for themselves. The husband of Couple 4 shared that his wife understands him and does not mind him doing the adventurous things that he loves. He talked about how he enjoys living on the edge, and she does not live on the edge. He expressed gratitude for her understanding, and that she does not try to restrict him.

Couple 6 spoke about giving each other space. They discussed that they have been married for a long time and they have learned how to respect each other's boundaries. The husband shared that they could tell when each other needs space and when they want to spend time together. They also have worked to not feel they are being rejected when the other person wants to spend time alone. The husband shared that time alone for him is smoking a cigar in the garage. The wife shared that she likes alone time when she is doing work. When she completes her work, she said at that time they can come together and spend quality time with each other.

## **Communication**

Researchers have shared that marital communication is linked with marital quality, satisfaction, and trust (Ledermann et al., 2010). There are numerous stressors experienced by Black Americans working in law enforcement, potentially harming marital functioning. One of these stressors is poor communication, and it can be exacerbated by the nature of the job, unfair treatment within the law enforcement culture, racial discrimination, and racial residential segregation (Leslie & Young, 2015; Roberts et al., 2013). Couple 1 addressed communication in their interview by addressing arguing. The wife shared that when they do argue, there is never any disrespectful name calling. She also expressed that she does her best not to nag her husband. The husband shared that for communication he believes that communication comes down to understanding each other. He shared that as a couple, they know that they should probably just hear the other person out before responding. The husband shared that when they do this, they can work out whatever the issue may be, because often it is just a misunderstanding of the way one of them perceive the other's action or inaction. He explained that neither of them like tension or to be in a situation where animosity is present, so they resolve issues before they become too much to handle. He shared that if they reach a stalemate in their communication, they will walk away from each other and just cool off to prevent destructive behavior from occurring.

The husband of Couple 2 shared that he needed to increase their communication to enhance their relationship. The wife shared that she witnessed her mother get burnt out in her own marriage. To prevent herself from burning out, she is engaging in more



conversation with her husband and practicing communicating what she needs, so her marriage does not have the same trajectory of her parents.

The wife of Couple 3 expressed that she would rather them not saying anything at all than to say something that will cause harm. The couple shared that they have an agreement to talk things out, but they are careful not to say anything that can cause harm. They are intentional in not crossing the line they have created for their relationship. They spoke about taking the time needed to think things over. The husband shared that over the past year, he feels that he has done a great job of taking the time he needs to process, but then checking back to make sure that they are still on the same page. The husband shared that he overcomes threats to their marriage by exercising communication. He explained that if they always let each other know what the problems are, they will not be blindsided and will know ideally what the problem is, which will prevent further issues in their relationship.

Couple 4 shared that they do not yell or scream at each other. They both shared that they give each other space when space is needed, and they avoid saying things in the heat of the moment. They allow themselves time to calm down before discussing heated issues so they can truly listen to each other speak.

Couple 5 spoke about how essential communication is in their relationship because of how much they travel for their job. The wife shared that there are times that due to traveling, they may see each other one day in a month. They will alter their schedule when seeing each other once a month becomes too much for them. They constantly are working on being open to listening to each other and resetting their priorities. The wife

shared that she finds their communication to be comforting and satisfying. She expressed how important it is for them to be sure the lines of communication are open without either of them feeling like they are enduring undue pressure. The couple spoke of their dedication to having open communication and explained that this is what makes their marriage work in addition to setting time apart for each other. The client shared that they are intentional in ensuring that they keep an open line of communication, date night, and reminding each other that at the end of the day, they are a team and each other's support network making an effort each day to communicate and put aside their own day and work life and say, "Hey, what's going on in your world? And where can I support you and what your day is? Or what is going on in your schedule or in your emotions?" The wife expressed that they can say to each other things like, "Hey, I'm having a rough day." "Okay, why? What can I do to help? Let's talk it out." Knowing how to work through difficult times takes stress and strain off their marriage. The husband shared that if they did not have communication, they would have to try to guess what each other is thinking, and that could lead to other problems.

Couple 6 shared that they communicate openly with "no beating around the bush and no sugar coating." They shared that they speak to each other respectfully and are cognizant of how each other feels and the expectations they have of each other. The husband shared that if the communication broke down, it would hard to maintain their relationship. They shared that in the beginning they would guess at what each other is thinking, but now they are able to talk to each other and share openly what they are

thinking. The wife shared that due to their open communication, other things in their relationship seem to flow easily.

### ***Accountability***

Couple 6 shared that they have found accountability to play a very important role in their marriage. If they see each other veering off from how their path they “self-police” each other. They discussed how important it is for them to stay in a set pattern. They explained that if they deviate from that pattern, they get each other back aligned to where we need to be by holding each other accountable through communication. They expressed strongly that they always must talk.

### ***Transparency***

Couple 3 shared that transparency is extremely important to their marriage. The wife shared that she would say what is on her mind, "This hurt my feelings, I didn't like the way you did this." And he would respond, "Oh okay, I didn't even realize," and most the time it does not happen again. She shared that in their earlier years, she was not as transparent about her feelings. The wife also shared that they are patient with each other, which also helps them in their communication. The wife shared that having transparency in their marriage has aided them in not having issues with trust. She stated, “He's never given me a reason to not trust.”

### **Effects of Stress from a Career in Law Enforcement**

Law enforcement occupations carry high stress loads and create work-family conflict due to many factors including unpredictable schedules, emotional stress, public perceptions, and interactions (Kirschman, 2018). The couples discussed the effects of

stress from a career in law enforcement on their marital functioning. The husband of Couple 1 shared,

...depending on the day, they might have dealt with some traumatic things and might just wanna be a homebody at that point. For some couples, there's animosity that's bred there. 'You don't ever wanna go out with me, do this, that, and the other.' And they don't understand that aspect of their partner's career. We don't have those issues; she understands that and allows me to decompress at my own speed.

The husband shared that if his wife mentions things like preparing dinner, he will do his best to prepare a meal, so his wife does not have the burden of figuring things out. He expressed that they try to be understanding of the other's situations, whether they feel that it is the same or not. He expressed that stress is stress, no matter how it comes about and what the source of it is. So, he expressed that they try to minimize the amount of stress they put on one another based on what the other one is already dealing with at the time. The wife shared that she has a lowered stress level because her husband never seems to be at work whenever stuff is going on in their specific geographical area. She expressed that social media was an issue for her as well as her husband's race. She shared that she closed all her Facebook accounts and in reference to her husband race, she stated,

I have a Black husband who's a cop. So, you have that dual dynamic there, 'cause he's a Black man, and he completely understands, and he knows some of his coworkers are racist. But he knows all of them are not like that.

Couple 2 discussed the effects of stress from a career in law enforcement on their marital functioning. The husband talked about how it is a benefit to him that his wife has knowledge of the legal field. He explained that it makes it easier for him to open up to her when he deals with issues at work. He expressed that there have also been some heated conversations between them because of his line of work as well. He shared that he was very excited about becoming a law enforcement officer, but after he got into the field, he began to see the truth behind it. He said his wife sees what is going on in the field as well also, so together they try to make sense of what is going on but often it feels impossible. He expressed that it can be stressful for him to deal with the stress of work, and then the anxiety from home due to his wife stressing about what she sees happening.

The wife shared the life became stressful for them as soon as her husband joined the police academy because this caused him to be gone for the majority of their first pregnancy. She discussed what it was like for her to have to deal with the pregnancy on her own for the most part. She shared that she feels conflicted by the status of law enforcement in this country and how it interacts with Black Americans. She expressed feeling bad for her husband due to him being Black and a police officer. She shared that he is in the middle, which is a hard place to be, and it leads to him being defensive of his profession. She expressed that she works to be understanding of his situation. She shared that he is to listen to what she thinks. She talked about his getting pulled over and when he is in his personal vehicle for no reason other than because they live in a White community. She shared that once the officers find out that he is a police officer, they let him go, but she is fearful of that privilege not extending to their children. The wife shared

that she understands things need to be different, and she is vocal about that when she sees things happening in the world and situations where Black people are getting shot by officers. She expressed that because of his profession, she works to understand his dissonance, but conflict is created in their relationship sometimes because of him being defensive of the way the police handle certain situations.

The husband shared that he handles the stress of working in law enforcement is by talking to his wife. He expressed that her knowing a lot about law allows him to ask for her opinion. He conveyed that being open with her helps him to deal with stress. He shared that he feels like he needs to keep his worlds together because that's what keeps him sane. He explained that his wife is his glue, and his rock, and when he talks to her, she helps him make sense of things. He also spoke about how he changed his position to working in the lab and off the streets to remove stress from his family and himself. He expressed that being open about his stress and his struggle, helps him to deal with it. He shared that he is intentional in working to make his wife comfortable, and this is possible through them being open, with each other. He shared that he thinks "marriage is a constant back and forth, but that's the good part because the scary part is when people stop talking."

The wife shared that as a family, she feels like they are making a sacrifice for her husband to do what he does because his profession is very stressful, and she expressed that it is additionally stressful because they are a Black family. She shared that it helps her to think about how in the grand scheme of things, their sacrifice is not for nothing. She shared that she knows that if more Black people work in law enforcement, change

will come because it cannot stay the way it is now. She expressed that she also knows that if more Black people are working in higher level positions in law enforcement, this will also cause progressive change. She focused on the positive things about her husband being in law enforcement as far as it relates to their kids, and how it can be an advantage for him to be in that position. She expressed that he gets to come and talk to the kid's classrooms, and how the kids are so proud of who he is and what he does. She expressed that talking to her mother daily, his parents every week helps her to deal with their stress. She shared that she also talked to a couple other spouses that have law enforcement spouses, and this helps her also. She expressed that keeping the positive aspects in her mind when dealing with stress gets her through it. She shared that ultimately talking everything over with her husband helps her significantly. She expressed that there are some positive things that come with the stress and focusing on those things helps to get her through difficult times.

Couple 3 discussed the effects of stress from a career in law enforcement on their marital functioning. The wife reiterated that her husband does not do well with stress. She shared that he would get home from a very long day at work and “just stress and word vomit”. She expressed openly how she feels about this stating,

And of course, you never want your husband to be stressed and not happy and just hearing it on a daily basis. And the higher that he moves up, you're not worried about the civilians, you're not worried about him pulling somebody over and somebody shooting, you're worried about the people in the office. You're worried about being a Black man, being a young Black sergeant, and people not liking the

authority that he has. And being the first Black sergeant at his station, and the only Black person in the whole station. Especially being so far from home, there's not many people you can turn to for guidance and help.

Her husband shared that he did not realize how much stress he was putting on his family, his mother-in-law included. He shared that he did have to accept that his stress level was at a very critical point at that time. He expressed that this experience helped him to see that he does not handle those stresses as well as he thought he did. The wife continued to share her frustration stating,

You can't really give your point of view, because although you are a law enforcement officer, you're still a Black man from Philly. You still relate to everybody as a Black man. And just dealing with the stress on a daily basis is hard, and I know that it will continue to get worse the higher he moves up, 'cause the higher you move up, the less Blacks there are. And I think for him, it's the age and it's being Black. Stressful, but of course, I want him to move up. It's not even a question of if he should do it, it's just, I don't know, we'll make it work, and try not to... Try not to take out your stress in a rude way. It's hard on the whole family, ...and just stressful on a normal basis.

The husband shared that the stress of working in law enforcement can be overwhelming. He shared that he did not find a way to effectively manage his stress when it was at its peak, but his situation changed. He was able to transfer to a barrack closer to his home, and this allowed him more time to take care of himself and spend more time with his family. He expressed that his greatest outlet was playing with his son. He expressed that



at this time, he was able to reflect on how he was dealing with his stress. He realized how bad he was eating, not keeping himself in shape, and allowing the stress to take a toll on him. He shared that his stress seemed to be forever revolving. He expressed feeling thankful that he and his family are in a very good spot now. He talked about how they still have stresses, but now they talk about them, work through them, and manage them so much better than they did previously. He expressed that even when they have stress in their life, and things going on at work like with the protests, they handle those things well as they talk through them. The husband shared that getting through Covid and being able to participate in physical activities again helped him tremendously to deal with his stress.

The wife shared that she handles the stress of her husband working in law enforcement by talking to him when he gets home. She stated that she is genuine in wanting to hear about his day and wanting him to release any tension he absorbed throughout that day. They talk as soon as he gets home so they can release what needs to be released, fix what needs to be fixed, and then move on to enjoy the rest of their day. She expressed that stress is a normal thing for them and they must adjust as they go through life together.

Couple 4 shared that stress is not something causes them too much trouble. The husband shared that being on the road and being domestic for his position can create stress for him. He shared that he is intentional about not bringing work stress home, by practicing decompression and compartmentalization. He talked about compartmentalizing by doing his hobbies. His wife shared that she does not have stress related to him with law enforcement. She expressed that her faith and trusting her heavenly father has

prevented her from carrying stress concerning his job. She expressed that she has always trusted that her heavenly father will bring him home, and there was not anything that she could do or say to protect him when he was at work, so she depended on her heavenly father to protect him.

Couple 5 shared that they recognize that there is a great level of stress that comes from the husband's position and they do their best to manage it and not feed it. The husband shared that he can manage his own stress, but he does worry about the impact of the stress that he brings home on his wife. He explained that his job trains him to deal with stress, as they train him to deal with the different scenarios and different incidents. He explained that through his job, he will see and encounter the worst of the world and life, but his wife is not necessarily trained to do so. He expressed that he is very cautious as to what stories he tells at home or how much work he brings home because he knows that will create a stress within her. He shared that at times, it is verbalized from her, and she'll say, "Hey, you know, be careful today I'm a little worried about what you're gonna..." He explained that she will internalize some of what he has going on and he will assure her that he is dealing with his normal stress of the day, and that it will go away once he leaves work. He also shared that his response would depend on how perfect he is trying to make his situation.

The wife shared that because her husband is no longer on the road, her stress level has decreased significantly. She shared that when he was SWAT, it was nerve-racking for her. She shared that now the stress is not caused so much from him getting hurt due to him being in physically dangerous situations, but it is more from an outside perspective.

She expressed that she feels people are very judgmental, and due to him being a law enforcement officer, he is the target of side conversations from friends and family. She explained that they will see something on the news that is very one-sided, a skewed view of whatever is going on in the media, very negative, and condescending dialogue about law enforcement in general and target her husband with this information. She talked about how she always wants to jump in and defend her husband. She shared that the conversations are always like, "Well, everything that you see on the news, isn't the truth. And please remember, my husband, who you love and trust and respect and all this stuff, is also a cop. And just so every cop isn't a bad cop." She said that this is something that she does not think will go away, so she is working on not allowing it to cause her stress.

Couple 6 shared that in the beginning of their relationship, they did not experience much work-related stress because they both were in law enforcement. The husband shared that since his wife has been out of the field for several years now, he informs her of some things, but not everything. He explained that because they are married, he knows that she will worry. He shared that there have been some close calls with him over the years at work, but he keeps those incidents with him. He expressed that keeping the incidents to himself causes him a little stress, but that he would rather take that stress than give her that part of it. He explained that he feels like the blessing is he made it through that situation, so why tell her about that situation and have her stress about it. He explained that for him mentally, it is over and done, so it is not necessary to continue to talk about it.

The wife of Couple 6 shared that she believes that she handles the stress from

her husband's career in law enforcement well because of her background of being in law enforcement for 10 years. She spoke to how her educational background including a graduate degree in criminalistic and biological forensics also aids her in understanding the ins and outs of what her husband deals with at work. She discussed what causes her stress now is the climate of law enforcement meaning what people think about law enforcement and the seemingly general hate of law enforcement. She said that she would prefer that her husband did not need to be out dealing with the public and or even some of his colleagues. She shared that she does not think the current risk is worth it.

### ***Time for Decompression***

As Couple 1 discussed the effects of stress from a career in law enforcement on their marital functioning, the husband shared when things happen that can create trauma within him, he needs time to be home and to decompress. He shared that there is no animosity created between him and his wife when these moments occur because his wife understands that he needs time for decompression, and she gives him the space and time to do so at his own pace. Couple 4 discussed how they do not practice nagging in their relationship, and they will give each other space when needed. The wife shared that her husband needs to decompress when he comes home, and he usually does this by watching television. She expressed that she realizes how important it is for him to have his space to decompress, so he did not feel overwhelmed by what he dealt with that day while he was working. She shared that he needed time to let it go.

### ***Coping Strategies***

Couple 2 talked about the coping strategies they use to deal with the stress they endure. Spending time with their children was expressed as an effective way for them to deal with stress. Talking to their parents and talking to other law enforcement couples who can share their experience has also been very helpful. They spoke about being intentional in keeping a positive mindset when dealing with the stress also helps them to get through it. They said what is most helpful for them is talking to each other and hearing each other. Couple 3 discussed how talking to each other has been extremely helpful for them, in addition to exercising, and spending time together as a family. The husband shared that he noticed that he could process through stress more effectively when he ate a healthy diet. Couple 4 shared that they cope best with stress by making time to spend time together.

### **The Dualism of Being a Black man and a Law Enforcement Officer**

The stress of being Black (St. Vil, 2014) and the additional stress of working in the field of law enforcement (Kirschman, 2018) may influence the marital satisfaction of couples that fall within this demographic. When asked about how the effects of being a Black man in law enforcement increases or decreases the level of stress couples experience in their marriage, the couples shared similar experiences and insight. The husband of Couple 1 responded that it depends on various factors. He discussed that with social climate today, there are things that happen that upset him and his wife. He stated that he will call in sick when he is not in a mental space to go in for fear of saying something that will be genuine, but not viewed by his White colleagues as the proper

thing to say. He shared that he has learned to remove himself from a situation based off what is going on and how he feels about it. He shared that being Black plays a factor in terms of how he and his wife navigate through the world. The wife shared her experience with handling race at work and her experience with being the only Black person in the office or the only Black person in an elevator, or in conference rooms provides her with a shared experience with her husband. The husband shared that at work, the concept of race increased the level of stress that he endures. He shared,

...you run the risk of, one, being alienated from the rest of your coworkers, who you have to deal with day in and day out for the sake of doing what's right, and assisting somebody who you'll probably never see again, but you know it's the right thing to do. They may or may not even appreciate your intervention; you have the internal struggle of, 'Can you go to sleep at night, knowing you allowed something to happen that shouldn't have?' So I'm always erring on the side of, I've been a Black man before I've ever been a trooper and I will be a Black man long after I'm a trooper.

He shared that there have been times that he has stepped into a situation and said something to prevent something from happening, or he has not corroborated a story that the rest of the people involved in a situation came up with to try to justify their actions. The husband spoke of witnessing the unfair treatment of people of color and the negative assumptions that are made by his White colleagues pertaining to civilians that do not look like them. He shared that he works to help his colleagues learn to hesitate or rethink when they're approaching somebody that looks like him, with the hope that may be enough to

save someone's life. He spoke about his experience at the police academy. He shared that there were people in the academy with him that had never interacted with a Black person before going to the academy. All they knew was what they had seen on social media, and this view was very skewed. They were very surprised to learn that he was raised in a household with two parents, his family was never on welfare, and that he always attended private school. He shared,

I just give them this narrative. They're just like, 'That's not real life, I was on welfare.' It's like, 'Exactly. So, if you're on welfare and you grew up in this trailer park with only your mom, why do you have an issue with the Black man who grew up over here with only his mom and was on welfare? Your story is no different, but the narrative is, you got the same exact story, but for some reason, things are different, but people don't wanna hear that. They only wanna go by the narrative of whatever news outlet they follow and so forth.

The husband shared that he knows that there have been plenty of times where certain calls have come in, and because he was the officer handling it, he feels he may have saved someone's life or kept their livelihood intact because of how he handled it versus if one of his colleagues would have been there. He expressed with emotion this is why he continues to serve as a law enforcement officer.

When Couple 2 was asked about how race increases or decreases the level of stress they experience in their marriage, the wife responded,

...it just seemed like there were some double standards happening. So, the Black officers get reprimanded more. They just get treated differently. They get more

punishments for stuff that they do wrong. So, I just think your job's already stressful, but you're getting in trouble more for things that you're doing, and you're trying to do the right thing. So that's gonna be added stress that somebody else is not gonna have. You're a Black man first and then you're an officer. They see you as a Black man. They don't see the officer part when you're not in your uniform.

She shared that she has asked him not to carry his gun when he is not on duty because she feels this puts him more at risk. She expressed that she feels like officers are already aggressive when they pull her husband over and she does not want them to react negatively to him having a gun. She discussed why she thinks that being a Black officer is hard and why being the spouse of one is hard because she witnesses him being in the middle. It is hard to be both an officer and Black. She expressed that on some level, they contradict each other because of the way things are happening with the Black community and law enforcement. She expressed that she feels sorry for her husband because he does not have a lot of people to talk to. She explained with frustration that the few officers that he works with that look like him are in the same predicament. She shared that when negative things happen in the world concerning Black men, and he must go to work, the White officers, expect him to answer for all Black people, which is not reasonable. The wife talked about her husband coming home and telling her that he has these conversations at work; she shared,

...and then he has to find a balance between being a Black militant person who has these ideas about what law enforcement could be better for Black people than



it is; He has to find a balance with having these attitudes at work and expressing these attitudes at work, or not saying anything because he doesn't wanna alienate himself from other officers. So, I feel like he's in a really precarious situation, for who he is. And I think it's directly related to his race.

The husband shared his experience with handling race at work and his experience with being the only Black person in the office. The husband shared that has had outbursts at work and that he is at risk of being identified as the militant guy. He said, "I guess that's the whole balancing act of being African American in law enforcement. It's just how much can you give; I come home to my wife and decompress. It does add stress being an African American in law enforcement."

When asked about the dualism of being a Black man and a law enforcement, the husband of Couple 3 responded that it is easier being a Black law enforcement officer when you have other Black law enforcement officers working with you. He expressed that he does not believe it will ever be balanced, but it helps to have others that can relate to your experience. He shared that when he is the only Black officer, it makes the job even more challenging. He discussed that when people will not attempt to understand his predicament, he feels like he is fighting two battles at the same time. He also expressed the struggle of remembering his place as a supervisor, or a second level supervisor, or overseeing a building and how this prohibits him from having some conversations because he cannot afford to take the risk of his words being misconstrued. He shared that he does not want his words to be somehow used against him, so he finds himself in a world where he must be quiet because not saying anything at all is better than the

alternative. The wife shared her thoughts about how her husband being a Black man in law enforcement increases the level of stress in their relationship. She shared,

I'm not worried about the civilians. I'm worried about all the people that he works with that simply don't like him because he's Black or simply they don't want to take direction because he's Black. And with so few Black people in law enforcement, I think it's just a barrier that he will always face, and something that just will always be there. And it's sad but I think it's just the reality of the position that he's in. 'Cause what is it, less than 6% Black?

The husband shared that his stress at work is escalated because of his race. He discussed how the caveat is that if he says something they do not like, the possibility or the probability that it ends up backfiring is high. He expressed that on the job he has felt that it is not worth trying to educate people because it comes with a challenge, a problem, and it comes with denial. He conveyed that he would experience stress either way, and that he feels like he must pick his poison. He shared that he has been put in uncomfortable spots where he is the resident Black man where everyone wants to project their comments or their Facebook thoughts and everything on him to see if it resonates with him. He talked about how he cannot express his thoughts in these situations because he is the only Black person in a room of 25, 30 people and he is the outcast.

The husband of Couple 4 shared that level of stress at work due to his race is always high. He explained that he feels that he always must do better than his European counterparts. He talked about how the standards are higher for Black officers stating that they must be perfect, and their standards must be above the standards of their

counterparts. He shared that if he would make a mistake, the same mistake as one of his European counterparts, his colleague would get off, but he would not. He summarized his statement by saying that “race has a whole lot of stress involved in that, because the way it's treated, it's supposed to be everybody gets treated the same. But that doesn't happen.”

The husband of Couple 5 shared that due to the current societal culture, more so lately he is getting questions about what it is like to be a Black male in law enforcement, from some of his nonminority coworkers. He explained that the majority of the couple's friends and family are Black, and he shared that their opinion of law enforcement officers is skewed. He and his wife work to have conversations with people to help them to think differently about law enforcement officers. His wife expressed that she thinks it is a tough sell in and of itself, but she thinks it is especially hard because many do not understand why he is a cop? She shared that she has lots of those conversations, and she expressed that because she of a lighter complexion, she thinks people sometimes get comfortable in making comments to her or in her presence. She explained that she will very quickly remind people where she comes from and set the record straight. She described that every time there is something on the news, their community expects them to be on their side of the line. When the couple continues to say that there are two sides to every story or three sides, and that one video clip does not show everything, the community can turn their back on them and say things like, "You don't support us and you're not... You're an Uncle Tom or you're falling in the mix." The couple commented that can be hard to swallow sometimes.

The husband of Couple 4 shared that for him it has always been an issue for Black person to be in law enforcement. He spoke about the songs that were made about Black Cops, and he also spoke about how he feels that the public groups all law enforcement officers together. He shared that within the organization, he is seen as a Black man who is a law enforcement officer and is treated as such. He expressed that he sees himself as being on the same level as every other law enforcement officer that's out there regardless of color, creed, or anything else. He talked about being viewed as a sellout by some and how that can be a bit stressful for a Black law enforcement officer in general because they have pressure falling on them from various ways. He explained that a Black law enforcement officer has racial things happening within a department, they have racial biases happening from their own people, and they have racial biases happening from the public.

### **Struggles to Overcome in the Marriage**

Couples struggle in marriages for reasons varying from infidelity to the stress of finances. The couples interviewed for this study reflected on their relationship and shared the types of struggles they have overcome in their marriage. The husband of Couple 1 spoke about how he works to protect his wife and for her to always feel like he has her back. He spoke about seeing issues come about in other people's marriages and relationships, and how he tends to watch, learn, and try to not make those types of mistakes or allow those types of things to happen in his marriage. He expressed feeling lucky in that sense that he and his wife are not in any type of situation where they have

had anything that we would even consider a marital difficulty. His wife agreed that they have not had to face any serious struggles where she felt their marriage was threatened.

Couple 2 conveyed what has been difficult for them throughout their marriage. The husband shared that he feels a great threat they endured was his wife feeling like she was doing everything. He expressed that he struggled with figuring out what he needed to do because she does not outright tell him what she needs and her anger and or frustration would build. He said that to address that he would talk to her more, and he made changes in his schedule at work, so he could do more at home for the kids.

Couple 3 expressed how their difficulty come through the transitions of their relationship. The wife shared what caused the greatest difficulty for them was their pregnancy. She spoke of how it was a surprise and due to where they were in their life, it was not an easy adjustment. The husband shared that he did not handle it well admittedly. They spoke about this difficult adjustment period and how thankful they were to overcome this difficult period of their relationship. The husband expressed gratitude for his wife's patience with him and faith in him during that difficult time. The couple spoke about the greatest threat to their marriage and the wife said a lack of guidance and the husband said his job in law enforcement. The wife expressed that they do not have a blueprint and they can only hope that their love can lead them. The husband shared that he believes the threat to their marriage is his job and the stressors that come along with it. He explained that he has heard the percentages on marriages in law enforcement and their success rates. He expressed that he does not want to be a statistic and he is trying to find every way to combat the statistic. He spoke about the pressures of working to support his

family and making the time to be there for his family. He expressed that he wants to be able to do both but knowing that there is a statistic against it is his biggest fear.

The wife shares that she overcomes threats to their marriage with prayer and determination. She shared that she made a promise to herself that once she got married, she never wants to get a divorce. She also stated that once she had a child, she said to herself that she never wanted her Black son to grow up without his father in the household, as she does not want her son to be a statistic and she does not want to be a statistic as a Black single mom. The husband shared that he overcomes threats to their marriage by exercising communication. He explained that if they always let each other know what the problems are, they will not be blindsided and will know ideally what the problem is, which will prevent further issues in their relationship.

Couple 4 shared they overcome the struggles in their marriage with communication. They explained that miscommunication can lead to struggle, so they make a point of listening to each other. The husband shared that he wants to be able to fix his wife's problems, but he is learning that sometimes all he needs to do is listen. They both expressed that they are learning that sometimes they just need to pause when things become heated or hard. The wife shared that she would go and read her Bible because she knows that devil wants to break up families, and he wants them to fight. She said the only fighting she will do is fight for her family, and not with her family.

Couple 5 shared that when they first got together, they had to deal with a lack of experience as they were still finding themselves. They shared that they had various struggles they dealt with, but their commitment to each other helped them to work

through difficulties. Now they have goals they have created together, and they are determined to work together to achieve them as this keeps them on the right course.

Couple 6 talked about finances and trust and respect. They spoke about the various changes they endured in their relationship including significant career changes. They spoke about juggling the changes and how they had to trust each other to overcome their struggles. They highlighted how respect was a third factor that helped them to overcome issues and helped them to not say something in the heat of the moment that they would regret later. They shared that their level of respect grew with the years they were together.

### ***Feeling of Safety and Security***

As the couples discussed overcoming the struggles in their relationship, there were a few themes that emerged in their data. The first theme that emerged was a feeling of safety and security. The husband of Couple 1 shared that he works to protect his wife and for her to always feel like he has her back. Couple 4 shared that stability and dependability are necessary for them to overcome struggles. Couple 5 shared that when you find your person and settle, you want to create stability for each other. They expressed that you want to hold safe what each other holds valuable.

### **Compromise/Patience**

Another theme that emerged was the importance of compromise and patience. Couple 5 shared that a failure to compromise would be a risk. They spoke about the importance of making clear decisions about long-term goals. They spoke of how the compromises they made served them and how they will continue to make the necessary

compromises as they will do what is necessary to put their relationship first. The couple expressed that by putting each other first, they are both willing to put aside whatever is in front of them individually for the betterment of them as a couple. Couple 3 spoke about patience and how important the role of patience is in their marriage. They expressed that patience is a big factor for them, especially raising a toddler, living through the Covid pandemic, and being married to somebody that has a job that has an unpredictable rotating schedule. They expressed that need patience to face the many situations that show up in their lives.

### ***Learning from Others***

Many of the couples spoke of being blessed to have couples in their life to learn from whether it be what to do or what not to do. When speaking about overcoming struggles in their marriage, the husband of Couple 1 spoke about seeing issues come about in other people's marriages and relationships, and how he tends to watch, learn, and try to not make those types of mistakes or allow those types of things to happen in his marriage.

Couple 2 shared they have a few people they can talk to for marriage advice. The husband shared that his mother would give them advice when asked by reflecting on what has worked in her marriage. The wife spoke of how significant it is for them to have that example and how her mother-in-law's advice helps them to refocus on what is important. The wife of Couple 3 spoke about how she watched her mother struggle for years and how she is very determined to make her marriage work. She expressed that she never wants her marriage to fail because of pride. She exclaimed, "I have learned over the years



that sometimes you have to swallow your pride and some fights are not worth it. Some arguments are just not worth it.”

Couple 4 talked about what they have learned from what they have witnessed.

The husband shared that through his work as a law enforcement officer he has dealt with numerous domestic situations and many times he had to play referee. He explained that there were times that little things grow into huge things and people would lose so much for something so little. He also shared that he never saw his parents fight and he never knew any of their marital stuff because they kept it between them. He expressed that he takes what he has learned through observation and practices it in his marriage because he decided early on that divorce is not an option.

The wife of Couple 5 shared that she was surrounded throughout her life by all the stuff that she does not want to happen in her life. She explained that she had very bad influences, so she made the decision that her life was going to be different. She explained that her parents were married, never got divorced, but were in a very abusive relationship and abused alcohol and drugs. The wife said because of what she witnessed, she had an expectation of what marriage should be, but this was the result of looking at marriage from all the things that she did not want to happen. Her husband shared that he had a lot of positive influences in his life. He shared that his family foundation, and the upbringing from his grandparents has helped him in his marriage. The husband discussed how observational learning has been critical for him as he came from a nucleus household of mother, father, and sister. His parents were married for 42 years before his father passed away suddenly and his grandparents were married for 68 years. He explained that he got

to see firsthand, in his household, the compromises of a marriage and the teamwork of a marriage.

Couple 6 shared that they like to learn from people who have been married for a long time. The husband's parents have been married for 53 years, and they look to their relationship, to learn from where the strength comes. They explained that even after 22 years of marriage, they still learn from observing what other couples are doing right. The husband shared that when he thinks he does not have an answer, he remembers when his parents were in a similar situation and how they handled it. He explained that he can take some data from their situation and use it and process it for his current situation.

### **Creating Work and Life Balance**

St. Vil (2014) examined the effect of work-family conflict and work-family balance on the marital satisfaction of Black American marriages. The results of the study uncovered a disadvantageous connection between work-family conflict and marital satisfaction (St. Vil, 2014). The couples participating in this research spoke about how important balance is in their marriage. The wife of Couple 1 shared how her husband has an easier time determining when he is done with work, whereas for her she must remember that the work is not going anywhere. Because there is always going to be more of it to do, she must focus to mentally and physically be in the moment. She spoke about the difficulties she experiences with not looking at her phone, or emails or sneaking back to her computer to "do something real quick." She shared,

... this is always a challenge for me...just trying to learn how to shut it off; I was disrespected by a job that I was like, 'Wow, I'm giving these people all this time,

all this effort, and at the end of the day, I'm not as valued as I thought I was. So, once I realized that, they only got so much of me; 'Your family and your home life is going to be there.

Couple 2 shared their struggle with creating balance in their life with work responsibilities and family responsibilities. The wife shared openly about the sacrifices she made concerning her career so she could be home with their children. She shared that when she works outside of the home, she only works hours that the kids are in school. She shared that if the kids needed something or more time, she was the one to have to give more. She explained that has how their marriage has been. She stayed home with the kids and worked around her husband's schedule. The husband shared that he was able to balance life with work responsibilities and family responsibilities because of his wife's sacrifices. He expressed that he could work because he knew she was caring for their children and that they were well taken care of due to her being with them. The wife shared that she spends much of her time with the kids, and as a family when her husband is home from work.

Couple 3 discussed what they have done to create balance in their marriage. The wife talked about how their decision for her to work parttime has helped them tremendously. She now has the liberty to be home with their son and for her to perform better at work, due to her feeling recharged when she does go to work. Her husband agreed that her working parttime has been a blessing to their family. He expressed how happy he is that she can experience motherhood the way she desires and still have an opportunity to be a part of society. He expressed that if a law enforcement officer's

spouse did not work, they were more likely to be the ones that marriage ended in divorce. The couple expressed that they spend most of their time together and that they really do not go out much but will host people at their home. The wife shared that her husband wants massive attention from her, and he agreed that he does, and that he is thankful that she does not mind giving it to him.

The husband of Couple 5 shared that he does not do a great job with work life balance. He shared that someone's always calling and because of his position he must be available to his staff when they call. The wife shared that she is learning to take more time off to spend with the family. The husband agreed that he needs to take advantage of all the leave he is given at his job and just take some time off, so he can develop a better balance.

Couple 5 shared that they both struggle with balancing work with their life outside of work. The husband shared that him being a perfectionist and pushing himself is due to the stubbornness in him and his desire to always "make it work" and or "find a way." He admitted that this desire maybe to his own detriment as it causes his work life balance to be a little lopsided. He spoke about his work-life balance journey and how he had to learn to compartmentalize and not even think about work at times when he is home. He shared that he and his wife are working to be intentional in having a life outside of their work, as they do not want work to necessarily define who they are. The wife shared that they have a life at home, career goals, and personal goals that they work for and take the time to do and that alleviates a lot of stress. The wife explained that they make sure they get their time together, as they travel time away to reset their batteries,

and reset each other. They shared that they miss a lot of events for friends and family, but they also know they cannot make everybody happy and make themselves happy. The wife explained that when they tried to run down the path of doing everything that everybody else wanted them to do, they were miserable, so they quickly pivoted and reevaluated their priorities.

The wife of Couple 6 shared that it is easier for her to find balance in her life than it is for her husband. She shared that when he is home, he is still getting phone calls from people at work regardless of if he is off work or on duty. The husband explained that he understands that his wife has his best interest at heart, but he knows that he must be there for “his guys” as well and answer when they call because they need him.

### ***Protect Your Peace***

As the couples discussed creating work and life balance, two themes developed. The first was the importance of protecting your peace. The wife of Couple 6 shared that a great threat to their peace is outsiders. They couple shared that they keep their circle very small and tight. They spoke about not knowing what type of energy an outsider may bring into their home if they let them in and how that can disrupt the balance they are working to create. They explained that they know how to maneuver through things at this juncture in their marriage and bringing someone who they are not familiar with in the inside is risky because they do not know their intentions, so they limit this as much as possible.

### *Economic Strain*

The second theme that developed while the couples spoke about creating work and life balance was economic strain. Some of the couples shared that they have not experienced economic strain, and some shared that it threatened their marriage. The first couple shared that they do not experience financial difficulties as they make it a point to live within their means and to avoid debt. Couple 2 shared that they do not experience economic strain due to the sacrifice the wife makes by staying home with their children. Couple 3 discussed finances and they agreed that they are blessed that they do not have financial struggles. They talked about how they made smart decisions about their finances when they were younger, which helps them today. They explained that they do not buy the biggest house or nicest cars, but instead invested in rental properties and other things to substitute for her not working fulltime. The husband shared that one of his wife's biggest qualities is that she's not materialistic. He shared things do not matter to her, and that they both value experience way more than things. He expressed that they are not trying to show off for anybody and they manage their finances well together. They shared that they have agreed to never put each other in a position financially where they compromise their family. The husband shared that he does not want his wife to ever feel the need to go back to work fulltime. He stated that his wife's happiness is more valuable than a couple extra dollars.

Couple 4 shared that they have experienced money issues. They discussed how expenses can be influenced by the needs of their children and can cause difficulties for them. The wife shared that they have determined that they are not going to lose their

marriage over money. Couple 5 shared that they work very hard, and they both have been compensated very well for the work they do. They expressed that they are very fortunate not to have finances be a problem.

Couple 6 shared that they had to learn early on in their relationship how to work through rough financial times. They explained that because they were learning as they went over the past 22 years in, they are good now. They shared that they have been through a lot of financial situations and now they have a plan of how to attack it, and have a plan takes off a lot of stress and strain off their marriage. The wife shared that due to the situation they are in now, economically they are doing well. They both have essential jobs, so they do not have to be worried about being laid off and they respect and trust each other to be financially responsible.

### **The Role of Faith in the Marriage**

Marks et al. (2012) discussed the importance of faith in Black American marriages and families and found that Black Americans view marriage as a sacred vow and considered religion the core of life for some families. Marks et al. (2012) found through their study that spiritual beliefs reportedly effected the participants, their families, and their marriages in numerous ways. The couples interviewed each spoke of how faith plays in role in their relationship and for most of them, faith was significant. Couple 1 shared that neither of them express their faith in a traditional, organized way. They do not consider each other to be religious and they do not worship with a congregation. They expressed that they do have a mutual understanding of what spirituality is and have similar thoughts on it. Due to their experiences, they do not

necessarily agree with organized religion, and they expressed that they cannot be categorized. They spoke of believing in a higher power and living with a moral understanding of what is right and what is wrong. The husband shared that some people might consider his relationship with his heavenly father to be disrespectful, because it is very casual. The couple expressed that their faith is governed by certain laws that are well beyond us, and they tend to live their lives based off their understanding of that nature.

Couple 2 shared stories of how their faith has carried them through difficult and devastating events. The husband said,

I know me and the wife, we've been trying to find a home church...we've always wanted to raise our children up in faith; really like people that have that foundation do a lot better with dealing with all the crap the world has to throw at you. So, I feel like in a sense, we're failing our kids if we don't do that.

The wife shared why faith is so important to her and how it has been a part of her foundation and that she wants this for their children as well. She said,

...you lose something, or you witness somebody loses something, and then it kind of recenters you in and all the stuff you're...All the stuff you're stressed at. Our faith has always been there, we believe in God, we believe in Jesus, we try to act morally, we talk about biblical stuff and we're in the Bible, we talk about religious things with the kids. We kinda gave them the foundation by enrolling them in faith-based programs, but we're trying to take a step forward and trying to be more consistent when going to church and getting them have relations outside of our nuclear family with other people that have the same faith.



The couple agreed that a faith foundation is a necessity for them, as they feel it will help their children to have direction in life.

Couple 3 discussed the role of faith in their relationship. The wife shared her strength comes from her faith. She shared that she prays a lot, more so than she has ever done before. The wife shares that she overcomes threats to their marriage with prayer and determination. The husband said there was a time when his faith was very important to him, but as he grew older and stopped going to church, his faith fell to the wayside a little bit. He explained,

... I think I'm one of those people that when it all hits the fan, unfortunately, sometimes I'm the guy who is then praying or is then asking God for help. But on the regular day to day...Sometimes I do say I'm very thankful for the things that I have and the things that I've been able to accomplish at this point, but it's not the highest of things on my list. I know it should be higher, but it's just the reality.

The wife shared that her faith is so strong because her mother is a reverend and she instilled in her that prayer is essential. She shared that she prays every night for her marriage.

Couple 4 said they both have a strong relationship with their heavenly father. They explained that they both believe in the Messiah, and their faith has been pillar of their marriage. They emphasized the significance of prayer and the role it plays in guiding them through their marriage. Couple 5 shared that their faith journey has been unique to them. The husband shared that he grew up on a foundation of faith and expressed that he will always have his faith, but his commitment to how he shows and

expresses his faith has changed over the years. He shared that he does not go to church. He said that when he is in an emotional, mental, or spiritual mental space, he will open his book and read, or pray, and or he will talk to someone he respects in his religion to give him some guidance. He expressed that as he got older, he grew tired of seeing the same building fund come around with no new windows and no new pews, and he grew tired of donating money to someone else's pocket and not seeing the betterment of the community church, so he stopped going. He expressed with gratitude that faith has always been vast component of their marriage as they know that they do nothing without their heavenly Father. He shared that they do nothing without understanding that they are extremely blessed to be given the opportunities to do the things that they do. He explained that their faith will never leave them because they were both brought up with faith as a foundation.

The husband of Couple 6 shared that he was born and raised in church, and although he does not currently attend church, he still has the morals and values instilled in him. He voiced that her tells himself, "You still know the way. You know the way." He declared that he still has those morals instilled in him and that he uses them every day. His wife shared that she is not a "super super religious person but I definitely think that there's definitely an aspect of faith 'cause I do know that certain things that I think about or in certain situations, it does revolve around the faith aspect of my life." She shared that she does not go to church every day or every week, but there is a percentage of her life that revolves around her faith.

### **Satisfaction in the Marriage**

The purpose of this study is to understand and interpret the experiences of Black American married individuals who experience marital satisfaction and have the influence of the occupational stress of a career in law enforcement. I asked the couples directly about their marital satisfaction and what they do to maintain the satisfaction in their marriage and received some powerful answers that summarized their experience with marital satisfaction well. Couple 1 spoke about maintaining marital satisfaction through common interest, doing things at their own speed, and not trying to keep up with societal expectations. They emphasized the importance of making time for each other and giving each other space for their solo activities. The couple spoke about feeding each other's joy and how they think of each other when they are apart.

Couple 2 spoke about maintaining marital satisfaction through various aspects of their life together. The husband shared that satisfaction to him is just chaos. He expressed that he loves it as he loves waking up to his kids "running around going crazy". He shared that his wife is his glue, as she helps keep everything stable. He shared that he loves the day-to-day struggle, as his satisfaction is that there is always something new in their house. He expressed that he loves going through the adventure of life with her, and he knows that there is nothing that she will not do for him or for the family.

The wife shared that "not a lot of exciting stuff happens", which she expressed is good for her as she does not like when "stuff deviates from the plan." She shared that their marriage is stable, her husband supports her ideas that she considers to be more progressive like hyphenating her name. She shared that she picked a partner who sees her

as an equal, and that makes her “super satisfied 'cause I don't think I could end up with... I could've ended up with somebody who didn't support me”. She shared that she “made the best choice about who was gonna be a father to my kids, 'cause he's a super great dad.” She expressed that she is not super physically affectionate, but that satisfaction is demonstrated in their marriage by them doing things for each other and being playful with each other. The husband spoke of them maintaining their marital satisfaction by being open, trying to find out what they can do for each other; and them just trying to keep their family satisfied, trying to find out what everybody needs, and learning every day.

Couple 3 couple spoke about what gives them marital satisfaction and the husband expressed that seeing his wife and son happy together gives him satisfaction. He also said knowing that she knows she can count on him brings him satisfaction. The wife shared that her satisfaction comes from knowing that she is needed by her husband and son, and that her husband is satisfied wither as a mother and wife. The couple shared how they demonstrate satisfaction in their marriage. The wife expressed that she receives her husband’s demonstration of satisfaction from the little things that he does. The wife said,

I think the little things. He makes breakfast, a big breakfast every Saturday and Sunday. Never defaults, always does it. The small things I mentioned. Little small things like that are what means the world to me. Washing your clothes and things like that, just show up on a daily basis, although something very small, it just shows that, "I care, and that I wanna be here," things like that.

The husband shared that satisfaction is demonstrated through providing for his wife. He expressed,

I think seeing her evolution from a friend to a girlfriend, to a wife. Now, there were things that she would have called it the wife package, the things you wouldn't get in the girlfriend package, and to see the evolution in her. Coming home and seeing the quality time she gets to spend with our son, and just coming home, the house is clean, it smells good, it looks nice. She's so happy and excited to get everything and turning our house into a home, and planning things for us, and trying to find out things that we can do. But seeing her smile is one of the biggest reasons I do everything.

To maintain marital satisfaction, the wife shared that she started initiating more date nights. She spoke passionately about why this is important. She shared,

I guess I didn't realize how important and how special it is just to go out to eat, get dressed, go out to eat, and be a married couple and not just be parents, 'cause we have our son all the time. And then go home and still be alone, and then go pick him up at 11:00. So, we have five, six hours of us just being us and talking, and things like that without being interrupted, and that has really maintained and really helped a lot.

The husband shared that he receives marital satisfaction partially from knowing her can support his family due to the promotions he receives at work. He explained,

...but I love wearing suits, so being in a position where I'm in now where I can wear suits and my wife sees me in a suit and tie, and I feel confident in a suit and

tie. She sees me in that, but it's not always the same one reversing. So, when we go out, I get to see her in her elegance as best is defined. So I get to see that sometimes and it just reminds me more that she's a beautiful woman in the house but she's also a beautiful woman outside the house. And I love seeing that sometimes. It gives you that moment again where it's like, "This is a beautiful woman, and she loves me and she wants to be with me, and I also wanna be with her too."

Couple 4 shared that stability, dependability, and peace is what gives them satisfaction in their marriage. The husband elaborated by sharing that when he has a tough day at work, just coming home and knowing that his home is his safe place, where he can say what he wants and not be judged for it. He expressed that knowing that he will be heard and supported by his wife is what brings him marital satisfaction.

Couple 5 shared that marital satisfaction is demonstrated through the achievement of their relationship goals, which are in alignment with their personal goals. The husband shared that the satisfaction for him is knowing that it is more of the journey, and not necessarily the end goal. He gets satisfaction from the process.

The husband of Couple 6 voiced that he receives marital satisfaction in knowing without a shadow of a doubt whatever he and his wife go through, even when he is wrong, she has his best interests. He exclaimed that he cannot ask for anything more than that. His wife shared that marital satisfaction is felt through their companionship. She explained that knowing that you have someone – your best friend - who you can come home to and talk about every aspect of whatever brings her great joy and satisfaction. She

explained that she demonstrates her satisfaction in their marriage by the things that she does around the house that she knows they both appreciate. The husband shared that he is turned on by the fact that his wife is the breadwinner, and she still does so many things to take care of them. He shared, "I consider myself going into old man status and still have this Tenderoni still do this for me." He expressed to his wife in the interview his love for her and how he is looking forward to the years to come.

### **Knowledge, Ideas, or Beliefs About Marital Satisfaction**

The couples were asked to share their knowledge, ideas, or beliefs they have about marital satisfaction, and they shared the following insight. The wife of Couple 1 shared that just seeing examples of a lack of marital satisfaction has taught her what not to do and that learning from other people's mistakes has been very influential in how she shows up in their marriage. She said that she strongly encourages other couples to learn from the mistakes of others, so they can avoid making the mistakes themselves. The husband shared that he and his wife have always been friends. He encourages other to go and experience life, figure out what they want, and if they are meant to be with their partner, they will be, but he does not want anyone to ever have any regrets that they waited around for someone, and things did not work out.

Couple 2 shared that it is important to look at examples and determine what you do not want in your marriage. They also shared that your children can be your whole life and can take everything over if you are not intentional in preserving your identity. The couple said that it is important for couples to parents to focus on themselves as a couple.

They also explained how having a good foundation has been key for them and how important it is to maintain a friendship within the marriage.

The wife of Couple 3 shared that she is often thinking about she can help more women because that is the population she works with, and she sees women of all walks of life each day. She spoke about wanting to help them change their mindset to set themselves up for happiness in their life. The husband shared that not seeing a ton of successful marriages makes it difficult for him to determine how he is doing. He expressed that he can only go by his wife's standards and how she is responding to their life to give him guidance on how they are doing. He shared that couples should be willing to give for each other.

Couple 4 shared that it is important for spouse of the law enforcement officer to trust in the training that their partner has received and that their thought is always to come home. The husband expressed that the officer is going to do everything possible to be safe and come home. The husband also shared that when he reflects on his marriage, he recognizes that he and his wife are not the same people they were when we were 19, when they were in their 30s before kids, when their kids were little, and even from a year ago before the COVID pandemic, they are not the same people. He explained that experiences and things happen, and they must lean on their rock of their faith to anchor them. He explained further that one cannot have a hard heart; instead, one must process their emotions and anger, one must process everything, and realize it is the two of you against the world. He finished with saying that marriage is hard work, and one must be loyal, one must have trust, one must be totally committed, and be all in. They expressed



together that a couple must have the right foundation, and they must have faith and trust in each other.

Couple 5 shared that you make it work. They explained that there is going to be some tough days, and some long nights, but you are in a marriage together and you make it work. The wife shared that she and her husband spoke early on about the expectation of what marriage should be for them. They both agreed that divorce is not an option for them.

Couple 6 shared they have been blessed to be around couples that have been married for 65 years and 70 years. They shared that they want to see themselves there someday. They spoke about the examples they have received from their parents and attributed their work ethic to the example they received from their parents. He expressed that his work ethic is what has helped him build his marriage into what it is today.

### **One Piece of Knowledge to Pass On**

The couples were asked if they could pass one piece of knowledge on to a Black American couple that is just beginning to experience life with the stressors of a career in law enforcement, what would it be? The couples were very reflective in their answers and passionate in the sharing of their answers. Below are the responses received from each participant.

#### **Couple 1**

The wife shared simply that couples should “close your social media”. Her husband’s advice was similar, but more direct. He shared, “Don't try to take influence

from other people's opinions of your relationship and don't let the outside dictate what's going on in the inside.”

## **Couple 2**

The wife shared,

...Talk about the stress you are bearing and be supportive in your marriage as this helps to increase the closeness of you and your spouse. Downloading with each other, and being the sounding board, and bouncing ideas off each other, and just telling each other about experiences at work. This is probably extra important with a job that's stressful, like law enforcement.

Her husband he wants people to know to just communicate. He shared that he when he awakes for work in the morning, he must be ready for war. He questions why he is doing what he does, and he reminds himself that there is a need for him to there to make a difference. He spoke about the importance of changing the face of law enforcement. He shared that he has an advantage because his wife is Black, and this helps her to understand what he endures at work. He shared that communicating is a big thing because it allows him to be open and share how he feels having to deal with mess at work. He stated,

...Be ready for war. Just communicate - that's the big thing. . Just talk about being a Black man dealing with this crap. ...you need to build that trust, build that respect. You kinda have to go through it together. And the other thing I would say is, because law enforcement usually has good health insurance and stuff... Black people in general think negatively about like, reaching out to a therapist, but your

insurance covers it, definitely take advantage of that kind of thing if you have it. I mean, I've used it in the past, I think it's great, and I think... You got to take care of your mental health, like, whatever you guys do, if that's what you got to do, that's who you have to download to, like that's super important so. Take advantage of the benefits that you have with it.

### **Couple 3**

The wife shared that the spouse of the law enforcement officer should be there and be the backbone. She expressed that it is important to be there for all the stressors that will happen throughout the whole career. She warned that the higher they go up, the worst the stress becomes, and you must deal with it. She said that you should be a sound board for them and be a support system for them and try to understand their point of view and try to give as much knowledge as possible. The husband shared,

Surround yourself with people who can understand what you're going through, even to the point where they are experiencing it themselves, and that they can talk you through them and stand by your side through them. Because if you don't have those support systems in place, especially people who know what it's like sitting in your shoes, you're on an island and you're hoping for someone to come and, I don't want to say save you, but just somebody who can understand where you're coming from, and not having that I think could be detrimental.

### **Couple 4**

Couple 4 shared that patience and understanding with each other is key. They also shared that it is important to remember to read your Bible each day and allow your faith

to guide you. The husband highlighted the importance of remembering the grass is not greener on the other side.

### **Couple 5**

Couple 5 shared that it is important for couples to talk to one another, and they reemphasized the importance of communication. They highlighted the need for validating each other's feelings and really understanding that you must work through every situation. They emphasized the need to have trust in each other and belief that their partner is in it for the long run, and what that means to each of them. He shared that when you firmly understand what that means to you and to your relationship, you are on the right track. The couple also warned against allowing outside noise and outside expectations to come into the relationship as this can cause great trouble. The wife shared that you must be true to yourself, be true to the relationship, be true to your marriage. She expressed that the couple should not feel any added pressure because they are a minority; she warned that once a person compromises who they are as an individual, they give up a piece of themselves that they are not going to get back. She ended with stay true to your marriage and relationship and to yourselves as individuals, and do not try to please everybody all the time.

### **Couple 6**

Couple 6 shared that any new couple starting out should make sure they are ready to be married. They shared that they should try to understand each other and still give each other space at the same time. The wife emphasized the need to be ready to trust, communicate, and keep their marriage things in house. The husband shared that piece of

knowledge he will pass on is be prepared for the journey. He shared that they should be prepared to grow together and have a relationship that consists of trust, communication, finances and not run from the challenges, but accept them because the challenges prepare you for the bigger ones that come along the way. The husband spoke about the importance of having a partner that is willing to work with you and understand what you are going through in your career. Be ready to build together, trust one another, communicate, and make sure you do not let the finances break you apart.

### **Summary**

Chapter four focuses on the data collection and data analysis utilized in the research study. My research concentrated on the lived experiences of Black American couples with at least one partner in law enforcement pertaining to marital satisfaction. In this chapter, I presented the data from the interviews with the couples and sharing the categories and themes that emerged from the data using quotations as needed to emphasize their importance. Trustworthiness and ethical procedures were used for the data collection. The data disclosed the strengths of their marriages, what makes their marriages special, and the importance of respect, trust, and communication. The data also revealed the dualism of being a Black and a law enforcement officer, overcoming the struggles in marriage, creating work and life balance, and the role of faith in the marriage. The interpretations of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, and implications of the study will be shared in chapter five.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of my hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of Black American couples, with at least one partner in law enforcement, pertaining to marital satisfaction. I obtained in-depth narratives of the participants' experiences of marital satisfaction and how they sustain it under the influence of a career in law enforcement. I conducted a qualitative study to identify factors that contribute to marital satisfaction through interviews. I identified 10 themes and 16 subthemes through data collection and analysis of the interviews conducted. I used the family strengths perspective to provide a conceptual framework that highlighted the strengths that uphold the marriages of the couples interviewed. Overall, I found that balance, support, and having a history as a part of the relationship foundation are fundamental strengths of a marriage. Respect, trust, and communication are vital to the success of a marriage as the couples emphasized this emphatically in the interviews. Leaning on each other, working to create a balance, and relying on faith were also among some of the themes and subthemes that emerged as essential components for marital satisfaction.

In this chapter, I will interpret the findings the data disclosed from the interviews with the participants including the strengths of their marriages, what makes their marriages special, and the importance of respect, trust, and communication. I will also reflect on data regarding the dualism of being a Black and a law enforcement officer, overcoming the struggles in marriage, creating work and life balance, and the role of faith

in the marriage. I will also discuss the limitations of the study, recommendations, and implications of the study.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

In Chapter 2, I began the discussion with the stressors of law enforcement, the subculture, and racism and mental health within law enforcement. Hillard (2019) revealed that law enforcement officers suffer from various mental health issues at higher levels than the general population. Researchers including Lincoln and Chae (2010); Smith et al. (2007); Soto et al. (2011); Walton and Shepard Payne (2016) also demonstrated a correlation between race and mental health and the influence of mental health on marital satisfaction. In the literature review, I also investigated marital expectations and satisfaction for Black Americans as factors including communication, respect, trust, and faith were explored in reference to their role within a relationship (Curran et al., 2010; Dew & Bradford, 2013; Ledermann et al., 2010). The current study is essential as it uncovered the strengths of Black American marriages that have at least one member serving as a law enforcement officers. Despite the significant and unique needs of Black American couples in law enforcement, there remains a dearth of research in the literature. For example, the study by Roberts et al. (2013) examined the bearing a job in law enforcement can have on marriage, yet Black Americans only made up 11.8% of their study sample and the study does not give the reader an understanding of how being a Black American in law enforcement can cause more stress on an individual. To fill this dearth of research in the literature, I explored the lived experiences of Black Americans exclusively. Through a hermeneutic phenomenological study using the family

strengths perspective, I was able to obtain in-depth answers as I explored the qualitative complexities of my study participants' experiences on an interpretative level. Information was gathered from maritally satisfied Black couples with at least one member serving as a law enforcement officer. This is a population that has been overlooked in previous marital studies.

I used the hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative approach to study the participants' point of view and the cultural and social forces that influence their perspectives as demonstrated by Moustakas (1994) in his work. Following the teachings of van Manen, a hermeneutic expert, I understood that phenomenology is an undertaking of sober reflection on the lived experience of human existence (van Manen, 2007). Van Manen (2014) teaches that included in the lived experience are four components: lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived human relations. The lived space is referring to the "space in which how one finds oneself and how it affects you" (Heinonen & Orlinsky, 2013 p. 225). Lived body meaning "that we are in this world physically and our feelings can affect our reactions" (Heinonen, 2013, p.225), lived time or subjective time, and lived human relations meaning "how we relate with other humans and how we maintain this interpersonal space that we share" (Heinonen, 2013, p.225; van Manen, 2014). To turn to the nature of the lived experience, I needed to be aware of four components that make up the lived experience. van Manen shared that the reflection on the lived experience must not only be thoughtful, but free from "theoretical, prejudicial and suppositional intoxications" (van Manen, 2007, p.12). Molley et al. (2018) shared van Manen's six step approach to hermeneutic phenomenology and they are as follows:



- 1) Turning to the nature of lived experience.
- 2) Investigating experience as we live it.
- 3) Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon.
- 4) Describing the phenomenon in the art of writing and rewriting.
- 5) Maintaining a strong and orientated relation to the phenomenon.
- 6) Balancing the research context by considering the parts and the whole.

I used personal memos to reflect on the phenomenon before beginning the interviews and throughout the process. I understood that it is imperative to look comprehensively at Black American marriages as a completely new concept. I needed to write and rewrite the phenomenon while contemplating the experiences of the couples shared in the interviews that reflected on the strengths that sustain their marriage. Through writing and rewriting, I discovered 10 themes and 16 subthemes within the data. I revealed through the prominent themes the essence of the experiences of the maritally satisfied couples interviewed which included: (a) strengths of the marriage, (b) what makes the marriage special, (c) respect, (d) trust, (e) communication, (f) overcoming the effects of stress from a career in law enforcement, (g) dualism of being a black and a law enforcement officer, (h) overcoming struggles in marriage, (i) creating work and life balance, and (j) role of faith in the marriage. The subthemes are (a) balancing each other, (b) supporting each other, (c) having history, (d) happiness, (e) friendship, (f) intimacy, (g) boundaries, (h) accountability, (i) transparency, (j) time for decompression, (k) coping strategies, (l) safety and security, (m) compromise/patience, (n) learning from others, (o) protecting your peace, and (p) economic strain. I used the themes and subthemes to answer the

research question: What are the experiences of maritally satisfied Black American couples when at least one partner is serving in law enforcement?

### **Strengths of the Marriage**

Through an exhaustive review of the literature, I identified in studies completed by Leslie and Young (2015), and Roberts et al. (2013) that occupational stress, poor communication, and disagreements over financial management exacerbated by the nature of the job, unfair treatment within the law enforcement culture, racial discrimination, and racial residential segregation, greatly affects marriages in a negative manner. Karaffa et al. (2015) discussed the psychological and organizational demands of working in law enforcement interference with quality of the interactions of the couple. In addition, law enforcement officers may experience emotional exhaustion due to being routinely exposed to human distress (Karaffa et al., 2015).

Through a strength-based framework, I discovered that even while enduring the negative aspects of the reality of a position as law enforcement mentioned above, couples can overcome and thrive through exercising their strengths. Strengths that emerged included balancing each other, supporting each other, having a history together, finding happiness, friendship, and intimacy. One husband expressed how significant it is for him to have his wife help him refocus on what is important. Another husband conveyed that the balance in his marriage does not come from necessarily what is best for him right now or what is best for his wife right now, it is kind of what is best for both in their long-term goals. When addressing the importance of support in their marriage, one husband shared that their strength is the support they provide for each other. Another husband explained

that supporting each other through devastating losses and celebrating each other during their wins is something special between them, because no one else can give them support like they can give to each other.

For the couples that have known each other for years, the history they have together proved to be very valuable. One participant said, “having that history makes things unique between us; because we did grow up together; this person understands me for who I am; came up together that's a little different than most people.” The length of time the couple had known each other was often a marker of distinctness for their relationship that they reflected on when speaking about what makes their union special. The wife of Couple 2 shared that one reason their marriage is special is because she and her husband went to prom together. Another couple shared that their union is special due to them being able to provide what they need for each other. The husband stated, “what I want I have in my wife.” Another couple shared that they are honest with who they are and allow each other the freedom to continue to be his or herself by being true to themselves. The subthemes of happiness, friendship, and intimacy related to the various love languages as the couple spoke of demonstrating happiness and friendship and experiencing intimacy through words of affirmation, acts of service, gift giving, spending quality time together, and physical touch (Chapman & Green, 2013). One husband stated, “happiness is it's those little things, cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, folding clothes, putting things up, trying to think of the things that she may need before she says something.” Some of the couples highlighted the function of gratitude, fun, and

connection that exists between them when they discussed happiness, friendship, and intimacy.

### **Communication, Trust, and Respect**

More prominent strengths that were highlighted in the participants experiences were respect, trust, and communications. Some of the subthemes that aligned with the more prominent strengths were boundaries, accountability, and transparency. All the participants emphasized the critical role of their spouse in their life and that one of their strengths are based in their powerful communication. The participants spoke about how it is important for them as a couple to know that they should probably just hear the other person out before responding. They addressed that typically issues that exists in the marriage are often just a misunderstanding of the way one of them perceive the other's action or inaction. One husband shared that he overcomes threats to their marriage by exercising communication. One wife shared that due to her and her husband's open communication, other things in their relationship seem to flow easily.

Previous studies such as Curran et al. (2010) found that trust is an important interpersonal resource for Black Americans that enabled strong, happy, and enduring marriages. The power of trust was mirrored in the data collected from the interviews. One husband shared, "the level of trust that I have with her is something that I can't say that I could experience anywhere else." Dew and Bradford (2013) found that demonstrations of respect were positively linked with marital satisfaction and negatively related to marital struggle and the possibility of divorce. Respect has also been identified as an important component of martial satisfaction (Ledermann et al., 2010; Dew & Bradford, 2013). Each

of the participants addressed the role of respect in their marriage and how it has enhanced their marital satisfaction. One of the couples addressed respect simply by saying “we just treat each other, with respect there's no other option for us.” One of the husbands shared that respect for him means respecting what each of them brings to the table. He shared that he respects his wife’s word and her position. Respect was also spoken of as a protective factor for the relationship. Each of the couples participating in my study explained that respect is necessary within a marriage to keep potentially negative situations from growing worse.

### ***Boundaries, Accountability, and Transparency***

Many of the themes and subthemes were intertwined as they build from each other. An example of this is respect and boundaries. Several of the participants spoke of how valued they feel by their partner when their boundaries are respected. One couple discussed not taking each other for granted and respecting each other’s boundaries. Each of the six couples also spoke of giving each other the time and space they need for themselves. Couple six highlighted the importance of accountability in marriage as they have set goals together and they need to keep each other on track to meet them. All six of the couples also spoke of accountability and how the trust they have with their partner allows them to hold each other accountable. Transparency was also mentioned as a critical element to a healthy relationship by three of the couples. One wife shared that having transparency in their marriage has aided them in not having issues with trust.

### **Overcoming the Effects of Stress from a Career in Law Enforcement**

The literature review revealed the stress from a career in law enforcement was discussed. Law enforcement work is physically and emotionally exhausting (Karaffa et al., 2015, Roberts et al., 2013). Long hours and shift work can involve day, night, long duration shifts, long work weeks, as well as rotating, fixed and irregular shift schedules (Kirschman, 2018; Peterson et al., 2019). Law enforcement officers, like military armed forces personnel, and other emergency first responders, are a type of occupational group that participate in a warrior culture (Malmin, 2013). The warrior subculture that exists in law enforcement in addition to serving under high levels of stress and frequently being witness to inhumanity results in increased trauma (Malmin, 2013). Tuttle et al. (2018) found that the stress and the organizational and operational career demands are associated with negative marital functioning. It is important for law enforcement officers and their spouses to have effective coping strategies to deal with issues that may arise due to the occupation.

The data collected from the interviews supported the research emphasizing the immensity of the stress from a career in law enforcement. Several of the husbands shared that they handle the stress of working in law enforcement is by talking to their wives, which is a preventative and adds to their marital satisfaction, whereas the opposite can lead to discontent in the marriage. Karaffa et al. (2015) shared that 38% of the spouses of law enforcement officers reported the officers keep things to themselves instead of sharing what is on their mind with their spouse. One husband talked about compartmentalizing by doing his hobbies. Data revealed the need to decompress in

addition to other beneficial coping strategies. One husband shared when things happen that create trauma within him, he needs time to be home and to decompress. Several of the wives expressed realizing how important it is for their husbands to have their space to decompress, so they do not feel overwhelmed by what they deal with that day while they were working. She shared that he needed time to let it go. A few of the coping skills utilized as effective ways to deal with stress is spending time with their children and talking to their parents and talking to other law enforcement couples who can share their experience. An additional coping strategy is being intentional in keeping a positive mindset when dealing with the stress as they explained this helps them to get through it.

### **Dualism of Being Black and a Law Enforcement Officer**

The data also revealed the dualism of being a black and a law enforcement officer, and the conflict that exists for the black law enforcement officers. Kirschman et al. (2014) found in their research that law enforcement officers may experience discrimination, favoritism, limited family-friendly policies, and an unbalanced workload distribution. The discrimination and favoritism seemingly affect the Black American law enforcement officers on a deeper level than White officers due to the disparagement they face (Conti & Doreian, 2014; Repasky et al., 2020; Rojek & Decker, 2009; Wilson & Wilson, 2014). Conti & Doreian (2014) found that Black American law enforcement officers are likely to encounter cultural prejudices at the inception of their career during their academy experience. It was found that throughout much of American history, Black American law enforcement officers experienced rejection by White officers and the White public (Repasky et al., 2020). The experiences of the law enforcement officers,

that involves prejudice and discrimination as stressors, spill over and contaminate the quality of the relationship (Doyle & Molix, 2014).

The data confirmed that Black men endure immense stress because of their race as well as being a law enforcement officer. All twelve of the participants discussed how the concept of race increased the level of stress the husbands endure at work. One shared,

...you run the risk of, one, being alienated from the rest of your coworkers, who you have to deal with day in and day out for the sake of doing what's right, and assisting somebody who you'll probably never see again, but you know it's the right thing to do.

This comment was made in reference to helping other black people that they and their White colleagues are interacting with while working together. One of the husbands spoke of witnessing the unfair treatment of people of color and the negative assumptions that are made by his White colleagues pertaining to civilians that do not look like them. One of the wives responded, “it just seemed like there were some double standards happening. So, the Black officers get reprimanded more. They just get treated differently.”

Another wife explained when negative things happen in the world concerning black men, and he must go to work, the White officers expect him to answer for all the black people, which is not reasonable. Previous studies such as Repasky et al., (2020) and Wilson & Wilson, (2014) spoke of the expectation of White people for one Black man to speak for all black people. Another husband responded that when he is the only black officer, it makes the job even more challenging. He discussed that when people will not attempt to understand his predicament, he feels like he is fighting two battles at the same



time. All the participants explained that Black law enforcement officers have racial things happening within the department, they have racial biases happening from their own people, and they have racial biases happening from the public.

Individuals who are victims of racial discrimination often experience substantial psychological stress and suffer from mental health problems (Willie et al., 2013). Racism is a major source of stress for many Black Americans and as a result it is the origin of many of their mental health problems (Willie et al., 2013). Researchers have found the lack of support Black American law enforcement officers experience is a potent stressor, as well as race relations, with discrimination producing limited career advancement opportunities (Wilson & Wilson, 2014). According to Jenkins et al., (2020) stressful interactions can aggravate depressive symptoms for each partner, and the depressive symptoms can erode the relationship satisfaction, which in turn becomes relationship dissatisfaction, which increases depressive symptoms. Several of the participants spoke of their mental health. One husband stated that he will call in sick when he is not in a mental space to go in for fear of saying something that will be genuine, but not viewed by his White colleagues as the proper thing to say. One participant shared that officers need to take advantage of their insurance and reach out to a therapist to take care of their mental health.

### **Overcoming Struggles in Marriage**

Law enforcement work is considered one of the most stressful occupations as officers are subjected to a range of organizational and work-related stressors that are not experienced by most people working outside the profession (Karaffa et al., 2015). The

officer's family also experiences a level of stress because of the time commitment and dedication required of the law enforcement officer for his career. A common and consistent complaint of law enforcement officers' spouses is their belief that the officer's career is more gratifying than the spouse and or family, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy and exclusion (Karaffa et al., 2015). As a result of feelings of inadequacy and exclusion, the spouse may begin to experience resentment and or other negative emotions. In addition to occupational related stress, there are also other struggles the couple may need to overcome. Couples struggle in marriages for reasons varying from infidelity to the stress of finances (Karaffa et al., 2015; Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Each of the couples interviewed for this study discussed several struggles they have endured, as well what they have learned to help them overcome their struggles. The three subthemes that emerged from the data relative to overcoming marital struggles are (a) safety and security, which was reported by 5 participants, (b) compromise and patience, which was reported by 4 participants and (c) learning from others, which was reported by 12 participants.

In reference to safety and security, one husband shared that he works to protect his wife and for her to always feel like he has her back. One couple shared that stability and dependability are necessary for them to overcome struggles. Another couple shared that when, "...when you find your person and settle, you want to create stability for each other... you want to hold safe what each other holds valuable." The importance of compromise and patience was addressed by one couple that shared a failure to compromise would be a risk. Another couple articulated the need for patience to face the

many situations that show up in their lives. When speaking about overcoming struggles in their marriage, one husband spoke about learning from the mistakes of other people. He has observed the marriages and relationships of peers and even domestic calls he has at work. The husband shared he tends to watch, learn, and try to not make those types of mistakes or allow those types of things to happen in his marriage. Another couple shared that they learn what to do right from observing what other couples are doing right. They are naturally looking for the strengths of others and building their strengths from their observations.

### **Creating Work and Life Balance**

St. Vil's (2014) study uncovered a disadvantageous connection between work-family conflict and marital satisfaction. Quality time with family can be hard to obtain when working various shifts and extended hours and may cause difficulty for couples and families to plan for activities including school and social events (Kirschman et al., 2014). Karaffa et al. (2015) reported that 28% of spouses reported that law enforcement officers take work home, and 48% of the law enforcement officers reported that at times they take their stress out on family and friends. The requirements of duty and its unpredictable nature can lead to frustration especially for the officer's significant other. Often the significant other takes on the responsibility that is neglected by the law enforcement officer due to their employment (Brodie & Eppler, 2012; Kirschman et al., 2014). Some officers work overtime hours and second jobs to supplement the income of the family, which leaves even less time for them to spend with their family (Brodie & Eppler, 2012). Marks et al. (2008) discussed various resources that help couples overcome barriers, and

one common barrier that was discussed is finances. Dew et al. (2017), through a strength-based approach, studied the role finances can play as a stressor on marriage. Dew et al., (2017) discovered in their study that strong Black American marriages could endure financial issues while maintaining strong relationships.

All six couples participating in this research spoke about the strain placed on their marriages from the husband's career in law enforcement and how important it is to create a balance in their marriage. All 12 of the participants expressed the need for balance in their life and in their relationship. The two subthemes that emerged from the research pertaining to creating work and life balance are protecting peace, which was highlighted by two of the participants, and economic strain, reported by all 12 participants. One wife shared openly about the sacrifices she made concerning her career so she could be home with their children. She shared that if the kids needed something or more time, she was the one to have to give more. The husband shared that he was able to balance life with work responsibilities and family responsibilities because of his wife's sacrifices. He expressed that he could work because he knew she was caring for their children and that they were well taken care of due to her being with them. Another husband spoke about his work-life balance journey and how he had to learn to compartmentalize and not even think about work at times when he is home. He shared that he and his wife are working to be intentional in having a life outside of their work, as they do not want work to necessarily define who they are as people.

Twelve of the couples acknowledged the want for peace in their lives, but two participants spoke directly to how having peace has helped them create a much-needed

balance. One wife shared that a great threat to their peace is outsiders. She spoke about being very careful about whom she allows into her home and into her relationship.

Economic strain was something each of the couples discussed, some having experienced it and others feeling fortunate not to have experienced economic strain. The couples that have experienced economic strain shared that finances have threatened their marriage, and how they worked through it.

### **Role of Faith in the Marriage**

Marks et al. (2012) discussed the importance of faith in Black American marriages and families and found that Black Americans view marriage as a sacred vow and considered religion the core of life for some families. In fact, faith positively influenced relationships with wives, husbands, and children (Marks et al., 2012).

According to Olson et al. (2015), significant relationships between religiosity and marital satisfaction with religiosity safeguarding against negative effects of risk factors including previous divorce, high-stress marriage, and spousal forgiveness. Moreover, Olson et al. (2015) found that religiosity increased marital satisfaction and marital resiliency.

All six couples interviewed for this research confirmed what the previous research found as the couples spoke about their unique relationships with their higher power. The twelve participants spoke of how their faith has carried them through difficult and devastating events. One wife shared that faith is part of her foundation and that she wants this for their children as well. One wife shared her strength comes from her faith as she overcomes threats to their marriage with prayer and determination. Another couple spoke of their faith being a pillar of their marriage. They emphasized the significance of prayer

and the role it plays in guiding them through their marriage. The results of this study validated the results of strength-based studies that focused on Black marriages. The studies that did not use a strength-based approach had results in contrast to the findings of this study.

### **Contrasting Data**

What I learned that contrasted the other studies that I reviewed was the power that exists within Black marriages to thrive in conflict and uncertainty, even when at least one partner is in law enforcement. The literature that does exist is saturated with the problems that exist in the relationships of Black American couples, rather than the strengths of their relationships. The research that I completed pulled out the strengths of the couples and highlighted the intentional work they do to maintain their marital satisfaction.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The research required participants to be married Black American law enforcement officers, a specific population, which provides an inherent limitation due to the exclusion of individuals that do not meet these criteria. Self-reporting is another limitation present in the study as the participants self-reported their experiences surrounding the phenomenon of study. Diligence was used to ensure the participants had a clear understanding of the phenomenon. Due to the study being qualitative, the results may also limit its generalizability to other members of law enforcement and to Black American couples that do not have a member working in the field of law enforcement. The study was based in a specific geographic region, a state in the northeast portion of the

United States, which also is considered a limitation. The geographic region may be a limitation due to the potential of decreased transferability. Another limitation of the study is each of the husbands were law enforcement officers; if the law enforcement officer was the wife, the participants may have shared information that varied from what I was given. I also chose to study heterosexual couples, so the results I received may vary when studying same-sex couples which is another limitation to consider. Although data saturation was achieved, the sample size of 12 participants is a limitation. A larger group of participants may have generated additional themes.

My awareness of trustworthiness throughout the research helped to increase the validity of my study. I used memos after each interview to record my observations (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I also used memos to purge thoughts by doing write-ups and mini analyses to flesh out concepts and patterns that emerged in the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, Young, 2016). To ensure trustworthiness, I listened for the participant's description of their experience including their state of mind, how they were feeling, their mood, and their emotions (van Manen, 2016). I focused on the specific examples and occurrences of the object of experiences of the participants that stood out for its distinctness (van Manen, 2016). I used an open-ended format for data collection to provide participants with an opportunity to share their in-depth and holistic perspectives and experiences as van Manen (2007) expressed the importance of participants shared lived experiences and meanings in the phenomenological study. Outside of using analytic memos to ensure credibility, I also used trustworthy interviewing methods including reflexivity and participant validation for my interview (Gibbs, 2012; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

To increase dependability, I documented as many steps of my procedures as possible, used a semi structured interview protocol, and I used the same instruments for each of my data sources, so my study has instrument consistency for dependability (Gibbs, 2012). To address transferability, I used thick descriptions to help my results have transferability and to establish credibility and trustworthiness (Young, 2016). To address confirmability, I worked to remain neutral in my study's findings, basing my research on the participants' responses, not on my bias or my reasons for doing the research (Gibbs, 2012). I needed to be aware of her bias to avoid being bias, and to remain neutral and objective. The use of notes and reflexive journaling to track my feelings and biases aided in avoiding bias throughout the research process (Gibbs, 2012).

Researchers conducting Hermeneutic studies acknowledge and make consideration of researcher bias; however, it is still considered a limitation. Maxwell (2013) discussed threats to validity including descriptive validity, reactivity, and interpretation validity that need to be considered when collecting data from interviews. Safeguards such as the use of member checking, memos, and an interview protocol were put in place to minimize and reduce the potential for bias to enhance the trustworthiness of the study (Maxwell, 2013). Reactivity of the participant of the study was also a possible threat to the validity of the study, so it was imperative to be aware of how the presence of the researcher influenced the study participant (Maxwell, 2013). I also ensured interpretation validity by capturing what the study participants said and not inferring my own understanding (Maxwell, 2013). I used myself as a research tool and after transcribing each interview verbatim and checking for accuracy, I practiced the art



of writing and rewriting what was shared in the in-depth interviews. I was cognizant of following van Manen's six step approach and maintaining a strong and orientated relation to the phenomenon and balancing the research context by considering the parts and the whole (Molley et al., 2018).

### **Recommendations**

Due to the dearth in the literature, there is so much work to be done when it comes to studying Black American marriages, especially those that are in law enforcement careers. The literature that does exist is saturated with the problems that exist in the relationships of Black American couples, rather than the strengths of their relationships. The effects of racism on the mental health of Black American law enforcement officers directly penetrates the marital satisfaction of a couple. The experiences of the law enforcement officers, that involves prejudice and discrimination as stressors, spill over and contaminate the quality of the relationship (Doyle & Molix, 2014). There is a gap in the literature that needs to be filled focusing on the effects of racism on the mental health of Black American law enforcement officers and the direct correlation to their marital satisfaction. Bryant et al. (2010) described a significant gap in the literature pertaining to the effects of discrimination creating distress in both marriages and families.

Only researching the negatives and the weaknesses of Black American couples leads to distorted perceptions of Black American couples who intentionally and tenaciously work to maintain marital satisfaction. When Black Americans are working to build healthy relationships, but the data being distributed to the science and mental health

community reports the opposite of what these couples are experiencing, this can be discouraging and cause pain, hurt, and great frustration (McGoldrick & Hardy, 2019). My study demonstrated the various strengths that exists withing the relationships of the participants such as the ability to balance and support each other, have a history together that allows them to truly know their partner, and nurture their happiness through friendship and intimacy amongst other aspects.

Curran et al. (2010) discussed that one of the most common limitations of research on marital meaning is the lack of sample diversity. Curran et al. (2010) shared that many studies focused on marriage and its meaning consist of White college students. Studies completed by Mitchelson (2009) and Hammer and Thompson (2003) (as cited in St. Vil, 2014) disclosed that perceptions of work-family conflict decreased marital satisfaction and increased divorce. Since marriage plays an important role in building culture and community, but the studies on marriage have been homogenous, the views of Black Americans concerning marriage are underreported. This lack of information is detrimental as it prohibits counselors from accessing the information necessary to develop the cultural competence necessary to serve Black American couples effectively. It is imperative that more Black Americans be included in research pertaining to marriage, so the results of the research can be more applicable to the Black American population. My study focused solely on the marriages of Black American couples with the intention of allowing their voices to be heard and the strengths of their marriage to be shared to help others see how possible it is to achieve marital satisfaction when various themes are at play within the relationship.

Black Americans in comparison to White people are more inclined to marry at a later age and spend less time married (Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Despite the potential benefits of marriage, Black Americans report the lowest levels of marital satisfaction in comparison to other racial and ethnic groups (Jenkins et al., 2020, St. Vil, 2014, & Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Black American marriages, in comparison to other racial and ethnic groups have the highest divorce rate, the highest rate of never married persons, and the lowest marriage rate overall (Vaterlaus et al., 2017). The results of my research indicates how influential each partner is on the life satisfaction of the other. The way the couples can work together, love each other, and support each other demonstrates the great role marital satisfaction plays in the satisfaction of their lives. The broader data that exists speaks to failure of Black marriages and typically views Black American families from a “deficit perspective”, which is a view that individuals from certain cultural groups lack the capacity to succeed due to their cultural background (Marks et al., 2008; Silverman, 2011). With researchers focusing on the negative aspects of Black American marriages, they typically report negative findings (Marks et al., 2008). My research exists in clear contrast to the broader data as it demonstrates that Black American marriages can experience marital satisfaction and use their strengths to sustain their rewarding marriages.

The topic of Black American couples’ experiences related to marital satisfaction with at least one partner serving in law enforcement is rich and layered as the experience involves many areas. Researchers have found the lack of support Black American law enforcement officers experience is a potent stressor, as well as race relations, with

discrimination producing limited career advancement opportunities (Wilson & Wilson, 2014). When studies are completed that focus on the rich and layered lived experiences of married Black American law enforcement officers, the research will include marital satisfaction, Black American experience with marriage, Black American experience specially correlated with working in law enforcement, the stressors of working in law enforcement, mental health and law enforcement employment, and Black American experience with mental health and how it relates to marital satisfaction.

### **Implications**

The findings in this study have potential impact for positive social change for individuals, couples, families, organizations, and society overall. The findings in this study demonstrate how empowering a strength-based approach can be as it allows the couples to see what they are doing right in their relationship. Clinicians should use a strength-based approach when working with Black American couples to counter act the negativity that exists surrounding their potential success. Black American couples have access to the negative data pertaining to black marital relationships, which can be discouraging. The data includes information such as, in comparison to other racial and ethnic groups Black individuals have the highest divorce rate, the highest rate of never married persons, and the lowest marriage rate overall (Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Further, marriage quality for Black Americans is lower than that of Whites, and sadly their marriages are less stable and more prone to conflict than White marriages (Klumpp, 2018). This information is disparaging information; a strength-based approach will focus on what is being done to

enhance their life, rather than focus on what will lead them to becoming a part of the negative statistics.

Barton et al. (2018) discussed the mistrust of service providers, due to the mental health stigma, still posing barriers to Black Americans who experience psychological distress seeking help. Barton et al. (2018) also shared that culturally informed relationship interventions may circumvent barriers normally associated with treatment and may increase relationship quality while also providing indirect benefit to the couple's mental health. In addition to using culturally informed relationship interventions, Jenkins et al., (2020) shared that clinicians working with Black American couples should consider spouses' racial identity, discrimination experiences, the couple's satisfaction, and mental health symptoms. These factors may influence both spouses individually and their relationship (Jenkins et al., 2020). Black American couples who feel their marital satisfaction is diminished because of law enforcement career stress need to have counselors available to them that they can trust, and that can help them navigate marriage struggles including work-family balance.

Clinicians need to be aware of the mistrust that exists of service providers and of the possible cultural resistance to counseling from the law enforcement community as well as the Black American community (Barton et al., 2018; Malmin, 2013). Seeking counseling might be reframed as a positive step for couples and as a sign of strength and commitment to the marriage. Additionally, it is important that clinicians understand the historical significance of religion and how African Americans rely on faith during difficult times. Having a conversation about faith and the positive impact on the marriage might serve as a basis for

helping couples in distress. Finally, clinicians should develop or improve relationships with clergy within the community to develop interventions or mentoring programs to strengthen African American marriages.

St. Vil (2014) also discussed the scarcity of research “pertaining to Black Americans, marital satisfaction and work-family balance” (p. 210). There is a need for identifying factors that contribute to marital satisfaction in Black American marriages due to Black Americans reporting the lowest levels of marital satisfaction in comparison to other racial and ethnic groups (St. Vil, 2014). Counselors will benefit from learning how Black American couples coping with the stressors of race and the occupational stressors of a career in law enforcement have achieved and maintained marital satisfaction. The information resulting from my study will help counselor education programs enhance their training programs to develop counselors that are multiculturally competent and prepared to help Black American couples who feel their marital satisfaction is diminished because of law enforcement career stress. The relevance of this study has increased with the recent racial climate changing in society. Despite an increase in attention to the plight of Black American law enforcements, there has been surprisingly little research on the effects of being a Black American law enforcement officer and marital satisfaction. It is imperative that research on the marital satisfaction of the Black American law enforcement officers continues, so this population can receive the services they need from mental health clinicians.

While the concept of family is universal, “what constitutes family, and how family relationships are determined, is profoundly culture bound” (Franklin & James,

2015, p.158). Due to the influence of culture and experience, Black American marriages have a uniqueness that influences their marital satisfaction and the family dynamics. Yet, due to the lack of representation within previous samples (Franklin & James, 2015), these dynamics have not informed counselor training. Thus, developing an understanding of Black American marital satisfaction is critical to ethical counseling practice.

McGoldrick & Hardy (2019) discussed the significant influence Black American marriages have on the positive well-being of adults, children, and Black American communities. Higher marriage rates of Black American couples correlate with higher incomes which makes a great financial impact on the community in a positive manner as it leads to increased college attendance and entrepreneurship (Jenkins et al., (2020). Higher marital rates of Black American couples also connects to reduced lower individual perceived stress levels, mental health complications, teen pregnancy, and juvenile delinquency (Jenkins et al., 2020; Pollock et al., 2014). Society benefits when changes are made to increase and strengthen the institution of marriage overall, but especially Black American marriages. Policy makers, counselors, faith leaders, and other community-based programming can create and offer services unique to the population they are serving to address the specific issues of the Black American community (Marks et al., 2008). Programs may be designed around educating community members on healthy marriage and relationships and offering early intervention for marriages that are seeking help that is affordable to all. Teaching people what healthy communication is and how to practice it in relationships with others is also something that should be offered in

communities. Exposing couples to a strength-based mindset creates a great opportunity for growth for successful marriages in the Black American community.

### **Conclusion**

Marital satisfaction can have a profound positive effect on people regardless of culture. Janjani (2017) shared that an “individual’s satisfaction with marital life is considered as family satisfaction, which in turn guarantees the concept of life satisfaction, and facilitates the growth and excellence, and material and spiritual progress of society” (p. 90). The marital relationship carries such vital importance because it provides a structure for the familial establishment, and through example, future generations learn from observing marital relationships (Janjani et al., 2017).

The findings from my research study substantiated the conclusions of researchers including Dew et al. (2017), Marks et al. (2008), Pollock et al. (2014), and St. Vil, 2014, that also utilized a strength-based approach revealing that through a strength-based approach, it is possible for Black American marriages to maintain marital satisfaction while enduring the stress of negative circumstances. It is almost inevitable that at some point married couples will endure a form of adversity, and counseling programs must train counselors to serve couples of all cultures in their time of need. Kennedy and Ruggles (2014) shared that it is vital for married couples to know how to deal with stress in their relationships effectively, because discourse in marriage may cause great turbulence in family life and result in the dissolution of that marriage.

Studying the marital journeys of the participants allowed the emergence of several themes that enhance the marital satisfaction of Black American couples. The participants



vulnerably shared the difficulties they have sustained and how they have developed strengths to overcome their trials. Often the trial has helped them to strengthen their bond and as a result they feel their marriage is stronger presently. Balancing and supporting each other have proved to be crucial for many of the participants and having history together has allowed them to have a trust in each other that is irreplicable. The participants spoke of how patience, healthy boundaries, and putting each other first has led them to experience marital satisfaction and sustain it. They work together to obtain work and life balance by sharing responsibilities and making sacrifices for the family unit.

Experiencing happiness, friendship, and intimacy have aided them in building a strong foundation and to overcome obstacles and seemingly overwhelming stress that has presented itself on their life. Research has indicated the significance of respect, trust, communication, and faith on a healthy marriage for Black American couples (Curran et al., 2010; Dew & Bradford, 2013; Ledermann et al., 2010; Marks et al., 2012). The findings of this studied substantiated their results as the participants highlighted the themes of respect, trust, communication, and faith in their unions and the critical roles each of the components has helping them to overcome difficulties, obtain and sustain their marital satisfaction.

Clearly, there are distinctive and unique marital concerns for Black American couples affected by a career in law enforcement. It is also clear that even with the stress of a career in law enforcement, racism and discrimination, and other life stressors, Black American couples can still experience strong, joyful, and fulfilling marriages. The

participants of this study are wonderful examples of Black American couples experiencing marital satisfaction. The strengths of their marriage are unique to their respective relationships, but the overall themes that create their marital satisfaction can be implemented in the relationships of other couples that may be facing similar life challenges. The hope is the information gathered from this study will be used to change the lives of many couples that are looking for help in healing their marriage.

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## Appendix A: A Semi structured Interview Protocol

As this is a semi structured interview, I may not ask every specific question below, but I will make sure to cover all of the topics.

Say to the couple: “The purpose of this interview is to explore your experiences of marital satisfaction including how you obtained it and how you are now maintaining it even with the influence of work in the field of law enforcement”.

Begin the interview with asking: “Please tell me about your background? Please describe your relationship?”

I will ask the following questions when appropriate, making sure to cover each topic:

- 1) What are the strengths of your marriage?
  - a. Where do you find your strength?
  - b. What makes your marriage special?
- 2) What gives you satisfaction in your marriage?
  - a. How do you demonstrate satisfaction in your marriage?
  - b. What do you do to maintain your marital satisfaction?
- 3) How is happiness demonstrated in your marriage?
  - a. Respect?
  - b. Trust?
- 4) What effect does stress from you or your partner’s career in law enforcement have on your marital functioning?
  - a. How do you handle the stress of your spouse working in law enforcement?
- 5) How does race increase or decrease the level of stress you or your spouse experience? At work?
- 6) What types of things have happened that caused you to have difficulties in your marriage?

- a. What is the greatest threat to your marriage?
  - b. How do you overcome threats to your marriage?
- 7) How do you balance work responsibilities and family responsibilities?
- a. With whom do you spend most of your time?
- 8) What role does economic strain play in your marriage?
- 9) What role does faith play in your marriage?

I will close the interview with the following two question: “Are there any additional experiences in your life you think have contributed to your knowledge, ideas, or beliefs about marital satisfaction? If you could pass one piece of knowledge on to a Black American couple that is just beginning to experience life with the stressors of a career in law enforcement, what would it be?”