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Perceptions and Experiences of the Benefits of Premarital Counseling Among African American Couples

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Abstract

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MSW, University of Southern California, 2014

BSW, Miles College, 2008

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Social Work

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Abstract

Researchers have conducted studies on the benefits of premarital counseling. However, little was known about the experiences of African American couples. The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore African American couples' perceptions and experiences concerning the benefits of premarital counseling. Social learning theory provided the framework for the study. Data were collected from semistructured interviews with eight heterosexual African American couples. Colaizzi's seven-step method of coding was used to analyze participants' responses. Four themes emerged: couples' expectations of premarital counseling, influences regarding participation, quality and structure of sessions, and overall experience. Findings could impact social change by increasing the cultural competency of social work professionals to help them provide a more individualized approach to premarital counseling for African Americans.

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Dedication

First, I would like to give honor and thanks to God for sending me so many people along this journey who constantly prayed and supported me through frustrations, late nights, and challenging life transitions. I would also like to dedicate this body of work to my mother, Bunny Louise Gowdy, my angel and forever number one supporter. Even though you are not here physically, I know you have been with me every step of the way. To my children, I love you all. Know that you can do hard things while creating your own path and overcoming any obstacles that may be in your way.

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank my mom for birthing a fighter and being the best role model a woman can have, my dad for stepping in and raising me to be the woman I am today, my sisters for their support and love, my kids for encouraging me and saying "so are you a doctor now?" every time I hit a milestone, my friends for being my hype men and women and reminding me of my greatness in times when I forgot, my church family for their prayers and affirmations, and my love for coming in and being an instant support.

Next, I would like to give thanks to my committee members, Dr. Phillips and Dr. Heinrich, for starting this journey with me, and to Dr. Wilson whom I am so grateful to for stepping in and helping me cross the finish line.

Additionally, I would like to give thanks to my accountability crew, Dr. Judkins, Dr. Whitman, and Dr. Campbell, for giving me a sisterhood. I could call any of you at any time for late night encouragement, plan writing weekends, and have venting sessions; I am truly grateful.

Special thanks to Tamia and her *Love Life* album. You've been with me since the beginning from my PhD coursework to coding data, along with WizKid (*Born in Lagos*), Beyonce (*Lion King: The Gift*), and Tems (Whole music catalog) whose music brought my ancestors to help push me across the finish line.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Premarital counseling is a curriculum for couples preparing for or seriously considering marriage (Clyde et al., 2019). Through premarital counseling, couples participate in training on topics that can help them avoid and prevent marital discord and divorce (Parhizgar et al., 2017). Researchers have examined the efficacy of premarital counseling (Brown, 2019; Carlson et al., 2017; Clyde et al., 2019; Mikle & Gilbert, 2019; Moeti et al., 2017; Parhizgar et al., 2017; Rajabi & Abbasi, 2020; Raley et al., 2015; Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Through this research, researchers have found that using premarital counseling programs aids in the reduction of divorce rates by providing the skills necessary to navigate challenges that may arise within marriages (Raley et al., 2015; Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Despite the documented benefits of engaging in premarital counseling, many couples choose not to use this resource when preparing for marriage (Duncan et al., 2018). Researchers have reported that White American couples are most likely to use premarital counseling (Mikle & Gilbert, 2019; Raley et al., 2015; Vaterlaus et al., 2017). In contrast, the demographic identified as least likely to engage in premarital counseling is African American couples (Mikle & Gilbert, 2019; Raley et al., 2015; Vaterlaus et al., 2017). African Americans are also the group least likely to marry of all racial groups, are more likely to marry later in life, and spend less time married than White Americans (Mikle & Gilbert, 2019; Raley et al., 2015; Vaterlaus et al., 2017). As researchers continue to study premarital counseling to decrease the likelihood of divorce, the perceptions of different ethnicities must be heard (Duncan et al., 2018; Lebow, 2019).

I explored the perceptions and experiences of African American couples regarding the benefits of premarital counseling and added to the existing knowledge

related to African Americans and their perceptions of premarital counseling. In this chapter, I introduce my research topic and provide the background of the problem, problem statement, research question, and conceptual framework. I also discussed the social problem and explain the nature of the study.

Background

Some researchers have attributed the increase in divorce rates to changes in societal views (Clyde et al., 2019; Lebow, 2019; Leeson & Pierson, 2017). For example, in the 1960s, couples were encouraged to work through challenges within their marriages (Clyde et al., 2019; Duncan et al., 2018; Lebow, 2019; Leeson & Pierson, 2017). Later, researchers discovered that many couples who chose to remain in unhealthy marriages displayed adverse emotional, psychological, and physical consequences (Leeson & Pierson, 2017; Sbarra et al., 2019). Before the 1970s, getting a divorce required that couples determine who was at fault before the divorce would be granted (Clyde et al., 2019; Duncan et al., 2018; Lebow, 2019; Leeson & Pierson, 2017). Since then, many states have adopted a no-at-fault divorce. According to a 2019 Census, the divorce rate in the United States averaged approximately 50% (Duncan et al., 2018; Lebow, 2019). According to marital statistics across ethnicities, 60% of White women who marry are still married in their early 40s compared to 55% of Hispanic women and 45% of Black women (Raley et al., 2015). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019), 50% of African Americans reported that they have never married. This same year, 29.5% of African Americans reported that they were currently married, while 3.3% of African Americans reported separation, 5.5% were widowed, and 11.80% ended their marriages in divorce (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

In the United States, the average couple divorces at an average rate of approximately 50% (DeLongis & Zwicker, 2017; Lebow, 2019). Poor communication skills, increased financial strain, unrealistic expectations, and substance abuse challenges are stressors that have been identified as contributing factors to divorce (Jackson & Fife, 2018; Lebow, 2019; Mikle & Gilbert, 2019; Vaterlaus et al., 2015). These stressors can caused changes in a couple's physical and mental health and changes in their family dynamics (Jackson & Fife, 2018; Lebow, 2019; Mikle & Gilbert, 2019; Vaterlaus et al., 2015). Researchers have also discovered that children may experience adverse long-term effects of divorce, such as behavior changes and feelings of abandonment (Morrison et al., 2017; Sbarra et al., 2019). Premarital counseling potentially limits these adverse effects by equipping couples with the skills necessary to navigate the challenges that may arise within a marriage or leave the marriage amicably, should they choose to divorce (Raley et al., 2015; Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Many researchers cited the benefits of participating in premarital counseling as increasing couples' communication ability, improving couples' financial literacy, and assisting couples with transitioning from single to married life (Cannon & Murray, 2019; Leeson & Pierson, 2017; Parhizgar et al., 2017). Although there are cited benefits, researchers report that many couples still chose not to use premarital counseling when preparing for marriage (Duncan et al., 2018).

Historically, religion has played an essential role in African American marriages and families because couples often rely on spirituality and religious counsel when faced with challenges (Avent & Cashwell, 2015; Lavner et al., 2018). Today, racial discrimination remains a chronic stressor in some African Americans' lives (Lavner et al., 2018). For some, challenges such as systemic oppression, institutionalism, job

instability, and racism created stressors within marriages (Avent & Cashwell, 2015). Racial oppression and poverty have also shaped the African American family's structure, along with religion as a place of refuge (Dixon, 2014). However, whereas older generations relied on religion, Dixon (2014) discovered that younger generations of African Americans appear to rely less on religion and spirituality as a source of guidance in their marriages.

<div align="center">**Problem Statement**</div>

Couples using premarital counseling reported experiencing many benefits including increased communication skills and tools to decrease marital discord and divorce (Cannon & Murray, 2019; Leeson & Pierson, 2017; Parhizgar et al., 2017). Researchers who studied the benefits of premarital counseling identified African Americans as least likely to engage (Mikle & Gilbert, 2019; Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Researchers have discovered that as an alternative to premarital counseling, African American couples were more likely to pursue religious counsel in times of distress and when preparing for marriage (Brown, 2019; Vaterlaus et al., 2015). According to research that explored whether couples benefit from using premarital counseling, much of the researchers' findings reflected the outcomes of studies with a majority population of White American heterosexual couples (Cannon & Murray, 2019; Carlson et al., 2017; Parhizgar et al., 2017; Williamson et al., 2018). Consequently, African Americans and other racial groups appeared to be underrepresented in these studies (Brown, 2019; Lebow, 2019). In an attempt to provide more information on this topic with African American couples, I gathered data to capture the experiences of African American

couples and to address the concerns of African American couples pursuing premarital counseling.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of African American couples concerning the benefits of using premarital counseling. Through semistructured interviews, I explored the perspectives of African American couples who experienced premarital counseling by investigating their perception of how it met their needs. Conducting this study was intended to augment existing research on premarital counseling that includes African American couples as participants. The findings may provide professionals in the field of social work more information to improve the delivery of premarital counseling to address the needs of African American couples.

Research Question

What are the perceptions and experiences of the benefits of premarital counseling among African American couples? Answering this research question would be essential to clinical social work professionals because it would provide increased knowledge of the perceptions of African American couples who participated in premarital counseling (see Cannon & Murray, 2019; Carlson et al., 2017; Parhizgar et al., 2017; Williamson et al., 2018). The findings may be used to strengthen the delivery of counseling services to African American couples, which could allow them to experience increased benefits from attending premarital counseling.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that was used to guide this study was social learning theory. This theory was chosen to explore how individuals learn values, beliefs, and behaviors from the people around them (see Forenza et al., 2018; Johnson & Bradbury, 2015). Many behaviors displayed between couples are learned within a familial upbringing. Positive and negative communication patterns and how to develop and maintain relationships are introduced during childhood (Woszidlo et al., 2011). Positive and maladaptive behaviors learned during early relationships are exhibited throughout adulthood and impact future relationships and how couples prepare for events such as marriage (Forenza et al., 2018; Woszidlo et al., 2011).

Nature of the Study

I employed a generic qualitative approach to answer the research question. The generic qualitative approach was chosen because it would aid in explaining how people interpret, construct, or make meaning of their world and experiences while allowing the study not to be subjected to one qualitative approach (see Kahlke, 2014). I interviewed eight African American couples. The research focused on the couples' experiences with premarital counseling. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, I investigated participants' subjective opinions, beliefs, and reflections on their experiences with premarital counseling, which was necessary to answer my research question (see Colorafi & Evans, 2016; Kahlke, 2014; Percy et al., 2015).

Definitions

The following terms are defined as they were used in the study:

Divorce: The dissolution of a marriage based on irreconcilable differences (Clyde et al., 2019; Sbarra et al., 2019)

Healthy marriage: A marriage in which couples can demonstrate positive coping and communication skills to decrease the likelihood of marital discord (Cannon & Murray, 2019).

Premarital counseling: An educational program with a curriculum designed for couples preparing for or seriously considering entering marriage (Clyde et al., 2020).

Religious counseling: Any counseling provided by clergy or within a church setting (Duncan & Rogers, 2019; Duncan et al., 2018).

Assumptions

Five assumptions were considered for this study. The first assumption was that couples would be forthcoming during the vetting and interviewing process and would answer the questions truthfully and honestly. The second assumption was that couples would understand the questions being asked during the interview. The third assumption was that couples would have the ability to recall their experiences and perceptions about participating in premarital counseling (see Fletcher, 2017). The fourth assumption was that couples would be open and willing to share their experiences with premarital counseling (see Oye et al., 2016). The fifth assumption was that I could separate my biases from the responses given during the interview process.

Scope and Delimitations

Participants for this study were African American couples who participated in premarital counseling and were married for no fewer than 2 years and no more than 3 years. The research sample consisted of eight couples recruited from relationship groups

on social media sites. The primary data collection method was semistructured interviews conducted through the Zoom videoconferencing platform. In these interviews, I explored the couple's perceptions of premarital counseling and whether there were any benefits to attending premarital counseling based on their experiences.

I delimited the study to the perceptions and experiences of premarital counseling and discussed no other aspect of the couple's marriage or relationship. This research was expected to add to the existing literature on premarital counseling and knowledge regarding African American couples' perceptions and experiences. Findings may be beneficial to other researchers who may want to explore the perceptions and experiences of other demographic groups.

Limitations

Limitations of this study consisted of sample size and accuracy of participant responses. Although smaller samples allow researchers to gain more depth while conducting interviews, the study could fall short of getting the entire perspective of the studied population (Malterud et al., 2016). To address this limitation, I encourage other researchers to replicate this study on a larger scale. While conducting this study, I considered confidence in the participants' responses. Couples could have felt compelled to embellish their responses to present themselves in a positive light. To mitigate this limitation, I two employed strategies. First, I explained the importance of honesty during the interview process and how confidential information would be collected. Second, I discussed how the information collected may offer guidance in improving how premarital counseling can be delivered to African American couples in the future.

Significance

There was little information on the African American experience in premarital counseling settings compared to their White counterparts. Also, researchers had identified that African Americans are at the most significant risk for marriage instability (Barton & Bryant, 2016). Higher divorce rates and lower use of premarital counseling resources within the African American community have been cited as contributing factors. By conducting this study, I aimed to add to the literature surrounding regarding African American couples' perspectives on the benefits of premarital counseling. The findings may be significant because they may improve the delivery of services for religious and licensed counselors. Also, similar research may be conducted with other ethnic and racial minority groups so that premarital counseling programs can meet their needs.

Summary

Although marriage is a milestone in life that any individual from any race can experience, every couple's experience is different. In this generic qualitative study, I focused on exploring the perceptions of the benefits of premarital counseling among African American couples based on their experiences. When researchers conduct studies to reflect the different perceptions within different ethnic and racial groups, it allows for individuals' needs to be met (Malterud et al., 2016). I explored African Americans' perceptions and experiences regarding the benefits of premarital counseling. The findings may fill a gap in the literature for this population and improve future efforts to provide premarital counseling to African American couples. In Chapter 2, I review the existing literature on this topic.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Changes in societal norms have influenced marriage views over time (Clyde et al., 2020). For instance, approximately 50% of couples who decide to engage in marriage end their marriage in divorce (DeLongis & Zwicker, 2017; Lebow, 2019). Researchers reported that as the rate of divorce has increased in the United States, so has the interest in premarital counseling (Cannon & Murray, 2019; Leeson & Pierson, 2017; Mikle & Gilbert, 2019). These researchers also found that premarital counseling gave couples the skills needed to experience healthier marriages. Skills covered in premarital counseling include communication, financial management, and information on transitioning from single to married life (Cannon & Murray, 2019; Leeson & Pierson, 2017; Parhizgar et al., 2017). Researchers stated that premarital counseling decreased the likelihood of marital instability and increased the couples' chances of experiencing positive outcomes by equipping them with marital coping skills and strategies (Raley et al., 2015; Vaterlaus et al., 2017).

Despite the documented effectiveness of premarital counseling in reducing divorce, African American couples are less likely than White American couples to seek premarital advice, although no specific statistics were provided (Duncan et al., 2018; Mikle & Gilbert, 2019; Williamson et al., 2019). Researchers have not identified why African American couples underuse premarital counseling (Brown, 2019; Vaterlaus et al., 2015). However, researchers noted that African Americans tend to rely on religious support when preparing for marriage (Vaterlaus et al., 2015).

I sought to explore perceptions of the benefits of premarital counseling among African American couples. I reviewed the existing literature on premarital counseling in

the African American community. Because premarital counseling and divorce are interrelated (Sbarra et al., 2019), I conducted a literature review addressing divorce in the United States and the African American community. I also researched societal influences on marriage and divorce. Finally, I used social learning theory to explore the perceptions of the benefits of premarital counseling in the African American community.

Literature Search Strategy

In procuring suitable literature for my research, I used various databases and search engines to identify professional journals, published dissertations from Walden University and other institutions, and peer-reviewed sources. I used the following Walden University Library databases to locate the information in the literature review: SocINDEX with Full Text, Thoreau Multi-Database Search, PsyARTICLES, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. I also examined peer-reviewed references within the existing literature. I looked for articles written between 2017 and 2020, except for literature classified as seminal research dating back to 2015. My search started broadly, looking at articles about divorce and premarital counseling and marriages. I ended my search with 74 articles. To locate scholarly and peer-reviewed articles, I employed a combination of the following keywords and Boolean identifiers: *divorce*, *divorce in America*, *divorce* and *minorities*, *counseling*, *marriage counseling*, *premarital counseling*, *premarital counseling in the African American community*, *African American premarital counseling*, *African American marriage*, *African American divorce*, *media's influence on relationships*, and *social learning theory*.

Theoretical Framework

Social learning theory provided a framework for understanding how perceptions of the benefits of premarital counseling are developed through relationship influences from others. Using social learning theory, researchers understood how individuals learn values, beliefs, and behaviors from the people around them based on observed behavioral, environmental, and personal factors (Forenza et al., 2018). In relationships, topics such as a couple's view on divorce, cohabitation, and the benefits of premarital counseling can influence a couple's family ties (Woszidlo et al., 2011). Researchers used social learning theory to gain insight into the development and maintenance of an individual's perceptions. By observing the social context of an individual's environment and the outcomes of modeled behaviors, researchers saw the positive and negative behaviors learned from that environment. (Clyde et al., 2020; Jackson & Fife, 2018; Woszidlo et al., 2011). Just as healthy behaviors are learned, researchers found that individuals who grow up within unsupportive social networks are less likely to acquire healthy behaviors (Woszidlo et al., 2011). Researchers also determined that these individuals are likelier to display maladaptive behaviors in relationships than individuals with more influential support circles (Jackson & Fife, 2018; Woszidlo et al., 2011). According to social learning theory, parents (or parental figures) play a significant part in the social environment through which people learn about individual and interpersonal attitudes and behaviors during childhood (Jackson & Fife, 2018; Johnson & Bradbury, 2015). Although the family is one core influence, the influence of perceptions extends beyond familial influence (Jackson & Fife, 2018). People who may not have contact with

biological family members are influenced by significant others and adult role models or mentors with whom they have built a close attachment (Forenza et al., 2018).

Much of behavioral, marital, and premarital counseling was developed from social learning theory. The use of social learning theory has shaped the field of premarital counseling through basic operant learning principles (Johnson & Bradbury, 2015). Bandura (date, as cited in Johnson & Bradbury, 2015; Wulfert, 2013) argued that behaviors learned through observation can be modified through the rewards and corrective actions that follow those behaviors. Traditionally, these principles were used in marital therapy to modify each person's behavior through the rewards and corrective actions that follow those behaviors (Johnson & Bradbury, 2015). However, in premarital counseling, these principles were used to identify where these behaviors originated and taught couples how to have a successful marriage despite having learned these behaviors (Parhizgar et al., 2017). Couples learned more positive ways to change how they address premarriage issues rather than after discord was created (Johnson & Bradbury, 2015). Couples failing to learn these skills and apply them to address this maladaptive behavior increased their likelihood of divorce (Williamson et al., 2019).

Divorce in America

Divorce has become an increasing concern in the United States (Duncan et al., 2018; Lebow, 2019). As of 2021, the divorce rate in the United States averaged around 50% (DeLongis & Zwicker, 2017; Lebow, 2019). Couples who engaged in long-term separation without legal action were included in this number (Lebow, 2019). Of the 50% of marriages in the United States that end in divorce, nearly two thirds of the separations transpired within the first 10 years of matrimony (Duncan et al., 2018). Research showed

that couples choose to end their marriages for several reasons. Wilmoth and Blaney (2016) found that when conflicting values were present in the relationship, there was an increased risk of marital discord. Other reasons for divorce include issues with commitment, poor conflict resolution skills, infidelity, age at the time of marriage, financial strain, domestic violence, and substance abuse (Jackson & Fife, 2018; Lebow, 2019; Mikle & Gilbert, 2019). Societal norms also play a part in the reasons for divorce (Clyde et al., 2020; Duncan et al., 2018).

Societal Influences on Marriage and Divorce

Over time, divorce became a normal life transition (Lebow, 2019). In the 1960s, couples were encouraged to work through the difficulties they faced in their relationships (Duncan et al., 2018). Divorcing became a tedious process requiring that the couple prove who was at fault (i.e., adultery, abuse, abandonment, criminal acts) to be granted the dissolution of the marriage (Clyde et al., 2019; Lebow, 2019; Leeson & Pierson, 2017). In the 1970s, the no-fault divorce came into effect after legislators examined the adverse effects on couples who stayed in unhealthy marriages (Leeson & Pierson,2017; Sbarra et al., 2019). Along with this new concept came the idea that more couples could divorce without participating in monotonous legal battles (Clyde et al., 2019). The new reform to the divorce process allowed couples to divorce based on irreconcilable differences, making the process easier, less of a financial burden, and less time-consuming (Clyde et al., 2019; Sbarra et al., 2019). By 1985, every state in the United States had adopted some form of no-fault divorce reform (Leeson & Pierson, 2017).

Society continues to influence beliefs and perspectives about marriage and divorce (Noor et al., 2016). Media platforms influence values and what is thought about

relationships and dating (Eichenberg et al., 2017.) Todd (2020) offered advice for those at different stages in relationships, such as being single, dating, married, and divorced. Many individuals use social media and dating sites to meet and connect with others. Social networking platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat have become popular worldwide and allow users to meet new people every day (Noor et al., 2016). Sites and apps such as Match.com and eHarmony reported that users have started relationships that have grown into successful marriages through their services (Eichenberg et al., 2017; Whyte & Torgler, 2017). These sites have also been known to create increased conflicts within relationships and sometimes result in internet infidelity or social media jealousy (Eichenberg et al., 2017). Individuals who use social networking sites have an increased risk of infidelity because of easy access to new potential partners (Whyte & Torgler, 2017). Researchers have also reported that couples who meet online have a higher chance of divorcing than couples with offline-initiated relationships (Eichenberg et al., 2017). Shows such as *Married at First Sight*, *Love Is Blind*, and *Marriage Bootcamp* portrays examples of media's influence on dating and marriage for those in everyday life. These interpretations of romance and marriage are unrealistic and potentially leave couples with distorted perceptions and expectations for marriage and courtships (Clyde et al., 2020). Possessing these unrealistic expectations leads to divorce, which has lasting effects (Boring et al., 2015; Perry, 2018; Sbarra et al., 2019).

Long-Term Consequences of Divorce

Divorce affects not only the couple who is divorcing but those around them. Divorce has historically been a stigmatizing experience that brings forth feelings of shame and thoughts of being marked socially (Perry, 2018). When couples considered

divorce, they experienced another set of challenges. For example, divorce increased financial strain through court costs and a division of assets, impacted physical health, created higher rates of depression, and increased the likelihood of single-parent homes (Cohen et al., 2016). In addition to the financial challenges brought on by divorce, other disruptions may occur. For instance, divorce may disrupt family functioning due to transitions from a two-parent household to a single-parent household with increased stress levels (Jackson & Fife, 2018). Divorce has also contributed to poor mental and physical health for the adults and children in the family unit (Boring et al., 2015; Sbarra et al., 2019).

Some children of divorced parents have experienced many life changes due to the divorce. According to Cohen et al. (2016), these children showed behavior changes in the first year of divorce that may last long after the initial separation. Children from divorced families reported experiencing more anxiety, sadness, anger, and feelings of loneliness than children who were not from divorced families (Jackson & Fife, 2018). Some children became highly concerned with their parents' grief and sorrow (Morrison et al., 2017; Sbarra et al., 2019). For example, like adults, children who have experienced divorce experience higher levels of distress, symptoms of depression, and a higher risk of engaging in substance abuse (Cohen et al., 2016; Morrison et al., 2017). Some of these children learn maladaptive responses that are repeated in adult relationships, thereby creating a cycle that passes throughout generations (Lebow, 2019).

Family dynamics can also be influenced by divorce and the mental health challenges that may arise. As the number of divorces increases, so does the number of children with a higher chance of growing up in single-parent households (Lebow, 2019).

Researchers reported that children who had experienced divorcing parents reported having lower academic success than children in two-parent homes (Morrison et al., 2017). Children in one-parent families have also exhibited more insecure and avoidant attachment styles than children in two-parent households, impacting their ability to form relationships (Morrison et al., 2017). These behaviors were presented as separation anxiety, irritability, and regression in developmental milestones (Cohen et al., 2016). Children of divorced parents are also more likely to become abuse victims and exhibit more health, behavioral, and emotional problems (Morrison et al., 2017; Sbarra et al., 2019). Sixty percent of men and 52% of divorced women go on to remarry (Lebow, 2019) People who remarry often take issues from previous marriages into new relationships without taking the necessary precautions not to repeat maladaptive behaviors (DeLongis & Zwicker, 2017; Lebow, 2019).

Marriage and Divorce in the African American Community

Religious values and the cultural implications of a history of slavery contribute to the marital discord in African American marriages (Dixon, 2014; Scott et al., 2013). These two factors shaped the structure of the Black family and continued to influence future generations. For example, many researchers reported that African Americans are the least likely to marry of all racial groups (see Table 1), are more likely to marry later in life, and spend less time married than White Americans (Mikle & Gilbert, 2019; Raley et al., 2015; Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Approximately 60% of White American women who marry are still married in their early 40s compared to 55% of Hispanic women and 45% of Black women (Raley et al., 2015).

Table 1

Marital Status of Racial Groups

Race	Percentage married (except separated)	Percentage divorced	Percentage separated	Percentage never married
White	52.2%	11.4%	1.2%	29.0%
Black or African American	29.7%	11.8%	3.1%	50.0%
American Indian and Alaska Native	38.1%	10.9%	2.8%	43.9%
Asian	58.2%	5.4%	1.1%	30.8%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	44.9%	8.4%	1.6%	40.1%
Hispanic or Latino origin	43.0%	8.3%	2.7%	42.7%

Note. Adapted from the U.S. Census Bureau (2021) American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates to reflect marriage and divorce rates in the United States.

Religious Influences

Historically, religion played an essential role in African American marriages and families, as couples often relied on spirituality and religious counsel as sources of support when faced with various challenges (Avent & Cashwell, 2015; Chaney et al., 2016). These challenges included systemic oppressions such as institutionalism, job instability, and racism, along with familial stressors such as marriage (Avent & Cashwell, 2015). Congruence in religion is especially crucial in dating and mate selection among African Americans and has served as a strong predictor of successful marriage among emerging adults (Chaney et al., 2016; Mikle & Gilbert, 2019). For example, in a previous study

participants found that having similarities with religious values created a better environment for couples to have higher marital success (see Vaterlaus et al., 2017). When these values are not shared, it can contribute to marital discord, increasing the chances of divorce. However, in a study focused on African American relationships, researchers discovered that younger generations of African Americans rely less on religion and spirituality as a source of guidance in their marriages (see Dixon, 2014). In more present studies, researchers (Chaney et al., 2016; Mikle & Gilbert 2019) highlighted religion as an advantage in African American marriages because religious involvement is associated with increased marital quality. Couples who regularly attended church and possessed similar religious values remained together and experienced a higher chance of marriage longevity (Chaney et al., 2016; Wilmoth & Blaney, 2016). Researchers also found that couples reported more comfort and less intimidation with seeking counsel from the church because churches have been at the forefront of providing this intervention within the African American community (Duncan et al., 2018; Duncan & Rogers, 2019).

Impact of Slavery and Poverty on African American Families

Although slavery appears to be non-existent, racial discrimination remains a chronic stressor in African Americans' lives (Lavner et al., 2018). Like slavery, racial oppression and poverty have shaped the structure of the African American family (Dixon, 2014). Many African American households still consist of single-parent homes (Wilmoth & Blaney, 2016). In March 1965, Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel P. Moynihan released The Negro Family: The Case for National Action (1965). He criticized black families' deterioration due to illegitimacy, divorce, female-headed households, and welfare dependence (Miller, 2018). His views led to a debate on the impact of slavery on

African American families and the magnitude to which family structures found in slavery transmitted across generate.

Since the emancipation of enslaved people in 1865, many African Americans have fallen victim to poverty. Although free, they still experienced the long-standing effects of slavery, racial discrimination, male unemployment, underemployment rates, and higher incarceration (Chaney et al., 2016). Although financial stability may be relevant to any race entering into marriage, it is particularly important to African Americans due to being noted as an economically vulnerable population (Raley et al., 2015). To many African Americans, marriage is associated with financial status, and having a two-person home decreases the likelihood of poverty due to multiple incomes (Wilmoth & Blaney, 2016). Economic stability also influences one's expectations of marriage and the motivation to pursue and stay married (Vaterlaus et al., 2017).

Premarital Counseling

Premarital counseling is an educational, therapeutic, and preventive approach used by couples to decrease the risk of marital discord and divorce and help couples learn how to use their differences as strengths within their relationship (Parhizgar et al., 2017). Since its inception, premarital counseling has provided couples with the skills necessary to experience healthier marriages (Brown, 2019; Parhizgar et al., 2017; Cannon & Murray, 2019). Although premarital counseling continued to gain popularity due to the increased divorce rates, premarital counseling has existed for decades, with the earliest marriage preparation interventions dating back as early as the 1930s (Mikle & Gilbert, 2019; Duncan et al., 2018). In a relationship, each couple brings a level of comprehension of these skills before engaging in premarital counseling. Skills covered in premarital

counseling usually consisted of assisting with the transition from single to married life, increased long and short-term stability and gratification, improving the couple's communication skills, enriching the companionship in the relationship, enhancing intimacy between the couple, introducing the implementation of problem-solving and decision-making surrounding finances, and defining marital responsibilities (Kepler, 2015; Parhizgar et al., 2017). Mastering these skills could predict the couple's marital satisfaction level and decrease divorce chances (Kepler, 2015; Parhizgar et al., 2017). Other factors that predicted marital satisfaction were personal attributes, couples' characteristics, and communication and personality background (Parhizgar et al., 2017; Cannon & Murray, 2019).

There is evidence to support that using premarital counseling before marriage increases the chances of success in marriage. Duncan et al. (2010) found that premarital counseling participants have a 79% chance of having a successful marriage than nonparticipants. Williamson et al. (2019) noted that a couple's thoughts or beliefs about therapy can influence their chances of utilizing premarital counseling. Thoughts such as therapy will not be helpful, friends or family would be more helpful in solving the problem, or the fear of being stigmatized for seeking therapy may deter couples (Williamson et al., 2019). An advantage of seeking premarital counseling is that couples who seek premarital counseling also increase the probability that they will seek marital counseling if marital problems manifest later in the relationship (Williamson et al., 2018). Seeking premarital counseling also improves the couple's familiarity with therapeutic resources while increasing awareness of signs of marital discord that would suggest the need for additional support, including professional therapy (Williamson et al., 2018).

Even with the many advantages of using premarital counseling, many couples decided not to engage. Duncan et al. (2018), discovered that only 30% of married couples had participated in premarital counseling. They further explained in a national study that only 36% of married couples in the last five years received church-affiliated premarital counseling. Despite its ability to strengthen relationships, many couples viewed therapy as financially straining and intimidating (Duncan & Rogers, 2019). These high-risk couples usually came from populations that were low-income, high distressed, or minority families. The financial strain created a barrier that made it more difficult for high-risk couples to engage in premarital counseling (Williamson et al., 2019). Couples were also more unlikely to engage in relationship interventions despite being at higher risk for distress and dissolution than their higher-income counterparts (Williamson et al., 2018).

Premarital Counseling Curriculum

There are numerous approaches to marriage preparation, because of growing recognition of the importance of healthy relationships. Although religious organizations offered premarital counseling, other professionals, such as community-based counseling centers, provided premarital counseling through multiple sessions, retreats, or short workshops (Cannon & Murray, 2019). Some colleges and universities have also offered full-length self-directed courses in marriage preparation or marriage strengthening to prepare couples for marriage (Duncan & Rogers, 2019). Other programmatic interventions consisted of a set curriculum delivered by trained facilitators in a group setting; online programs were also prevalent (Clyde et al., 2020). Faith-based premarital

counseling is delivered in religious settings and includes religious principles within the curriculum (Chaney et al., 2016). Although some curriculum has undergone adaptation for diverse racial and ethnic groups, most of the curriculum available has not focused on culturally sensitive topics that may be important to the couple (Dixon, 2014). African American Relationships and Marriage Strengthening (AARMS) is a curriculum that was developed with these factors in mind (Dixon, 2014). The AARMS program included TLC: Talking and Listening with Care: A Communication Guide for Singles and Couples, a culturally centered communication guide for African Americans (Dixon, 2014). Although communication is essential across all demographics, it is vital to consider cultural protective factors that can enhance relationship functioning and stability among racial/ethnic minority couples (Mikle & Gilbert, 2019). TLC focused on the African ideology of the power of words, fundamentals of effective talking and listening, communication and connection, processing styles, gender differences in communication, and African American communication styles (Dixon, 2014).

The cultural-specific factors that were considered when discussing African American communication styles are:

> African American women are labeled as the angry, bitter Sapphire stereotype who emasculates men when she expresses her frustration and pain, and African American men, because of fear of showing their pain and vulnerability, may have difficulty communicating at all. As indicated previously, many Americans are raised in single-parent homes, which may mean that they have no models for how couples can communicate and resolve conflict in healthy ways. The goal is to help couples explore their parent and early caregiver communication and conflict

resolution styles and how those experiences may affect their communication style and learn skills to communicate and resolve conflict in ways that are healthy and affirming. (Dixon, 2014, p. 345)

Premarital Counseling's Influence in African American Communities

Despite having a lower percentage of marriages, African Americans tended to adopt the notion that "remaining unmarried is better than being unhappily married" (Vaterlaus et al., 2017, p. 884). Dwindling numbers in marriages, coupled with the high rate of divorce in the African American community, increased the number of children who will grow up in single-parent homes (Browne & Battle, 2018). Growing up in single-parent homes decreased exposure to examples of how couples communicate and resolve conflict in healthy ways (Dixon, 2014; Browne & Battle, 2018). Along with being the least likely to marry and most likely to divorce among other races, researchers also found that African Americans are also the least likely to pursue premarital counseling outside of the church, family, and friends than any other race (Mikle & Gilbert, 2019; Lovelace, 2016; Raley et al., 2015; Vaterlaus et al., 2017).

In a 2019 study, a researcher asserted that many African Americans recognized therapy only as an intervention for the mentally ill (see Brown, 2019). African American males have reported that participating in counseling is viewed as a sign of weakness, cause embarrassment, and affects their level of pride (Vaterlaus et al., 2015). As a result, when seeking interventions like premarital counseling, African Americans are noted to approach it with the same attitude and level of pessimism (Brown, 2019). Avent and Cashwell (2015) and Vaterlaus et al. (2015) reported that many African American men and women cited religion/spirituality and family (immediate/ extended) as a source of

support for assistance with overcoming marital challenges. As religion continued to play a significant role in the African American community, the church served as an excellent social resource for families and a resource for non-traditional and spiritual counseling (Avent & Cashwell, 2015; Dixon, 2014). "When discussing experiences with help-seeking for marital problems, participants indicated that they considered the trustworthiness of the resource, typically relied on religion/spirituality, and preferred to keep their problems within their relationship" (Vaterlaus et al., 2015, p. 22). Previous research shows that couples whose spouses engaged in religious activities report more positive marital outcomes when they attend premarital counseling in a religious setting and higher marital stability rates if both spouses participate in religion (Baker, 2019; Perry, 2015). When couples deal with these stressors together, it increases marital discord (Avent & Cashwell, 2015). Doherty et al. (2016) asserted that religious-based premarital counseling offers a couple increased clarity and confidence before marriage, which can contribute to decreased conflict during the initial stages of marriage.

Summary and Conclusion

In summary, as divorce continues to be prevalent in the United States, it is particularly prevalent within the African American community. The psychological and financial effects of divorce cause concern for the well-being of those who directly experience it (Boring et al., 2015; Cohen et al., 2016). Children who experience the divorcing of parents may encounter the same adverse effects of divorce (mentally and emotionally) and experience disruptions in their development and ability to form relationships (Cohen et al., 2016).

When looking at the history of premarital counseling, religious organizations and churches provided most of the marriage preparation in the United States (Avent & Cashwell, 2015). However, African American denominations have rarely been sampled when looking at premarital counseling programs (Wilmoth & Blaney, 2016). Much of the research conducted reflects the outcomes of the effectiveness of premarital counseling with White American heterosexual couples (Cannon & Murray 2019; Carlson et al., 2017; Parhizgar et al., 2017; Williamson et al., 2018). Consequently, African Americans and many other racial groups appear to be underrepresented within these studies, with African Americans making up an average of three percent of the population within each of these studies (Brown, 2019; Lebow, 2019; Vaterlaus et al., 2015).

Premarital counseling has offered many benefits, such as increasing communication skills, educating couples on finance, and preparing couples for transitioning into marriage (Kepler, 2015; Parhizgar et al., 2017). Premarital counseling's preventative strategies have continued to reduce the dissolution of marriages by equipping them with the skills to work through conflict within the relationship (Carlson et al., 2017; Kepler, 2015; Parhizgar et al., 2017). Despite low marriage rates and high divorce rates, African American couples do not often seek premarital counseling as a first choice before entering marriage (Clyde et al., 2019). However, African American couples are noted as being identified as having a secure connection to religious-based interventions, especially when the couple possesses similar religious values (Vaterlaus et al., 2015; Vaterlaus et al., 2017).

In conclusion, the literature's exploration has supported that there is a gap in existing literature as it pertains to the perceptions of the effectiveness of premarital

counseling. Discovering whether African Americans can see a benefit in pursuing

premarital counseling is vital to professionals in the field of Social Work because it will

increase knowledge on premarital counseling surrounding this population and its

effectiveness in delivering services to the African American community. Additionally, it

is also an opportunity for the African American community to have a voice in the

development of future premarital counseling programs to consider their unique cultural

history and religious influences. In chapter 3, I will present my methodology for this

study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

There have been many reported benefits associated with engaging in premarital counseling, such as learning skills to improve communication, managing finances, and guiding couples while they transition from single to married life (Cannon & Murray, 2019; Leeson & Pierson, 2017; Parhizgar et al., 2017; Williamson et al., 2019). However, only 30% of couples participate in premarital counseling despite the documented benefits (DeLongis & Zwicker, 2017; Duncan et al., 2018; Lebow, 2019). Much of the research found on the benefits of premarital counseling focused on the experiences of White heterosexual couples (Cannon & Murray, 2019; Carlson et al., 2017; Duncan et al., 2018; Mikle & Gilbert, 2019; Parhizgar et al., 2017; Williamson et al., 2018, 2019). In addition, researchers reported that African American couples were less likely than White couples to engage in premarital counseling to prepare for marriage (Cannon & Murray, 2019; Carlson et al., 2017; Duncan et al., 2018; Mikle & Gilbert, 2019; Parhizgar et al., 2017; Williamson et al., 2018, 2019). Researchers also reported that compared to White American women, approximately 45% of African American women who married stayed married in their early 40s; African American women were reported to be the least likely to marry of all racial groups, were more likely to marry later in life, and spent less time married than White Americans (Mikle & Gilbert, 2019; Raley et al., 2015; Vaterlaus et al., 2017).

With the many benefits that premarital counseling offers, it was essential to capture the views of African American couples and aid in providing research that supports strengthening African American marriages by providing them with the necessary skills and decreasing divorce rates. Conducting this study, I hoped to provide

insight into the perceptions and experiences of benefits by interviewing heterosexual African American couples who completed premarital counseling to close the gap in the literature. In this chapter, I provide the rationale for employing a generic qualitative approach and describe the research design. I present the research question and clarify my role and responsibilities as the researcher. I discuss the sampling strategy, sample size, and method by which I collected data. I also discuss the sites where I recruited participants and explain the methods I used to analyze the data. The conclusion includes a discussion of the reliability of the data collected.

<div align="center">**Research Question**</div>

The following research question guided this study: What are the perceptions and experiences of the benefits of premarital counseling among African American couples?

<div align="center">**Research Design and Rationale**</div>

There are many ways researchers can examine the perceptions, beliefs, and experiences of others using qualitative methods (Percy et al., 2015). Traditional methodologies such as ethnography, case studies, grounded theory, and phenomenology have been used separately to gain insight while conducting research (Kahlke, 2014). However, I chose a generic qualitative approach after evaluating which qualitative approach would be best to examine perceptions and experiences. This method was appropriate for this study because it offered flexibility in blending multiple methodologies while also focusing on the totality of the experiences of the individuals and emerging themes from their experiences (see Kahlke, 2014). Although appropriate when analyzing participants' lived experiences, phenomenology focuses on the essence of those experiences rather than the external influences on perception compared to a

generic qualitative approach (Percy et al., 2015). The ethnographic approach is used to understand the participants' culture through their perspectives (Teherani et al., 2015). The ethnographic approach requires the researcher to immerse themselves over an extended period and is used to develop theories of cultural behavior (Dodgson, 2017; Teherani et al., 2015). The purpose of the current study was not to focus on African American culture but to draw out the participants' thoughts to understand their unique experiences and perspectives (see Bellamy et al., 2016).

Often used to examine complex phenomena using a single case, a case study could have provided a path to conduct an in-depth inductive exploration to understand a theory or process (see Bellamy et al., 2016). However, the purpose of the current study was not to gather insight from an in-depth study of a single person or group. Instead, I sought to understand perspectives generated throughout a specific experience, making the case study approach inappropriate for this study. The grounded theory approach focuses on developing a theory of explanation based on individuals' experiences and how they make sense of their social interactions (Gammelgaard, 2017). Because the process addressed in the current study was the focus of the outcome, giving less attention to individual participants' responses, grounded theory was also inappropriate for this study (see Bellamy et al., 2016; Dodgson, 2017).

Role of the Researcher

Much debate surrounds the researcher's role in qualitative research due to the implicit bias in serving as the primary data collection instrument (Råheim et al., 2016; Teherani et al., 2015). As the researcher in the current study, I explored the participants' perspectives and experiences of the benefits of premarital counseling and the influences

surrounding their decision to engage in premarital counseling (see Råheim et al., 2016; Teherani et al., 2015). As the researcher and the instrument, I used reflexive journaling and member checking to develop an awareness of my biases and keep an open mind throughout my study (see Gauche et al., 2017; Råheim et al., 2016).

The relationship between the researcher and the participant needs to be established at the beginning of the study to determine the researcher's position as an insider or outsider to the studied experiences (Råheim et al., 2016). I could have assumed the role of an insider as a counselor who has provided marriage counseling and understood the importance of having the skills to navigate challenges within a marriage. However, as a divorcee who did not use premarital counseling, I could have been considered an outsider to this experience. If I had revealed these experiences to the participants, there was a possibility that I may have experienced resistance from the participants due to my marital status and professional counselor role (see Råheim et al., 2016). Disclosing my professional title as a counselor could have influenced the participants' perceptions and interactions and information given during the interview process (see Råheim et al., 2016). Therefore, I defined my role before the interview phase of the research to cultivate an environment in which the participants would offer their full cooperation and share their experiences and thoughts about premarital counseling freely (see Råheim et al., 2016). My experience as a counselor helped during the interviewing process by encouraging the couples to share their experiences through attentive and empathic listening without confusing the interview as an opportunity to receive a therapeutic intervention (see Råheim et al., 2016). Furthermore, I did not reveal my professional title and defined myself as a researcher for this study.

Methodology

Participants were chosen through convenience sampling. Using this strategy allowed me to attract participants who were willing to participate and communicate their experiences and perspectives in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner. This method also increased opportunities for participants who were knowledgeable and had experience with premarital counseling, yielding information-rich data (see Palinkas et al., 2015). I interviewed eight African American married couples age 25–50 who completed premarital counseling. Couples were selected based on a specific criterion: they were married for no more than 2–3 years. This allowed them to apply and practice skills learned in premarital counseling, which increased their chances of remembering the experience. Couples were recruited from social media groups that focused on marriage and dating. I achieved saturation through this method by attracting participants who could lend enough insight until there was no new substantive information acquired during data collection (see Palinkas et al., 2015). The instrument that I chose to collect data was semistructured interviews.

Instrumentation

I used semistructured interviews with open-ended questions (see Appendix) to explore the participants' perceptions and experiences of the benefits of premarital counseling, allowing them to contribute as much detailed information as they desired (see Turner, 2010). Using open-ended questions also allowed me to ask probing and follow-up questions, if necessary (see Turner, 2010). Employing a standardized method for semistructured interviews allowed the participants the opportunity to express their viewpoints and experiences (see Turner, 2010). Asking open-ended questions helped me

understand the perceptions of the benefits of premarital counseling in African American

couples (see Turner, 2010). Due to COVID-19 social distancing protocols, interviews

were conducted via Zoom videoconferencing, a professional meeting platform. Zoom

allowed for recording and security through password protection. Interview times ranged

between 45and 90 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed. Each participant

was asked to provide verbal consent to record on Zoom prior to beginning the interview.

Procedures for Recruitment

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I used social media platforms such as Facebook

and Instagram to recruit participants after I obtained approval from the Walden

University Institutional Review Board. Participants were recruited from Facebook and

Instagram by posting digital flyers in public social media groups. Before posting, I spoke

with the group administrators and explained the study's nature and the method by which

the interviews would be conducted. Administrators agreed to allow me to post digital

flyers within their Facebook groups to recruit potential participants for my study. Couples

who agreed to participate in the study received a copy of the informed consent that

addressed the procedures, confidentiality, and risks associated with the study, as well as

consent for participation in video and audio recordings. Upon recruitment to the study,

participants were initially asked to present a certificate of completion of premarital

counseling to verify that they had participated in a formal premarital counseling program.

They were also asked to present a copy of their IDs and marriage license to verify age

and marriage date to verify that they were currently married. However, after discussions

with the institutional review board, I was instructed to accept verbal confirmation of

completed participation and identity. Couples who participated in the study were asked to

share the flyer with other couples who met the criteria for participation to assist with recruitment.

Data Analysis Plan

I employed an inductive approach to analyze participants' responses using Colaizzi's seven-step method of coding (see Huang et al., 2019; Wirihana et al., 2018). The data were collected through semistructured interviews conducted using open-ended questions. During the interviews, responses were audio recorded. The participants' perspectives and experiences were transcribed verbatim within 24 hours after the interview, and detailed notes were bracketed to separate my personal views from the participants' views (see Gauche et al., 2017). Member checking was conducted by emailing participants a PDF file of the conversation so they could review their responses and for accuracy and confirm my interpretation of the data gathered.

It is common during data analysis that researchers repeatedly read the data collected from interviews to extract helpful information (Huang et al., 2019; Wirihana et al., 2018). Coding is a repetitive review of information and eventually leads to the summarization of information into themes (Huang et al., 2019; Wirihana et al., 2018). To complete coding in the current study using the Colaizzi (1978, as cited in Huang et al., 2019; Wirihana et al., 2018) method, I used these seven steps: (a) read all of the contents of the interview and then reread for clarity, (b) extract significant statements related to the couples' perception and experiences with premarital counseling, (c) formulate meanings from significant statements made throughout the interview, (d) organize the meanings into clusters of themes related to the topic, (e) develop an exhaustive description from the clusters of themes, (f) establish the fundamental structure of the

phenomenon through distinct statements, and (g) allow participants to review and provide feedback for accuracy. Colaizzi (1978, as cited in Huang et al., 2019; Wirihana et al., 2018) noted that it is important for the researcher to be flexible within these steps and not become rigid but employ an explorative approach. After identifying the different themes that emerged, I continued this process until no new information was found and saturation was achieved. I input the data collected into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is increased when researchers consider how their perspectives influence or guide their ability to analyze and enhance their data analysis (Levitt et al., 2017). The participant's knowledge and understanding are socially constructed and grounded within their experiences and knowledge, the same holds true for the researcher (Birt et al., 2016). As the data collector and analyst, I was careful to be aware of my personal biases, beliefs, and interests so that only the participants' voices would be heard while I analyzed the data collected (see Birt et al., 2016). I used bracketing, journaling, and member checking to promote trustworthiness within the research and increase data interpretation confidence (see Connelly, 2016). I attempted to remain transparent during the data collection process by keeping detailed descriptions of personal views and the research findings to increase the study's transferability. I used bracketing and member checking to help me develop a clearer understanding of the data and limit the influence of my perspective on determining study results (see Levitt et al., 2017). The combination of bracketing and member checking increased credibility and confirmability by challenging me to remain self-aware and open to the participant's thoughts and beliefs (see Levitt et al., 2017).

Bracketing

To process the data collected, I kept a bracketing journal and maintained self-awareness of my experiences, reasoning, and overall response throughout the research process (see Råheim et al., 2016). Bracketing is a strategy to mitigate researcher preconceptions (Dörfler & Stierand, 2020). Bracketing can also promote trustworthiness by detailing any biases the researcher acknowledged during data collection and analysis (Dörfler & Stierand, 2020; Weatherford & Maitra, 2019). Bracketing allowed me to revisit some misconceptions I had while conducting interviews and reviewing the literature to support my study (see Weatherford & Maitra, 2019). I documented preconceived notions during the interviewing stage and used this information while I coded the information collected in a bracketing journal. Using this tool allowed me to identify my biases during data collection and to distinguish the participant's voice from my own (see McNarry et al., 2019). When data collection was complete, I included these thoughts in the findings to help others understand my interpretation of the results of my study.

Member Checking

Member checking allows the participants to review a summary of their interview to verify whether their responses accurately reflected their views (Birt et al., 2016). Collaborating with the participants supports trustworthiness by ensuring that the data collected accurately represent the participants' opinions (Dodgson, 2017; Gauche et al., 2017). During this process, I also used reflective listening to record the responses. To conduct member checking, I emailed each participant a PDF copy of the interview summary for review. Participants were instructed to contact me to record the accurate

responses if they had any corrections and changes. The participants had 48 hours to respond and submit changes to the summary for accountability and to reduce data collection time. I spoke with the participants and confirmed if they felt my summary was accurate.

Ethical Considerations

In research, all necessary measures must be taken to ensure that the study is conducted ethically, starting with recruitment (see Oye et al., 2016). The first step was getting approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board. The approval number for this research study was 09-28-21-0564213. To ensure that the participants were fully aware of the nature of the study, I provided participants with a written informed consent form. Participants were also provided details about the purpose and interviewing procedures through Informed Consent. The names of participants were changed to aliases to preserve confidentiality. Upon request, participants were also informed that they could receive a list of follow-up counseling services and resources in their area should they need additional support. All interviews and transcriptions were kept in password-protected files on my personal computer and will be destroyed five years after the dissertation study's completion and approval.

Summary

In qualitative research, choosing the right methodology is essential (see Bellamy et al., 2016). Choosing the best method to address the research question can be tedious. However, generic qualitative research offered flexibility in blending multiple qualitative approaches (Kahlke, 2014). Using this strategy, I explored the participant's perceptions and experiences with premarital counseling while permitting them to contribute as much

detailed information as they desire. I considered the ethical concerns that could arise to avoid harming participants. The inductive analysis allowed me to take the information collected and share the participant's thoughts and beliefs while investigating their experiences subjectively (Percy et al., 2015). In Chapter 4, I discussed the results of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of African American couples concerning the benefits found in using premarital counseling. To gain insight into the African American experience of participating in premarital counseling, I interviewed eight couples and asked them to share their recollection of their experiences while attending premarital counseling. The questions were created based on the following research question: What are the perceptions and experiences of the benefits of premarital counseling among African American couples? The theoretical framework that was used to guide this study was social learning theory. The use of this framework not only helped me in developing appropriate interview questions but also aided in exploring how individuals learn values, beliefs, and behaviors from the people around them (see Forenza et al., 2018; Johnson & Bradbury, 2015). In this chapter, I discuss the setting in which the study was conducted, the participants' demographics, the procedures I used to collect the data, the evidence that supported the trustworthiness of the study, and the results of the data collection. To conclude this chapter, I summarize the answers to the research question and provide a transition to Chapter 5, where I discuss the findings.

Setting

The research was conducted using the Zoom meeting platform to conduct face-to-face interviews with eight couples. The Zoom meeting platform was chosen because it allowed me and the participants to participate in the study while adhering to COVID-19 safety guidelines. This setting also allowed couples who did not reside in my local vicinity to participate in face-to-face interviews. All eight couples agreed to participate in

the study on the Zoom platform. To ensure privacy and confidentiality, I requested that

each choose a place and time where they could speak freely about the subject matter.

Participants were provided a written consent form through email and were asked to

respond to the email stating they agreed. Before starting the interviews, I reviewed the

consent form and purpose of the study. Couples were also given time to ask any questions

about the study. All couples were open to sharing their experiences and giving an account

of their personal experiences. Couples were also forthcoming regarding whether they felt

participation in premarital counseling had benefited them as African Americans. There

were no significant issues with the interview protocol. However, throughout the

interviews, I began to see where specific follow-up questions would help the couples

expand their answers and provide more insight for me to answer the research question.

Demographics

The study included African American heterosexual married couples between the

ages of 25 and 50. When beginning the recruitment stage, my goal was to find eight

couples using purposeful sampling. I posted a digital flyer on social media platforms and

used convenience sampling to recruit participants. Although the flyer was shared over 70

times, it took approximately 4 months to recruit eight couples who met the selection

criteria. Within these months, 16 eligible couples showed interest by reaching out but

only eight scheduled and completed the interview process. Table 2 shows the

demographics of each couple who participated in the study, the ages of each partner, and

the type of counseling they participated in. All couples were between the ages of 31 and

44, with men ranging in age from 31 to 44 and women ranging in age from 31 to 40. Five

couples reported being married for 3 years, with three reported that they had been

married for 2 years.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age		Time married (years)	Type of counseling
Couple 1	Husband-41	Wife-37	3	Pastoral
Couple 2	Husband-32	Wife-36	3	Pastoral
Couple 3	Husband-44	Wife-40	3	Pastoral
Couple 4	Husband-31	Wife-31	3	Pastoral
Couple 5	Husband-32	Wife-31	3	Pastoral
Couple 6	Husband-37	Wife-35	2	Pastoral
Couple 7	Husband-33	Wife-31	2	Pastoral
Couple 8	Husband-34	Wife-35	2	Licensed counselor

Data Collection

To complete data collection, I conducted semistructured interviews with eight

couples who reported to have participated in premarital counseling and had been married

for at least 2 years but not more than 3 years. Once interviews were scheduled, the

couples were sent a consent form via email and were asked to reply to confirm that they

understood the criteria and agreed to participate in the study. On the day of the interview,

I reviewed the consent form and discussed the purpose of the study, the eligibility

requirements, and the risks and benefits of participating. I reminded the couples that

participation was voluntary and that there would be no compensation, and I thanked them

for participating in the study. I recorded the interviews electronically through the Zoom

meeting platform to ensure that the transcripts would be accurate and that I could review the conversations later.

During the interviews, I engaged the couples in a conversation about their experiences in premarital counseling, guided by the data collection tool (see Appendix). Because the interview was conducted as a joint session, the participant's responses were documented as a couple. To ensure each participant was heard and that I gathered their perspectives, I asked the wife and husband each interview question separately within the joint session. Both the wife and husband were asked to share their open and honest opinions about their experiences while participating in premarital counseling. I sought clarification for responses given and made sure that I conducted trusting and nonintrusive discussions throughout the interviews. The open-ended questions allowed me to ask follow-up questions, which allowed the couples to be extensive with their responses to the questions. During this experience, each participant did not appear to be influenced by their partner's responses. The partners invited each other to share their opinions equally. Many wives and husbands expressed similar experiences with premarital counseling that aligned with their partner; however, in situations in which they did not, I reported the findings separately (e.g., C1-H [Couple 1 husband] and C1-W [Couple 1 wife]).

I ensured that couples were not providing information beyond the scope of the study by asking clarifying questions when needed. However, some responses were repeated due to the overlapping with other questions. Other responses gave profound insight into the couples' experience and expressed their passion for the topic. I felt open-minded while listening to the wife's and husband's responses to the interview questions throughout the interviewing process. However, there were two couples for whom I had to

check myself for bias due to statements that they did not believe a divorced individual should be providing premarital counseling. I also discovered early on some challenges in the wording of my questions. I observed that many of the questions sounded like I assumed what I asked was "true" and could have been better worded. For example, the question "Why did you feel that premarital counseling was necessary to participate in before getting married?" could have been better worded by asking "Did you feel premarital counseling was necessary to participate in before getting married? Why or why not?"

As the primary instrument in the study, I used bracketing by journaling any biases or feelings I had throughout the interview process. I took notes of the wife's and husband's responses and asked clarifying questions to ensure my interpretation matched what they were communicating. After each interview was completed, I provided each couple with a summary of the interview. Couples were given 48 hours for member checking. I contacted the participants to confirm the accuracy of my summation of their responses. I also reviewed the transcripts and listened to the recordings during this time. Upon completing and reviewing the eight interviews, I concluded that no new data were appearing, which indicated that saturation had been attained and additional participants were not needed.

Data Analysis

I employed an inductive approach using Colaizzi's seven-step coding method to analyze the data collected in this generic qualitative study. I approached data analysis with an explorative perspective so that patterns would emerge from the experiences of each participant (see Huang et al., 2019; Wirihana et al., 2018). Through this approach, I

was able to identify relevant experiences that the participants reported. To conduct this approach, I followed seven steps to identify themes.

Step 1: Data Familiarization

At this stage of data analysis, I was tasked with familiarizing myself with the data that were collected while conducting the interviews (see Morrow et al., 2015). This process consisted of reading interview transcripts and rereading them several times to gain clarity and understanding of the responses. I reviewed the recorded interviews and the transcripts to ensure no responses were missed due to some connection issues that occurred during some of the interviews on the Zoom meeting platform.

Step 2: Extract Significant Information

In Step 2, I extracted significant assertions within the couple's responses depicting a representation of their perceptions and experiences with premarital counseling. I identified meaningful phrases from transcripts and noted the findings by compiling them on an Excel spreadsheet. However, I found it too hard to assess data in that format and began to compile them on a poster board using Post-it notes. After completing the extraction, I went back and input the information into the Excel spreadsheet.

Step 3: Formulate Meanings

In this step, I took the extracted information and formulated meanings based on the statements made by the couples. After reviewing the interview transcripts several times, I began to notice themes emerging.

Step 4: Organization and Theme Development

The fourth step of the analysis process consisted of organizing meanings into clusters of themes related to the couples' experiences with premarital counseling.

Step 5: Exhaustive Description

At this stage, I sought to develop a detailed description from the clusters of themes. This required me to reexamine the transcripts and thematic clusters for any contradictions or differing perspectives (see Wirihana et al., 2018).

Step 6: Identifying the Structure

At this stage of analysis, I extended the previous step by condensing the exhaustive description down to short, dense statements that captured essential information (see Huang et al., 2019; Shosha, 2012; Wirihana et al., 2018). This required eliminating redundant or misused descriptions by understanding the participants and the influences that led them toward developing their perspectives. By completing this step, I was able to see commonality in the responses and solidify formation of themes.

Step 7: Returning to Participants for Validation

The final step consisted of member checking, which consisted of reaching out to the participants to ensure that the responses were an accurate representation of the couple's experiences and validation of the findings. This step allowed participants to review and provide feedback for accuracy (Huang et al., 2019; Wirihana et al., 2018). Each couple was contacted for member checking, and no alterations were made.

<div align="center">

Evidence of Trustworthiness

</div>

Trustworthiness indicates the degree to which there is confidence in the researcher's data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of a study

(Connelly, 2016). Several strategies were employed to promote trustworthiness by ensuring credibility, reflexivity, confirmability, dependability, and transferability throughout the study.

Credibility

One strategy used to increase trustworthiness and establish credibility was member checking. Providing a summary of the interview responses I allowed the participants to review transcripts for accuracy and enhanced rigor within my qualitative study by using member checking (see Birt et al. 2016).

Confirmability and Reflexivity

Another strategy used to increase trustworthiness and account for reflexivity and confirmability was bracket journaling. Bracket journaling allowed moments of self-reflection and documenting any feelings and biases I had while conducting the study (see Dörfler & Stierand, 2020).

Dependability and Transferability

To support dependability, I recorded the steps taken during the research process. I established an audit trail by engaging in peer review through numerous conversations with my dissertation committee to audit my research findings. This strategy also helped establish transferability because it helped me to discuss behavior, experiences, and the context surrounding the participants' responses (see Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Transferability refers to how applicable the findings could be to other populations with the inference that every story is the same (Connelly, 2016). For this reason, I sought to provide a detailed description of the study that would resonate with other populations.

Results

What are the perceptions and experiences of the benefits of premarital counseling among African American couples? A generic qualitative approach was used to answer this research question. This methodology was chosen because it aided in explaining how the participants interpreted, constructed, and made meaning of their world and experiences while allowing the study not to be subjected to one qualitative approach (see Kahlke, 2014). There were 14 questions asked during each semistructured interview. Although the couples had similar responses, each brought their unique experience to the study. The responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed to identify the following themes: couples' expectations of premarital counseling, influences surrounding participation, quality and structure of sessions, and overall experience.

Theme 1: Couples' Expectations of Premarital Counseling

Each couple expressed that they entered premarital counseling with specific expectations and motivations. When asked about their motivation to pursue premarital counseling, four of the eight couples reported that the officiant conducting their marriage ceremony required them to attend premarital counseling. Couple 7 stated that attendance was encouraged and that they had not considered it a need before it was suggested. Couple 1 stated that they attended to prepare for their marriage because they wanted more insight into how to be successful. Couple 4 stated "we wanted to make sure that we were on the same terms and basis of how we wanted our marriage to be, especially because when we both came from single-parent households." Despite their familial influence, Couple 4 expressed that pursuing premarital counseling was further motivated by seeking

to "break generational curses." Other couples reported wanting to improve their relationship by getting to know each other better before entering a marriage.

When discussing the expectations before participating in premarital counseling, four couples expressed shared expectations during the experience. For instance, Couple 1 agreed they expected to gain guidance that would assist them in having better communication and tools to have a successful marriage. Couple 2 stated they expected to receive guidance and validation they were making the right choice to marry each other. Couple 6 reported the experience was a "confirmation of what we already knew" and a "breath of fresh air; the pastor complimented us on our knowledge." Couple 8 expressed due to previous challenges in their relationship, they wanted to correct past behaviors and have a safe place to communicate with a neutral party before entering a marriage.

The remaining four couples shared differences in expectations between partners. Specifically, C3-H reported that he did not know what to expect, and C3-W expressed that she expected more in-depth guidance on improving the relationship. C4-H stated that he expected accountability during the sessions. C4-W stated, "I did not know what to expect. I thought they were going to gang up on me based on what other couples said." Couple 4 stated that because their counselor explained what they would be doing during the sessions it resulted in them looking forward to attending. C5-H stated that he had no expectations while C5-W noted that she expected they would get to know each other better. Lastly, C7-H also expressed that he did not have any expectations. C7-W stated that "I didn't have any expectation. I really thought it was going to be him asking very triggering questions that could make us question each other. But it wasn't that at all."

Most couples agreed that their expectations were met during premarital counseling; however, couples one and three reported that although their expectations were met, they were "looking for more details," felt like the conversations were "surfacy", and that the session "didn't feel couple-centered." Couple 1 stated that attending marital counseling after they were married further assisted them with some things that would have been beneficial in premarital counseling. Couple 3 stated that they did not feel confident in their premarital counselor and probably should have discontinued the sessions. Overall, the couples reported that attending premarital counseling helped to "debunk myths", was a "confirmation of what they already knew" and that their experiences did not differ from their initial expectations.

Theme 2: Influences Surrounding Participation

Research states that the family serves as a core influence on how perceptions are formed; however, the influence of perceptions extends beyond familial influence (Jackson & Fife, 2018). To explore this more within the study, I discussed past experiences, level of necessity, and religious and familial influences when choosing to participate in premarital counseling with the couple. Six out of the eight couples reported that there were no influences in the past that made them hesitant about participating in premarital counseling. However, two remaining couples were able to give insight into the reported influences from past experiences that made them hesitant about participating in premarital counseling. Couple 3 reported that they had both attended premarital counseling to prepare for their previous marriages; those experiences made them hesitant to attend again. Couple 4 stated they were hesitant because they spoke to another couple that participated in premarital counseling and marriage ended in divorce. When asked if

each of them felt premarital counseling was necessary, Couple 4 said it was and helped them reacquaint each other. C3-H stated that he did not want to do it and did not have confidence in the counselor's ability. C3-W stated that although she did not feel it was necessary, there was a strong desire to have conversations related to preparing for the marriage and a space where they could talk. Couple 7 shared similar sentiments and stated that although it was helpful, it was not on the "to-do list." Couple 1 stated that they "wanted to save money," so they attended due to the discount offered in conjunction with attending premarital counseling.

The other couples who believed it necessary to participate in premarital counseling were Couples 2, 4, 5, 6, and 8. Couple 2 reported that "it was required by the church; without the requirement, I would not have attended." They explained that the necessity came from religious influence, and if they had not attended, they could not have the wedding in the church and would not be blessed. Couple 4 stated that they felt it was necessary because "It helped us in getting reacquainted with history, personality, and beliefs." C4-W further explained that even though they had been together for a long time, exploring "all that type of stuff to help us be who we are now" was beneficial. Couple 5 added that it "helped us to deal with things better," and that they while couple 8 suggested that other couples "treat it like you are going to the doctor."

Couples were also asked about religion's influence on their decision to participate in premarital counseling. Many couples stated that religion significantly influenced their decision to participate in premarital counseling. Couples 1 and 4 stated that participating in premarital counseling was required for the pastor to marry them in the church. They stated that they saw marriage as a "vow before God." Couple 4 added, "Religion has

always been a part of our relationship." They stated that they saw God as the head of their household and wanted the information to help them become one in their marriage. Couple 6 stated, "Religion was important because of familial background in the church." C6-W stated that she wanted to support her husband because she knew attending premarital counseling in a religious setting was important to him. Couple 7 revealed, "Our pastor encouraged us, and his opinion matters." It was less about religion and more about trusting the advice their religious leader gave them. Couples 5 and 8 reported that their decision was not influenced by religion and was more about the relationship. They both agreed that it was needed it to have a successful marriage. Couple 8 was the only couple that chose a professional counselor to provide their premarital. C8-H said he "Did not want a pastor without the proper credentials." C8-W stated that she had Christian friends who attended premarital counseling, but it did not influence whether or not she wanted to attend it.

When discussing family influence and their choice to participate in premarital counseling, all eight couples stated that their families had no direct influence on their choice. Five couples reported that they had family members that attended premarital counseling; however, their choice to participate was self-motivated. Couple 4 stated that their family was unaware that they attended premarital counseling. In addition, they stated that by attending premarital counseling, they felt they could influence other family members to attend. They stated that shared letter their counselor wrote at their wedding to illuminate their positive experience during premarital counseling. Couple 1 stated that their family supported their decision and offered advice on how to choose the best counselor. Couple 3 was able to offer in-depth insight by stating,

In the marriages and divorces in my family and nobody ever thought about pre-

marriage counseling. I wanted to break generational cycles and I feel like we are

really crushing the cycles and sharing the cycles that we had growing up because

of the stigma and the taboo when it comes to mental health, when it comes to

being in a relationship, when it comes to dealing with hardships and conflict, and

just the family structure, period.

It is important to note that although these experiences aided the development of the

couples' perceptions of premarital counseling, the couples decided to participate in

premarital counseling whether they had supportive or opposing influences.

Theme 3: Quality and Structure of Sessions

To gather information related to the quality and structure of the sessions, I

employed questions related to the topics discussed during premarital counseling as well

as the topics that the couples found most and least helpful during the first years of their

marriage. Topics discussed the most consisted of love languages, communication,

finances, gender roles, and intimacy/sex. Many couples reported that many topics

discussed were helpful in the first year of marriage. Couple 2 stated that the conversation

on sex was constructive because it is a taboo topic not discussed within their family.

However, the couples also reported that topics such as love languages and gender roles

were not particularly helpful in the first year of marriage. Couple 5 stated that in their

relationship they felt as if they were equal partners so there was no need to discuss gender

roles. Many couples agreed noting that the conversation on gender roles felt dated

because, in today's society, many couples do not function within traditional gender roles.

Couple 1 reported that they felt more guidance was needed and that their premarital

counseling was not helpful. They specifically stated,

> I did not need to hear that I was going to be okay. I didn't want to hear it is going
>
> to be bumps in the road, but you will be fine. If somebody is shooting at you, you
>
> don't want to hear there will be bullets out there, but you will be okay. Teach me
>
> how to duck. You need to teach me how to get down, how to be equipped, wear a
>
> vest if you are going to be in that type of situation. I wasn't hearing their voice
>
> when we was going through situations that everything was going to be okay. That
>
> was the last thing I was thinking about or hearing.

Couples 6 and seven reported that the structure and duration did not help prepare for

premarital counseling and that their session was only one day. C6-F stated they did not

learn anything new, which was "just a confirmation." Couple 5 noted that some of the

information covered in premarital counseling were things they had already discussed and

made the duration of counseling longer than anticipated. Couple 8 stated, "The process

was helpful; the experience brought teamwork." The table below shows all topics

discussed in this section regarding what was helpful and what was not.

Table 3

Topics Discussed in Premarital Counseling

Participant	Topic discussed	Most helpful	Least helpful
Couple 1	Love language communication	Not helpful	Needed more guidance
Couple 2	Finances Sex Family planning Personal grooming Accountability Gender roles	Finances Sex Personal grooming	All topics were helpful
Couple 3	Compatibility Communication Gender roles Being "evenly yolk"	Communication	All topics were helpful
Couple 4	Families background Dating while married "Influence of what love is?" "What's going well?" Love languages Core values Expectations "Stress from planning a wedding" Intimacy Mental health Communication/conflict resolution parenting	Communication Dating while married	Parenting Gender roles
Couple 5	Love languages Communication Finances Medical history Family history Gender roles	Communication	Finances Gender roles
Couple 6	Gender roles Sex Communication Conflict resolution Finances Strengths/weakness	Gender roles Conflict resolution	Duration Nothing new was taught
Couple 7	Discussions geared toward marriage Keeping God at the head of marriage Communication	Keeping God at the head of marriage	All topics were helpful
Couple 8	Conflict resolution Communication Commitment	Conflict resolution Commitment	All topics were helpful

Theme 4: Overall Experience

It was vital to this study that questions specifically targeted the African American experience while attending premarital counseling. To gather this information, I asked about topics the couples thought helped prepare them for marriage, specifically as African Americans. It was also essential to gather information on how their experiences could have been improved and how it impacted their relationship after participating in premarital counseling. Lastly, I asked the couples if there were any advice they would offer to African American couples seeking to use premarital counseling to prepare for marriage.

Couples 1, 2, 4, and 7 reported that communication, gender roles, finances, conflict resolution, and their relationship with God were topics that they felt prepared them for marriage as African Americans. C1-H stated that the experience helped by strengthening his communication skills so he could stay present in the relationship. Couples 1 and 4 agreed that attending premarital counseling allows them to break generational curses. Couple 4 also stated that they could learn about financial management and give space to express themselves freely by talking about grief and preparing for death. They expressed that this was important because these topics are rarely discussed in African American families. Couple 6 reported that although the information in premarital counseling was generalized, it was still impactful because African Americans are not known to attend premarital counseling. They stated that they needed to share their experience with others in hopes that their attendance would allow them to influence others to participate in premarital counseling. Couples 3, 5, and 8 also

agreed that the information provided was generalized and that no topics were specific to African American struggles or experiences. Couple 3 specifically reported,

> I haven't run across any program for premarital counseling that I think is really catered to us because we have a unique structure. We have unique background and history especially when it comes to the family structure that it was basically ripped from us.

Many suggestions were offered that improve the experience for African American seeking premarital counseling. Specific changes conveyed by the couples were seeking services from a professional counselor, having a counselor with a similar background or "black person," someone familiar with how African American history affects relationships today, and someone non-biased and not divorced. Couple 1 stated that if they could redo their experience, they would utilize a professional counselor. C1-H expressed that the insight they gathered from a professional counselor in marriage counseling was valuable and transformed their marriage. C1-W added that religious counselors "understand the spiritual aspect of it, but not the human side of it. That would be super helpful if we understand the dynamics of each other's family, understand the dynamic of each other's past." Couple 3 agreed with not using a religious counselor. They stated that topics such as the historical context of the African American culture and how our history affects relationships today, generational trauma, finances, the trauma from past relationships, and a discussion on blended families would have been helpful to discuss. Couples 4, 5, 6, and 7 noted that the duration of these sessions was a concern for them. Couple 4 stated that they enjoyed their experience so much that they wanted the sessions to be longer. Couple 5 reported feeling their experience was too long, having

attended premarital counseling for six months. They stated that had some topics they were already confident in been omitted, and it would have been shorter. Couples 6 and 7 stated that they felt they would have benefited more if the sessions had been more than a day. They stated that it would have allowed them to dive into the topics more if they had been at least a month.

When asked about the couple's relationship after participating in premarital counseling, seven out of the eight couples reported that although there were struggles, they did see improvement in their relationships. They agreed that attending premarital counseling made their relationships stronger and helped them to be able to open up to their partners. Couple 1 stated that they did not see improvement after participating in premarital counseling. They stated that they saw improvements after seeking marriage counseling which improved their relationship. Couple 2 stated that attending premarital counseling strengthened their relationship and decreased their fears of getting married. Couple 3 stated that their communication was up and down, but the skills they learned allowed them to get to know each other and solidified their communication.

The couples offered a great deal of insight when asked what advice they would give to other African American couples seeking premarital counseling. The couples did appear to answer independently and express individual opinions and views. There did not appear to be duress from a partner in independent view. One suggestion offered was, to be honest. In addition, the couples expressed that they found benefit in having a space where they could learn about their partner and themselves. They also suggested that African American couples invest time into attending premarital counseling. They further added that it was important that couples decide for themselves and forget the stigma that

seeking additional help means that something is wrong. Many couples also noted seeking a counselor that is a "good fit" and "non-bias" as essential advice for couples considering premarital counseling. Specifically, Couple 8 suggested, "Get someone who understands you. Have a counselor that looks like you, and do not be afraid to change therapist." Couples 1 and 8 also shared the opinion that having a counselor that is also married could prove to be beneficial when seeking premarital counseling because they could share their experience with the couple. Couples 1 and 3 advised the couples is seek a professional counselor so that topics related to past trauma could be covered. Couples 2 and 7 suggested using both a professional counselor and clergy. Specifically, C2-W stated that seeking a professional counselor and clergy can allow couples to see from two different perspectives. She added that having a professional counselor can allow you to share things with a neutral party that you would not want to share with a pastor. Overall, all eight couples agreed that African American couples should attend premarital counseling before entering into marriage. They stated that they saw benefits to their participation in premarital counseling but also areas where there could be improvements to the delivery of services to serve African American couples best.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I described the purpose of the study, the research setting, methods of data collection and analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and presented the participants' demographics. I reintroduced the research question and presented the study's results in this chapter. Four themes emerged surrounding premarital counseling: couples' expectations of premarital counseling, influences surrounding participation, quality and

structure of sessions, and overall experience. In Chapter 5, I summarize, analyze, and

interpret the findings in the context of the theoretical framework.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of African American couples concerning the benefits found in using premarital counseling. The hope was that the data collected would bridge the gap in existing research on premarital counseling with African American couples. I chose a generic qualitative approach to aid in the exploration of how people interpret, construct, and make meaning of their world and experiences (see Kahlke, 2014). In addition, I used social learning theory to explore how individuals learn values, beliefs, and behaviors from the people around them (see Forenza et al., 2018; Johnson & Bradbury, 2015). The use of semistructured interviews created an opportunity for participants to reflect on and provide in-depth responses about their experiences and influences regarding their participation in premarital counseling and to identify common themes among their experiences.

In this chapter, I discuss my interpretation of the findings based on the conceptual framework introduced in Chapter 2 and the results reported in Chapter 4. I also discuss the limitations to trustworthiness that arose while conducting this study. To conclude this chapter, I discuss recommendations for further research and implications for social change.

Interpretation of the Findings

Historically, religion has played an essential role in African American marriages and families who relied on spirituality and religious counsel as sources of support (Avent & Cashwell, 2015; Chaney et al., 2016). In the current study, most couples reported that they were influenced by religion in that it was required by the officiant to conduct the

marriage ceremony. If it was not required, it was strongly encouraged. Other factors connected to religion encouraged couples to seek premarital counseling, such as the importance of their religious values or to have a blessed marriage. Couples also stated that they attended premarital counseling with a religious counselor with the expectation that the couples would receive guidance and skills that they could use in their marriage. Although many of the couples' expectations were met, findings showed that some of the counseling given by religious counselors lacked a skill-building component and did not feel individualized. The couples also stated that the duration of the counseling was too short or very long.

Previous research on social learning theory indicated that behaviors learned within a familial upbringing can influence a couple's view on divorce, cohabitation, and premarital counseling (Woszidlo et al., 2011). Previous research also noted that perceptions' influence extends beyond familial influence (Jackson & Fife, 2018). In the current study, couples were given an opportunity during the semistructured interviews to express how their families influenced their decision to participate in premarital counseling, and many shared how religion also shaped that decision. Couples expressed that although many family members did not attend premarital counseling before marriage, their or their partner's religious ties influenced them to pursue premarital counseling. Those with family members who attended premarital counseling reported apprehension about participating due to the family member's marriage ending in divorce or a report of a bad experience while attending. Despite the negative reports from those family members, couples were able to assess the possible benefits of attending premarital counseling. In addition to religious influence, each couple voiced that their choice to

attend was for self-motivated reasons such as equipping themselves with the tools to have a healthy marriage. Among the data indicating familial influence, a unique finding emerged: Many couples expressed that they were "breaking generational curses" by attending premarital counseling so they would not repeat previous mistakes of divorced family members and friends.

Overall, the responses offered by the participants in this study supported evidence that premarital counseling offers benefits for African American couples. In addition, couples noted areas for improvement in premarital counseling to address issues specific to African American couples. For example, in some cases, couples met with the religious counselor only once before marriage and felt like the session lacked structure. Others felt the premarital counseling process was drawn out due to covering topics such as gender roles and finances, which couples had already established due to cohabitating before marriage. Lastly, although many couples chose to engage in premarital counseling through religious influence, they also noted the benefits of attending premarital counseling with a licensed professional counselor to explore previous experiences and trauma that religious counselors may not have addressed within a religious setting. Couples also suggested that other couples approach premarital counseling honestly, ensuring their counselor is a good fit for them and making the time to participate in it.

Limitations of the Study

A limitation was that most participating couples attended premarital counseling with a religious counselor, and only one attended counseling with a licensed professional counselor. The lack of diversity in the type of counselor limited the transferability of the experiences. Another limitation related to the structure of the questions. Although I

completed mock interviews before conducting my study, many questions appeared to contain assumptions and could have been better worded. This limited my study because couples had to be redirected during the semistructured interviews. One limitation I anticipated at the beginning of the study was couples might not be forthcoming regarding their experiences with premarital counseling. However, the couples were very receptive and open to providing information during the interviews. Nevertheless, with the small sample size, there were limitations on whether the findings could be transferable to other African American couples. There may be benefit to conducting this study on a larger scale. Due to the use of the qualitative approach, the results of this study cannot be generalized to the larger population. However, they can serve to inform the current research and literature base.

Recommendations

Based on the current findings and the research reviewed in Chapter 2, I developed three recommendations for future research.

Recommendation 1

The first recommendation includes exploring counselors' perceived level of cultural competency in premarital counseling for African American couples. The rationale for this recommendation came from statements from participants in the current study suggesting that the counselors they encountered did not offer topics specific to the African American experience. As addressed in the literature review, although some premarital counseling curricula have undergone adaptation for diverse racial and ethnic groups, most of the curricula available do not focus on culturally sensitive topics (Dixon, 2014). Therefore, further research is needed to assist counselors with increasing their

cultural competence and tailoring the premarital counseling curriculum to the experiences found in African American marriages.

Recommendation 2

Within the current study, although many of the couples' expectations were met, they also felt the counseling given by religious counselors lacked a skill-building component and did not feel individualized. Couples stated that the "cookie cutter" approach led them to review topics they felt they had already mastered in their relationship. Each couple brings their skills, experiences, and personal traumas before entering premarital counseling (Cannon & Murray, 2019; Parhizgar et al., 2017). Therefore, my second recommendation is to conduct research promoting structured/ individualized premarital counseling. This rationale came from researchers' reports highlighting that many couples enter therapy with the perception that therapy is financially straining and intimidating (Duncan & Rogers, 2019). Obtaining more information on how to individualize premarital counseling may reduce the time and financial strain of attending it because the couples would know that the challenges they are facing in a relationship will be addressed.

Recommendation 3

Lastly, I recommend additional research to examine the perceptions of African American couples of premarital counseling on a larger scale using a quantitative approach with a larger population (e.g., survey) to establish generalizability. With this approach, several topics could be examined. For instance, researchers could examine whether more African American couples engage in premarital counseling outside of the religious setting, and if so why. Researchers could also compare the differences between

couples who engaged in counseling with a religious counselor who used a specific curriculum compared to those who received spiritual guidance because religion has played a historical role in the African American community (see Chaney et al., 2016). Researchers could also explore whether the perceptions identified in the current study differ from region to region. For example, perception may differ based on religious and socioeconomic factors in Southern states compared to Northern states.

Implications

There is a need to gain a greater understanding of premarital counseling to assist in maintaining healthy relationships (Cannon & Murray, 2019). Findings from the current study may allow others to gain knowledge of the experiences of African Americans who have participated in premarital counseling to increase cultural competency and humility and prepare professionals in the social work field to work with more diverse populations. Some social work professionals think that services such as premarital counseling can be implemented with a one-size-fits-all approach; however, as evidenced in the current study, that is not the case. In addition to findings in this study, other researchers have recognized the need for revising premarital interventions to serve different populations and meet their needs (Clyde et al., 2020).

Scholars and professionals may benefit from the findings in this study by using them to develop premarital skills programs that will address the individualized experiences of African Americans and other racial minority groups who lack studies highlighting the effectiveness of premarital counseling. The findings in this study may also assist in developing cultural protective factors that can enhance relationship functioning and stability among racial minority couples (see Mikle & Gilbert, 2019). The

current study may promote social change through the opportunity not only to learn about and understand the experiences of people from different backgrounds and cultures but also to implement that change for delivery and future research. This research may encourage others to contribute to the existing literature on premarital counseling and relationships so that scholars and professionals can support the growth of healthy, long-lasting marriages.

Conclusion

The findings in this study provided an understanding of the perception of African American couples' experiences through the lens of social learning theory. Analysis of the data from semistructured interviews resulted in four themes regarding premarital counseling for African American couples: expectations of premarital counseling, influences surrounding participation, quality and structure of sessions, and overall experience. The emergence of these themes allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of African American couples' experiences, which may be used to improve future couples' experiences by making premarital counseling more beneficial to this population. The participants' responses provided evidence that premarital counseling offers benefits for African American couples.

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Appendix: Perceptions of the Benefits of Premarital Counseling Among African

American Couples Interview Questions

Demographic Questions

1. Husband Age: _____ Wife Age: _____
2. What race do you identify as? Husband: _____ Wife: _____

Qualifying Questions

1. How long have you been married?
2. Where did you receive premarital counseling?
3. What were the credentials of your Counselor?

Premarital/Marriage Questions

1. What motivated you to pursue premarital counseling?
    a. P#1:
    b. P#2:
2. Prior to attending, what did you expect from premarital counseling?
    a. P#1:
    b. P#2:
3. After beginning, how did your actual experience differ from your expectations?
    a. P#1:
    b. P#2:
4. What influences have you had in the past that made you hesitant about participating in premarital counseling?
    a. P#1:
    b. P#2:
5. Why did you feel that premarital counseling was necessary to participate in before getting married?
    a. P#1:
    b. P#2:
6. In what ways did your family influence your choice in deciding to use premarital counseling?
    a. P#1:
    b. P#2:
7. Give me an example of how religion influenced your decision to pursue premarital counseling?
    a. P#1:

      b. P#2:

8. What were some of the topics that were discussed during premarital counseling?
    a. P#1:
    b. P#2:
9. Which skills and topics did you find most helpful in the first years of your marriage?
    a. P#1:
    b. P#2:
10. Which skills and topics did you find least helpful in the first years of your marriage?
    a. P#1:
    b. P#2:
11. Give me an example of topics you feel prepared you for marriage specifically as an African American?
    a. P#1:
    b. P#2:
12. If you could do it again, what changes would you make in premarital counseling to make your experience better?
    a. P#1:
    b. P#2:
13. Tell me about your relationship with your spouse after participating in premarital counseling?
    a. P#1:
    b. P#2:
14. What advice would you give other African American couples who are seeking premarital counseling?
    a. P#1:
    b. P#2: