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Black American Adult Children of Divorce

Aurielle C. Williams
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Aurielle C. Williams

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Walden University
2019

Abstract

Black American Adult Children of Divorce

by

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MA, Mercer University, 2015

BS, Auburn University, 2013

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Human & Social Services

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Abstract

While a plethora of studies have examined the effects of divorce on children, fewer have looked at young adults who have experienced parental divorce after they were 18 years of age, and even fewer have examined the experiences of Black American adult children. Using concepts from Social Identity Theory, the goal of this study was to understand the experiences of Black adult children whose parents have divorce and the phenomenon of their self-perception based on family identity. This was a phenomenological study conducted through guided face-to-face interviews and utilizing Photovoice with four Black adult children of divorce, whose parents divorced after they were 18 years old. The data collected from narrative interviews and photographs through this study were analyzed using narrative and visual content analysis. Findings were that adult children who are emerging as adults with their identity struggle to reidentify themselves, their familial relations not only with their divorced parents, but even more so with their siblings; where relationships are also impacted. This study contributes to social change by identifying needs of this population at an important time in their lives. Therapists, universities, and communities may use this study to better support Black adult children of divorce of American descent.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all Black Adult Children of Divorce...know you are not alone and hopefully; this study provides comfort and solace through life's adventures.

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I would like to thank my mother, Dr. Winifred L. Williams and my father, Capt. Joe F. Williams, Jr, USMC Retired for encouraging me, supporting me, and being my greatest inspirations throughout my educational journey! Can you believe it? We did it!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Within Black American culture, family structure and a sense of community are of high importance (Brooks, 2015). The structure of the Black family, familial behaviors, and cultural norms differ from those of other racial groups (Brooks, 2015). When a Black adult child experiences a parental divorce, there are already a myriad of negative effects that can result from the divorce itself; however, when considering the cultural norms within this community, there may be further detrimental effects. In this study, I focused on Black American adult children of divorce from the Southern part of the United States. The term Black is used in this study to refer to residents of the United States who have origins in any of the Black populations of Africa or the Caribbean.

Black individuals have a lower desire to marry and have a higher prevalence of divorce compared to other racial groups (Aughinbaugh, 2013). According to the findings of Besharov (2017), Black American marriage rates have been on a steady decline. In the study, the author repeated a quote from the Kerner Commission, stating, “Black and White families live in two separate worlds, that are separate and unequal” (p. 47). This is especially true when it comes to marriage and divorce rates. Over the past 50 years, all ethnic groups have experienced some decline in their marriage rates while divorce rates have increased; however, the greatest increase has occurred within the Black American community (Aughinbaugh, 2013).

The lived experiences of Black adult children appear to be insufficiently studied, specifically how the effects of parental divorce manifest in future intimate relationships.

Race, cultural backgrounds, and ethnic backgrounds impact individuals' development of identity and sense of belonging in society and culture (Yip, Douglas, & Sellers, 2014). Adult children who have experienced later-life parental divorce face a number of challenges and adjustments as they attempt to maintain a sense of normalcy in their family structure (Greenwood, 2014). Some of these challenges include: (a) feelings of having to choose sides, (b) pressure to spend equal time with both parents' families, (c) possible changes in socioeconomic status, (d) the loss of close bonds with family members, (e) parental dating and potential remarriage, (f) inclusion of new siblings, (g) a sense of detachment from their nuclear family, (h) higher levels of stress and anxiety, and (i) role reversal within the family dynamic (Greenwood, 2014; Ricketts, 2015). To build on previous research, I explored the viewpoints of Black adult children of divorce on love, marriage, and intimate partner relationships after the divorce of their parents.

Background

I conducted a preliminary literature review on the area of adult children of divorce with an emphasis on the following topics: (a) their relational experiences within their family dynamics, (b) the sources of uncertainty in adult children postdivorce, (c) the prolonged effects of later-in-life divorce, (d) relationships between parents and their adult children after a divorce, and (e) the lived experiences and perceptions of those experiencing these later-in-life divorces (Abetz & Wang, 2017; Greenwood, 2014; Kalmijn, 2015; Mikucji-Enyart, Wilder, & Barber, 2016; Ricketts, 2016). I did not find any research specifically exploring the effects of divorce on Black adult children.

Mikucji-Enyart et al. (2016) showed that when adult children experience later-in-life divorce of their parents, there is a stage of relational uncertainty and interference with personal development. They found a number of negative psychological effects, including family uncertainty, parent-adult child relationship discord, disruptions in normative development, and uncertainty with their family ties (Mikucji-Enyart et al., 2016). Abetz and Wang (2017) reported that adult children of divorce experience uncertainty in regard to spending time at family events and holidays, their parents' happiness, feelings of having to choose sides, and uncertainty in coping with their experience. Kalmijn (2015) studied the impact divorce had on parents' relationships with their children and found that the more involved the parent was with the child before the divorce, the fewer negative impacts were reported by the child afterwards. Ricketts (2016) addressed a gap in the literature regarding race and the lived experiences of divorce for adults, determining that parents who waited to get divorced until after their child was an adult did not escape the negative effects of divorce for their children.

Statement of the Problem

The institution of marriage has experienced rapid transformation in recent years and has long been studied through historical, sociological, psychological, and social lenses (Karney, 2014; Manning, 2015). In recent years, divorce rates in the United States have increased to 50%, the highest they have been in history (Miller, 2013). Even with the rise in divorce, cohabitation, and unwed parents, marriage is reported to be a core value for a majority of Americans (Manning, 2015). Only 45% of African American households contain a married couple, compared to 80% for Whites and 70% among

Hispanics (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). In 1890, 80% of African American households were composed of two parents. One hundred years later, only 40% of African American children live in married-couple households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Other areas that separate Black families from their White and Hispanic counterparts include religious affiliations, political and social oppression, family structure, systemic concerns, educational disparities, and other economic disadvantages other racial groups do not face (Raley, Sweeny, & Wondra, 2015).

The experience of divorce causes significant changes to the family structure and relationships of family members (Polak & Saini, 2015). Studies, such as Orth's (2018), have shown that self-esteem is formed in early childhood based on family environment and has a major impact on children's self-perception into adulthood. Research on the impact of divorce on children varies based on the ages of the children at the time of the divorce (Greenwood, 2014). Children under the age of 18 whose parents' divorce experience negative consequences, such as behavioral concerns, separation issues, and adjustment difficulties (Weaver & Schofield, 2015). Adult children of divorce have negative experiences similar to those of their adolescent counterparts (Greenwood, 2014). These difficulties include: (a) a decrease in relational contact with their grandparents, other family members, and familial supports; (b) a decreased likelihood of graduation from college; and (c) the development of self-esteem issues (Connel, Hayes, & Carlson, 2015; Jappens & Van Bavel, 2015; Sorla, Morrow, & Jackson, 2017; Westphal, Portman, & Van der Lippe, 2015). According to Sorla et al. (2017), children whose parents divorce are highly unlikely to graduate from college after 4, 5, or even 6 years. The impact of

parental divorce on young adult children (i.e., 18–24 years of age) delays their adjustment into adulthood, and they report lower levels of self-esteem compared to their peers whose parents were still married and report marital satisfaction (Connel et al., 2015). In regard to marriage and divorce, Black women are half as likely to marry compared to White and Hispanic women but are more than twice as likely to divorce (Besharov, 2017). Some of the decline in marital rates can be attributed to the rates of unwed mothers and childbirth (Besharov, 2017). Besharov (2017) stated that 1 in 5 Black women has a child in their teenage years, which is twice the rate of White and Hispanic women; however, these rates have been declining in recent years within the Black community.

Based on the aforementioned negative impacts and consequences of divorce on adult children, I took a deeper look into Black American culture to understand the phenomenon of divorce as it pertains to race and ethnic and cultural backgrounds (see Mikucji-Enyart et al., 2016; Ricketts, 2016). Continued and new understanding of the causes of the decline in marriage rates and marital satisfaction on the Black American child and the dissolution of their family system are still needed. One variable that researchers appear to have neglected is the experience of race and ethnic background on the phenomenon of later-in-life parental divorce. Continued studies are needed to expound on the cultural experience of divorce among Black adult children in relation to their viewpoints on and experiences with love, marriage, and intimate partner relationships (Ricketts, 2016). With Black families divorcing at higher rates compared to other racial and ethnic groups, the impacts of these life changes on children from Black families is more pronounced.

According to Saunders, Curtis, Alexander, and Williams (2013), compared to White couples, Black couples are less likely to get married, but have a higher likelihood of divorce. With this in mind, Black couples who do marry have more challenges (compared to their White counterparts) sustaining a successful marriage and raising children, which has transgenerational impacts on the family system. In this study, I delve into these impacts to understand the perceptions of Black adult children of divorce of marriage and relationships after their parents' divorce as well as their perceived social identity within their ethnic group.

Compared to women of different racial backgrounds, Black women will marry later in their lives (or not marry at all) and report increased rates of marital instability (Raley et al., 2015). When the family milieu is altered in Black families, anxiety, stress, depression, and other difficulties in day-to-day life present themselves (Pollock, Kazman, & Deuster, 2014). In this study, I gained an understanding of how race and culture may impact perspectives on relationships and love following parental divorce and further explored the perceptions of love, marriage, and intimate partner relationships among middle-class adult children of divorce over the age of 18 who identify as Black.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to better understand the phenomenon of Black adult children of divorce and gain insight into their unique experiences and perspectives of their parents' divorcing and, specifically, whether this event impacted their views of relationships, marriage, and intimate partner relationships. There is a dearth of studies on how parental divorce impacts Black children's sense of self, community belongingness,

and long-term perceptions on love and intimate partner relationships, even though it has been documented in the literature that Black families have a core value of social support and connectedness (Pollock et al., 2014). Due to increasing divorce rates and mounting long-term negative impacts (Washburn, 2017), it is important to foster an increased understanding of the effects of divorce on Black adult children. In this study, I add to the knowledge in the field and develop new insights and understanding concerning this population.

Research Question

What has been the personal experience of Black adult children in the United States whose parents divorce later-in-life with regard to self-perception and familial identity?

Theoretical Framework of the Study

While a phenomenological study does not require a theoretical framework, I used social identity theory (SIT) in this study for the purpose of understanding the phenomenon of social relationships of Black adult children of divorce (see Moustakas, 2010). SIT is used to look at social groups and their affiliations, along with the conflicts faced within these groups and an individual's role within their group membership (Moustakas, 2010). SIT takes into consideration social psychology, social identity, and the power differentials held among group members (Moustakas, 2010). The theory helped me gain insight into adult children of divorce and their social identity status based on the singular event of their parents' divorce, exploring their perceptions of whether their social standing has changed within their group membership.

Other frameworks that were considered were uncertainty management theory (Mikucki-Enyart, Petite, & Wilder, 2018) and family systems theory (Kerr, 2000). Uncertainty management theory explains the uncertainty that results from adverse situations when there is a lower predictable outcome expectation for an individual or others (Hogg & Belavadi, 2017). This theory had some influence on this study but was not used as the dominant theoretical foundation. Uncertainty management theory, created by William Gudykunst, posits that when an individual goes through difficult circumstances, they seek comfort and support in group membership and belonging to help conceptualize their own self-identity and self-perception (Hogg & Belavadi, 2017). This theory is used to explore how individuals communicate with one another based on the uncertainty they experience in social situations and major life events (Hogg & Belavadi, 2017). I did not primarily use this theory as a foundation of this study because I was interested in the personal, lived experiences of Black adult children of divorce and not their community interactive perceptions; however, the theory did contribute to some of my underlying understanding of social groups and belonging.

Family systems theory, introduced by Dr. Murray Bowen, posits that since the family is the core emotional unit, understanding the individual involves understanding their family dynamic (Kerr, 2000). In this theory, the family system is defined as all the members in a family system and each of their respective roles within the family dynamic (CITE). This theory was considered for its emphasis on family dynamics and interactions as well as systemic family functioning but was not used because I focused on the individual and not the family unit.

SIT can provide a framework to study how an individual sees themselves based on their membership in a group (McLeod, 2008). Henri Tajfel developed this framework in the 1970s when suggesting that groups, such as social class or families, are a crucial part of developing self-esteem and are a source of pride (McLeod, 2008). According to SIT, in these group settings, the group will discriminate against outside members of their group in order to improve their views of themselves (McLeod, 2008). In support of the nature of this study and the research question being asked, this theory served as my theoretical framework in order to explore and understand the phenomenon of how adult children of divorce see themselves within their community, family, and social culture after their parents' divorce. I used the theory to evaluate (a) how participants view divorce, (b) whether their parents' divorce has hindered them interpersonally within their community and social circles, (c) whether their sense of identity has changed now that they are a child of divorced parents, (d) what their opinions are on love and commitment, and (e) whether they desire to marry someday themselves.

Nature of the Study

I based the plan for this study on Moustakas's (2010) heuristic phenomenological research methods because there did not appear to be a construct that defined the phenomenon this demographic is experiencing. The heuristic inquiry framework allowed for deeper understanding of the lived human experiences of Black adult children of divorce (see Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). Moustakas has used various human science modalities to contemplate the behavior of humans and their interactions. I used the heuristic phenomenological research design, conducting guided interviews to discuss the viewpoints of Black adult children of divorce on love, marriage, and their intimate partner relationships before and after their parents divorced. I also included the use of Photovoice to expound upon the lived experiences of adult children of divorce and gain an understanding of how they see the themes of love, commitment, and marriage. Photovoice is a participatory research strategy (Kuratani & Lai, 2011) that allows participants to have a personal and meaningful impact on the research gatherings where they can heighten awareness in their community, increase knowledge, and record their experience through the data that are being collected through their photos (Jarldorn, 2016).

In individual interviews with participants I asked semiguided interview questions. Discussions allowed for further exploration and processing of topics in a free-flowing and open conversation with participants. After each individual interview, I reviewed the transcript from the interview and reassessed which questions should be asked of the next participant. I selected the phenomenological method because I wanted to describe, interpret, and understand the experiences of human life (see Bloor & Wood, 2006). In

phenomenological studies, the research questions are designed to understand the experience of a specific situation or phenomenon (Bloor & Wood, 2006).

Through the images captured by participants using Photovoice as well as their own explanations and interpretations of the meaning of the photos, I gained a deeper understanding of internal experiences and emotions that may not have been verbally expressed by participants. Participants described their selected photo to me, along with two sentences describing their picture for interpretation and to compare these statements to what they have articulated in interviews.

Working Definitions

Adult children of divorce: Individuals who experience parental divorce at age 18 or over (Melen, 2017; Sumner, 2013).

Black adult children of divorce: Individuals who are residents of the United States who have origins in any of the Black populations of Africa or the Caribbean who experience parental divorce at age 18 or over (Melen, 2017; Sumner, 2013)

Adult children of intact marriages: Individuals whose parents have not experienced a divorce (Melen, 2017; Sumner, 2013).

Marital commitment: An individual's personal dedication to another characterized by voluntary actions consistent with a pledge of one spouse to another in the hopes of an exclusive, lasting marital relationship. Individuals with increased marital commitment are more likely to ignore other potential partners and invest more of themselves to maintain their marital relationships by sacrificing personal comforts and preferences in hopes of

pleasing their spouse, making them happy, and positively working through marital discourse (Melen, 2017).

Delimitations

Delimitations are the factors that impact the study and establish the boundaries and scope of the study (Suresh, 2015). I selected the subjects for this study, Black adult children of divorce, due to curiosity and personal impact. This course of study was chosen because of the dearth of research on Black adult children of divorce and the fact that Black Americans experience the highest rates of divorce; therefore, it is surprising that others have not yet researched the impacts that this racial group experiences. Other racial groups and age brackets have been researched in numerous studies looking at the implications of parental divorce on their development and well-being; consequently, I addressed this gap in the literature with this study.

The sample size for this study was four participants. Although this is a small number of participants, this sample size is in alignment with the heuristic framework for qualitative research. This study involved interviewing a limited number of participants from a specific racial group as well, and the findings cannot be generalized to represent all Black adult children of divorce due to the small sample size.

The questions that were asked of participants are another delimitation that must be considered. The questions that were asked aimed to address specific questions that I wanted to study and find answers to. A limited number of questions were asked due to time constraints. In this study, the focus was only on Black adult children of divorce over the age of 18 years old, which is also a delimitation. I employed a heuristic, qualitative

research design in this study and not a quantitative research design. Previously gathered data and Likert scales were not used; instead, I followed the heuristic approach and gathered personal lived experiences. The philosophical framework that guided this study was another delimitation. Though several frameworks were considered, SIT was the primary framework used based its alignment with the research questions and the data being gathered.

Limitations

As with any research study, there are limitations that must be taken into consideration when understanding the research findings and interpreting the data of this study. The first limitation was the demographics of the participants. All participants selected for the study were over the age of 18 years old, and because of this, are not representative of all Black adult children of divorce in this age bracket. All study participants lived in the South at the time of the study but had possibly come from other parts of the United States. The geography of the study was a limitation because the findings from this study may not apply to groups outside this geographical location. The qualitative methodology is another limitation that was taken into consideration. The use of individual interviews and Photovoice can be viewed as subjective, which also makes it a limitation. Another limitation was the time at which data were gathered. Data collection for this study was conducted in 1 day, and participants had experienced their parents' divorces at various times before the study took place. The event of their parents' divorce did not all occur on the same day and was variable based on the individual's lived experience.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study benefit Black culture. By adding to the literature in the academic world on this topic, this demographic gained increased exposure that will result in further understanding of their lived experiences and how those lived experiences impact them socially, historically, economically, and personally. This study also contributes to a body of knowledge that is underrepresented in regard to literature available on divorce in adult children of African descent. With this study, I sought to improve the social understanding of this specific demographic.

The findings of this study have a potential impact on theory, practice, and social change in a number of different ways. In theory, understanding the psychological impact that Black adult children of divorce face and the experiences that they have after their parents' divorce creates the opportunity for new therapeutic approaches and modalities to be created to service this population more effectively. With regard to practice, college counselors as well as marriage and family therapists will have the most to gain from this research. Young Black adults entering college may seek support for their transition to college; with this transition comes other risks as previously mentioned. Therapists and counselors can use the information gathered through this study to address concerns and become aware of some of the needs that Black adult children are facing in the context of their parents' divorce. The potential for social change is immense. With Black families experiencing dissolution and decay, the findings of this study provide a glimpse into the perceptions of these children of divorce. This study brings awareness and fills a gap in

the literature that had not previously addressed concerning Black adult children of divorce.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experience of Black adult children of divorce. In this study, I compiled the lived experiences of this understudied population, aiming to fill a gap in the literature and address the lack of research. The results of this study provided insight into the lived experiences of Black adult children and how their perceptions have been altered through their parents' divorce. Using Photovoice as a research method, participants played an active role in the research; instead of merely being studied, they actively showcased how they perceive their parents' divorce from their vantage point.

In this chapter, I provided background information, justification for the study, and what I set out to understand. In the following chapters, I present a review of current literature and provide further rationale for this study, then the methodology and saturation of current literature, followed by participant selection and data collection strategies, and finally explaining the results of the study and where future research can continue to expand.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Black adult children of divorce are an underrepresented and understudied demographic (Brooks, 2015). In this study, I aimed to find meaning in their lived experiences to bring awareness to this population's plight based on the increased rates of divorce within this community. In this chapter, I review any relevant literature pertaining to perceptions of love, marriage, and intimate partner relationships among middle-class adult children of divorce who identify as Black, but the dearth of literature on this topic required me to explore broader contexts for all of these issues individually. I placed particular attention on: (a) adult children of divorce and their relational experiences within their family dynamics, (b) the sources of uncertainty in adult children postdivorce, (c) the prolonged effects of later-in-life divorce, (d) relationships between parents and their adult children after a divorce, and (e) the lived experiences and perceptions of those experiencing these later-in-life divorces (Abetz & Wang, 2017; Greenwood, 2014; Kalmijn, 2015; Mikucji-Enyart et al., 2016; Ricketts, 2016).

When looking at the current literature, there is an overwhelming amount of research that speaks to divorce and the impact on children under the age of 18 but far less that explores the effects of divorce later in life. Through my review of the literature, it became evident that there is a need for further research regarding adult children of divorce, particularly Black adult children of divorce due to their distinct cultural and societal experiences compared to other racial groups. The United States has varying customs and norms between different racial groups (Raley et al., 2015). Areas where

Black families differ from their White and Hispanic counterparts include religious affiliations, political and social oppression, family structure, systemic concerns, educational disparities, and other economic disadvantages other racial groups do not face (Raley et al., 2015).

As presented in the previous chapter, there appears to be a consensus among previous researchers that divorce has negative effects on children and has the potential to impact them in several ways across the lifespan, including an increased risk of divorce in their own personal relationships (Braithwaite, Doxey, Dowdle, & Fincham, 2016). In recent years, divorce rates in the United States have increased to 50%, the highest they have been in history (Miller, 2013). This increasing rate of divorce also means an increasing number of children, adolescents, and adults that will potentially experience the negative impacts of their parents' divorce (Melen, 2017), including lower academic performance, behavioral concerns (Babalís, Tsoli, Nikolopoulos, & Maniatis, 2014), separation issues, adjustment difficulties (Weaver & Schofield, 2015), substance abuse (Arkes, 2013), and mental health concerns (Shimkowski & Ledbetter, 2018). This literature review not only serves to contextualize my current study, but it also serves as evidence that further research is needed in this area and provides a rationale for this inquiry into the interpersonal struggles of Black adult children of divorce.

Literature Search Strategy

I created a detailed search strategy and used various methods to appropriately locate previous research studies surrounding adult children of divorce. Through the Walden University Library online portal, I accessed various databases, including: (a)

PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, (b) SAGE Psychology, and (c) SocIndex. I also searched Academic Search Premier and ProQuest as well as individual peer-reviewed journals in electronic format. Most of the literature included in this review was peer reviewed and published within the past 5 years. Search terms included: *divorce, divorce in black communities, intergenerational transmission of divorce, children development and divorce, adult children and divorce, divorce attitudes among racial groups, marital satisfaction in children of divorce, divorce and mental health in children, negative impacts of divorce on children, race and self-identity, religious affiliation and viewpoints on divorce, children's development, Black family structure, race and marriage, and aftermath of divorce*. Several phrases and terms were combined from this list to gather additional literature. The final method used was reviewing the reference lists of the literature previously gathered to identify additional sources and recommendations for the future.

Theoretical Foundation

SIT was the theory selected as the theoretical foundation of this study for the purpose of understanding the social relationships of Black adult children of divorce. SIT is a model for how an individual sees themselves based on their membership in a group (McLeod, 2008). Through SIT, I gained insight into intergroup behavior and interpersonal behavior (see McLeod, 2008) Black adult children of divorce through their narratives, lived experiences, and perspectives. In the SIT, for someone to increase their self-image within a group, they must either increase their status (McLeod, 2008) One method to attain higher status is for an individual to define themselves against others in a

group, taking a negative view of those in the group who have opposing situations (McLeod, 2008). For example, Black children of divorce may come together within the Black community and form a subgroup distinct from those Black adult children whose parents remain married.

Tajfel (2010) developed the SIT framework in the 1970s, suggesting that individuals can identify as a member of particular groups, such as social classes or families. Group affiliation is a crucial part of developing self-esteem and represents a source of pride for the individual (McLeod, 2008). A given group can also discriminate against outside members of their group to improve their views of themselves (McLeod, 2008). When children are growing up, their family comprises one of their most significant groups (Cookston & Remy, 2015). When parents divorce, the adult child may find themselves trying to understand their place in their familial group if they are no longer a part of a family unit, asking themselves, “Who am I, if we are not us?” By using the theoretical framework of SIT, I gained further understanding of how Black adult children of divorce see themselves within their community, family, and social culture after their parents’ divorce.

Through a divorce, an individual’s sense of self and perception of who they are within their community is altered (White & Berghuis, 2016). Through the SIT lens, I wanted to understand the social identity of adult children of divorce and understand if their perceptions of love, marriage, and their own intimate partner relationships changed after their parents’ divorce. Tajfel (2010) stated that stereotyping and separating individuals into classes, groups, and categories is a part of normal cognitive process

(Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and that it is human nature to find similarities and differences between group members and outsiders (Hogg, 2016). When mentally separating individuals into distinct groups, individuals typically view the group they belong to as the superior group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The cognitive process that people go through to make decisions starts with social categorization, then moves to social identification and social comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In the first stage, individuals' minds are categorizing the objects they see to understand the object or individuals better (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The second stage assigns characteristics to the objects and individuals that people have placed in the category (CITE). Finally, once assigned the group and identifying the characteristics, individuals begin to compare themselves to other individuals within the group (Hogg, 2016). Through SIT, I want to better understand whether Black adult children of divorce feel they have been moved to another group and the impact of this shift on their processes of social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. The loss of family connection, sibling relationships, and belonging to a family group is altered once parents decide to divorce and may have some influence on self-perception (White & Berghuis, 2016).

Other frameworks that were considered for use in this study were family systems theory and uncertainty management theory. I did not use family systems theory due to my interest in the current perceptions of adult children of divorce as adults and not their perceptions from a family systems approach. Uncertainty management theory was not selected as the theoretical foundation because its primary focus on a balance of anxiety

and uncertainty, which I determined was not a primary area of concern for adult children of divorce. Abetz and Wang (2017) used uncertainty management theory as a theoretical framework because they were measuring the uncertainty of adult children of divorce, but I sought to understand the situation of Black adult children of divorce from a broader perspective.

Review of the Literature

Adult Children Perceptions on Divorce

Of all the research that I discuss in this chapter, the work of Greenwood (2014) was the springboard for this study regarding race and its impact on adult children of divorce. One challenge with performing this literature review was the dearth of studies looking at adult children of divorce generally and, more specifically, the intersection of race and adult children of divorce. Greenwood called for more research to be conducted in this area, since historical, social, and economic disparities between races might suggest differences in the effects of divorce on Black adult children. Through my study, I aimed to provide increased research on and knowledge to this population.

Using the Paul R. Amato Divorce Scale, Jensen and Bowen (2015) explored the experiences of adult children and their parents' perceptions of their emotional reactions and adjustments after their divorce. While there are very few studies that look at this specific population's emotional well-being, Jensen and Bowen identified several key factors regarding how adult children of divorce perceive their parents' divorce, including factors that predict better outcomes, such as: each parent's gender, the nature of the contact and interactions between the parents, the reason for ending the marriage, the

timing of the divorce, and the history of the family structure. When adult children of divorce are presented with divorce, their perceptions and experiences vary based on these factors (CITE).

Kalmijn (2015) studied the impact of partnered fathers and their relationships with their adult children postdivorce. Fathers who moved forward and started new romantic relationships postdivorce had significantly decreased interactions with their children from their previous marriage (Kalmijn, 2015). Fathers also provided less support to and had less communication with their adult children, and the overall quality of the relationship diminished (Kalmijn, 2015). In a contrast, Cohen, Leichentritt, and Volpin (2014) looked at the relationships between mothers and their children postdivorce and found different impacts. They identified that mothers were careful to maintain a strong maternal presence in their children's lives as well as communicate pertinent information about the divorce to their children. Mothers strive to maintain a positive view of the children's father postdivorce and are concerned about the children's emotional well-being (Cohen et al., 2014). These previous studies provided further information that aided in the development of the research question and concepts to be considered while conducting my study on adult children of divorce. Based on the research presented, maternal and paternal relationships have an impact after parental divorce, and I was interested in understanding this communication shift with participants in my study.

Connel et al. (2015) stated that there is also a dearth of information pertaining to the adjustment period of emerging adults, especially when it comes to first-year college students (i.e., 17–19 years of age). Their study looked at first-year college students and

how their relationships with their parents prior to divorce impacted them as they adjusted to college and young adulthood. As discussed by both Cohen et al. (2014) and Kalmijn (2015), many factors must be considered when looking at adult children of divorce and the impact their parents' divorce has on them, understanding that the singular event of parental divorce has an overarching impact on the children involved. Compared to other studies, such as Abetz and Wang (2017), this study found that there were not great differences in adjustments based on gender, but they did find that the students who were older when their parents divorced showed increased levels of self-esteem compared to students who were younger at the termination of their parents' marriage.

Abetz and Wang (2017) took a more in-depth look at an Adult children of divorce and how they have learned to navigate their post-divorce familial interactions. This study looked at several areas that children of divorce must adapt to, such as: changing roles (e.g., needing to become a friend or social support to a parent), holiday and family events, and adjustment to the changes in family dynamic. This study brings up interesting perspectives regarding the uncertainty that Adult children of divorce may face and how they speak about their parents' divorce in social settings, with friends and other family members. As the Cohen et al. (2014) study pointed out, children must go through an adjustment period, one that involves learning how to talk about their parents' divorce with family and friends as well as crafting the narrative that they will internalize regarding their experience of their parents' divorce. Along with learning how to adjust to their parents' divorce, Adult children of divorce are also faced with juggling the new stressors of starting college and becoming an adult, such as: learning to make a way in

society, find a career, and become financially independent. With these stressors at play, Adult children of divorce are forced into several new roles and must adapt to advanced life stages compared to their counterparts whose parents remained married or were never involved in romantic relationships through their childhood.

Moving forward and looking at the emotional and mental health impacts that Adult children of divorce face, Shimkowsi and Ledbetter (2018) make note of how little research that has been conducted regarding Adult children of divorce and specifically their emotion management while they are going through parental-divorce disclosures. Using the previous studies findings, this study mentions that understanding this population's emotional state regarding their parents' divorce has implications for their mental health, family communication, and emotional management. Compared to the Abetz and Wang (2017), they address the post-divorce emotional and family interactions. In the Shimkowski and Ledbetter (2018) study, some of the Adult children of divorce in these studies mentioned that they had feelings of being caught in the middle and not being able to emotionally process their feelings after their parents' divorce. The Cohen, Leichtentritt, & Volpin (2014) study speaks to this emotional dichotomy that Adult children of divorce encounter post their parents' divorce.

In addition to processing their own feelings and perceptions of their parents' divorce, Adult children of divorce have yet other external factors they must process as well. According to Mikucji-Enyart, Wilder and Barber (2017), Adult children of divorce experience uncertainty in terms of their perceptions of their parents as individuals, the specifics of their parents' divorce, and the structure of their family unit going forward as

well. The participants in that particular study also mentioned several disruptions in their normative development and the struggle to maintain family ties. With all of these areas of uncertainty and confusion within the family dynamic in the Adult children of divorce role—and shifting responsibilities in their newly-transformed parental dynamics—it is unclear how Adult children of divorce process and cope in order to continue through their development, and if these impacts are lifelong. Moving to the next heading, I provide evidence and research that speaks to the impact that Adult children of divorce experience.

Attitudes Towards Divorce

Individuals' attitudes and perceptions towards marital dissatisfaction and accepting the ending to their marriage differ greatly. Individuals who have a more favorable attitude towards divorce have more tolerant views of marital dissolution and see more situations as acceptable reasons to divorce. Conversely, those with negative attitudes towards divorce view marriage as a more permanent institution and believe people should remain in their marital relationships despite contending with marital difficulties (Whitton, Stanley, Markman, & Johnson, 2013; Eliyahu, 2017).

Impact on Adult children of divorce

The experience of divorce can wreak havoc on a family system. When there are children involved, no matter what the age, research shows there is some form of an impact that is experienced. In the study by Ricketts (2015), he specifically cites a gap in the literature pertaining to Adult children of divorce and the impact that their parents' divorce has on them. Society tends to have the opinion that if a parental union dissolves after the child is an adult, then the negative impacts are mitigated; this study refutes this

idea. It appears that no matter what the age of the child, the dissolution of their parents' marriage has an effect on their emotional, mental, and social aspects of their lives.

Ahrons (2011) describes divorce as a crisis within the family system. With this increase in stress due to familial crisis, Adult children of divorce experience a vast array of negative impacts from the end of their parents' marriage, no matter their age at the time of the divorce. Amato (2001) goes in-depth on the effects divorce has on children, but even though younger children have their own negative experiences, adult children face decreases in school performance (Babalis et al., 2014), greater difficulty adjusting to college (Connel et al., 2013), long-term issues with mental health and psychological wellbeing (Mermitz, Kamp, & Dush, 2016), an increase in substance use (Arkes, 2013), and difficulty processing emerging feelings about love, relationships, and marriage (Braithwaite et al., 2016). For years, many held this idea that older children did not face the same emotional hardships compared to their younger counterparts. However, the research states differently, as presented above.

Weaver and Schofield (2015) explored the impact of parental divorce on both young children and on adults, comparing experiences and identifying differences and similarities for these two age groups. Adults experienced several issues in areas including behavior regulation, externalizing emotions, distress tolerance, internalizing problems, and lower functioning than their intact-family counterparts. While younger children struggle in these areas as well, it is less well understood how these issues manifest themselves in young adults as they transcend across developmental stages. These domains comprise important coping skills that are crucial to a young adult's success as

they move into their own intimate relationships and careers. Connel et al. (2013) attempted to better understand this developmental stage gap. By understanding the difference between both age groups, it can be concluded that similar supports may be beneficial to both parties when facing a crisis in the family, such as a parental divorce.

To provide context to the age gap, Connel et al. (2013) refer to the period between adolescence and young adulthood (between 18-25 years of age) as “emerging adulthood.” It is the timeframe where young adults have become self-reliant, but do not yet hold as much responsibility as they will in adulthood. Connel et al. note that this is a crucial period of development that young Adult children of divorce may struggle with due to the combination of these new challenges with the pressures of family separation and stresses at home. With these stressors from home impacting their developmental stages, other areas are also impacted. The extent to how much they are impacted and the long-term effects are still being studied as in Ricketts (2015). What we have concluded is the negative impact parental divorce has on school performance, intimate partner relationships, social development, and the adult child’s transition into adulthood.

Another factor to consider when understanding Adult children of divorce and how they cope with their parents’ divorce is the relationships with their extended family members. These relationships are crucial in predicting Adult children of divorce adjustment after their parents’ divorce. According to the Westphal et al. (2015), grandparents can play a significant role in Adult children of divorce’s transition. Their research found that Adult children of divorce who had more contact with their mother tended to have more contact with their maternal grandparents and the lowest rates of

connection with grandparents was found to be with those having higher contact with their father. The amount of conflict in the home influences all parties and can impact their level of involvement with extended family members as well. Cultivating these relationships is imperative for Adult children of divorce to continue feeling supported through this life change. It must be noted as well, that grandparents are also facing life changes and emotional disappointments as a result of divorce. For the parents of the divorcees, some experience a grieving process, with similar characteristics as their grandchildren, as they grieve the loss of a family member and the dreams they had for their child. Jappens and Van Bavel (2015) also examined the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren after parental divorce and found that grandparents occupy a vital role during this transition by supporting adult children who are in a precarious and stressful position of having to choose sides. The study concluded, however, that grandchildren from divorced households had more infrequent communication with grandparents compared to children whose parents were in the same residence. This is an unfortunate reality that was alluded to earlier in how Adult children of divorce feel pressure to pick sides with their parents, and ultimately their grandparents and extended family members as well.

Kalmijin's (2015) study of fathers and the relationships between their children post-divorce concluded that fathers who remarry have less frequent contact with their adult children and the quality of the relationship is poorer. In the study, Kalmijin speaks to a "familial swapping" that occurs when fathers remarry. This study alludes to the fact that after a divorce, fathers tend to give more support to their new family rather than to

their old family, which has particular repercussions for adult children that resulted from the previous marriage. They discuss conflicts that arise with their children and new spouse and how this adjustment increases stress in the parental relationship. With the addition of a step-mother and step-children, Adult children of divorce are often no longer emotionally validated or supported by their fathers.

In the study by Greenwood (2014) he interviewed Adult children of divorce about the negative consequences their parents' divorces had on them including: having to pick sides, being put in the middle of their parents, and strained relationships with both parents. The adult children mentioned that this transition was difficult and negatively impacted them. Sumner (2017) also looked at Adult children of divorce post-divorce and found that Adult children of divorce face life stage hinderance (in accordance with Erikson's intimacy vs isolation), a lost sense of belonging, and pressure to reach financial independence sooner than their peers due to the family restructuring. Sumner also found that Adult children of divorce felt that self-exploration may be delayed or stifled because the needs of their parents seem greater at the time; overall, the Adult children of divorce may not be fully prepared for young adulthood because of these transitions in their family dynamic. Role reversal is another concern that was mentioned in the article.

Triangulation between the parents and the Adult children of divorce occurs frequently and is quite common because parents are turning to the now-adult children, looking for emotional comfort and support. In some instances, the Adult children of divorce must act as mediator between their parents due to familial discord. Finally, Sumner discusses the long-term effects of divorce: Adult children of divorce become insecure and have

difficulty in long-term relationships compared to their younger counterparts. Adult children of divorce are less committed, have negative views of marriage, and are more likely to stay single for life.

With the above-mentioned studies in mind, Washburn (2017) found differences in the long-term effects of divorce on Adult children of divorce based on what they experienced with their parents growing up. For example, if there were higher levels of conflict and discord within the household, Adult children of divorce are impacted differently post-divorce compared to other Adult children of divorce who did not have the same level of stress and discord. The amount of conflict observed by Adult children of divorce as children has an impact on their intimate partner relationships as adults.

In the study conducted by Hogg and Belavadi (2017) they linked Uncertainty Management Theory to the notion that community shapes our social identity in terms of the groups we associate with and belong to. Being socially “placed” in a group can have both positive and negative impacts. Abetz and Wang (2017) discussed how Adult children of divorce may face judgement from their family and peers due to the assumptions that because of their age, Adult children of divorce would not be impacted the same way as their younger peers. From a different vantage point, Soria, Morrow, and Jackson (2017) studied graduation rates from a four-year university for Adult children of divorce and found that Adult children of divorce have a significantly lower graduation rate even after four, five, or six years. Also, Brooks (2015) discusses how Black children need more support when attending college, especially at predominately-White institutions. Parental involvement, support, and expectations are all cited as important for

children to thrive in college. When one's family is separated and disrupted during this life stage, it has negative impacts on academic success. Black college students list family and home concerns as academic distractions and worry about being a financial burden to their family members. In the next heading, I will discuss Black families specifically and how the dissolution of the marriage impacts those of African descent.

Marital Dissolution in Black Families

Marital dissolution is the process of ending a marriage and eliminating the bonds and commitment that were formed through this union. Bulanda and Brown (2007) found that Black individuals report lower rates of marital happiness and quality and have an increased risk of marital dissolution when compared to Hispanic and White individuals. Other studies, such as Diekmann and Schmidheiny (2013) have looked at divorce from a global perspective, analyzing the intergenerational impacts of divorce for children and other descendants. This study looked at 15 countries and the results found that intergenerational divorce is not a common phenomenon, but that each country had different races, religions, societal norms, and attitudes surrounding the concept of divorce. In countries where divorce was less common, divorce resulted in greater stigma and negative impacts on the children compared to other countries where divorce was more prevalent. Brooks (2015) studied the importance of kinship and family relationships that make Black families unique and special. Due to historical experiences, a vast number of black families are the descendants of African slaves brought to the United States against their will. Keeping this thought in mind, Black families tend to carry down

variations of traditional heritage and values from Africa which carry over from generation to generation.

Amato (2010) found that there are several factors to consider when looking at divorce, especially in the United States. One factor was clear: divorce rates are higher in some ethnic groups than in others. The National Survey of Family Growth showed that 42% of non-Hispanic Whites and Hispanics divorced within the first 15 years of marriage. In contrast, 55% of Black couples divorced within the first 15 years of marriage. Amato concluded that the reason for this disparity is that Black families differ from other ethnic backgrounds in terms of historical, economic, structural, and cultural factors. Black couples with higher educational attainment tend to have higher rates of marital satisfaction and lower divorce rates.

According to Raley et al. (2016), there is a growing racial divide in the United States as it relates to marriage patterns. Raley et al. concluded that structural factors—such as the decrease in employment and rising rates of incarceration for black males—contribute to this disparity. The authors also argue that the institution of marriage has changed a great deal since the 1960s, and that these changes also contribute to marriage and divorce patterns in this country. The conception of an optimal marriage situation has changed over time. Economic changes—including the increased economic status of women both inside and outside of the home—have caused changes in the family dynamic, especially between a husband and a wife. One example of this shift is the fact that the numbers of Black women attaining advanced degrees has continued to increase faster than for other ethnic minorities. Black women are making more substantial

economic and socioeconomic strides within their households and communities, and subsequently have less need or desire to marry.

When discussing marital dissolution, it is also imperative to discuss the negative health aspects that both parties may face when married and the potential for lower marital satisfaction. According to Bourassa, Sbarra, and Whisman (2015), marital dissolution is associated with a higher risk of both mental and physical implications and those who are in lower-quality marriages have better health outcomes when they divorce. When looking at Black couples who are married, Black women are shown to have lower rates of marital satisfaction, which also impacts their health and life satisfaction in the future (Bourassa et al., 2015).

Braithwaite et al. (2016) discuss how religious upbringing plays a prominent role regarding individuals' ideas of marriage and the significance of divorce. When Black families have religion at the center of their community, black couples may feel undue pressure to get married, even if they have other factors such as educational, economic, and societal challenges working against them from the beginning of their relationship. Additionally, Bulanda and Brown (2007) demonstrated the significance of race and ethnicity as it pertains to marriage and the dissolution of marriage. Blacks have lower marital desire and have higher divorce rates when compared to their White counterparts. This study also explored financial and economic stressors that impact Black families compared to other racial groups. For example, financial security is a "pre-qualifier" for marriage, especially when it comes to men and their attractiveness as a mate. Black males are more likely to be poorer, less educated, and have fewer economic resources than their

White male counterparts. With all these factors considered, it is not surprising that Black families have higher levels of stress due to economic instability, which can cause higher rates of marital dissatisfaction and lower marital quality resulting in higher rates of divorce.

Furthermore, Gatson, Earl, Nisanci, and Glomb (2016) examined mental health stigma within the Black community. This study suggested that an increase in mental health awareness and resources within the Black community could potentially alleviate some of the stressors this community faces. They identified four areas that needed to be expounded upon in this work, namely: intervention, prevention, social work practice, and better service to communities of color. Since mental health still has a negative stigma, community support is imperative. Pollock et al. (2014) elaborate on the importance of social support and community within the Black community, especially during emotionally stressful times such as divorce. They evaluated daily stress, depression, and anxiety as contributing factors to the evaluation of mental health as adult children go through their parents' divorce; the study also suggests that social support from family and friends are immensely beneficial. Within this community, some common coping mechanisms include smoking and children who externalize their emotions and feelings in negative ways. Pollack, Kazman and Deuster (2014) also found higher rates of depression in this community. The study identifies a "stress absorbing system" as an example of a positive support for individuals in these communities during highly stressful events in their lives.

Positive Outcomes for Parental Divorce

Though it appears there are extensive negative impacts on children at any age, there are still some positives that can result from parental divorce, including: (a) increased interpersonal confidence and independence; (b) financial independence including managing a budget, purchasing groceries and managing a household; and (c) maturing more quickly than their peers. Connel et al. (2015) found that college students whose parents divorced when they were older reported higher levels of self-esteem compared to children who were younger at the time of their parents' divorce.

Methodology

Many of the existing studies utilize qualitative interviews to collect data. For example, Greenwood (2014) asked 40 Adult children of divorce about their subjective experiences surrounding their parents' divorce; Abetz and Wang (2017) used a similar process for gathering data through one-on-one interviews, identifying therapeutic modalities that would be beneficial when working with Adult children of divorce based on these discussions. Washburn (2017), however, used a quantitative method. Washburn used convenience sampling procedures and deployed a survey about intimate relationships, perceptions of current relationships, and evaluations of other relationships. This survey was disseminated through email; participants submitted responses online and statistical results were analyzed. Based on the number of studies that utilized a qualitative interview to gather data to understand the perceptions and feelings surrounding Adult children of divorce, a similar methodology was in this study and will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

Summary and Conclusions

There is clearly an abundance of information surrounding children of divorce, and even several studies that look at Adult children of divorce and their perceptions.

However, previous studies on children of divorce and Adult children of divorce have not focused on race. Black culture varies from other racial groups as mentioned in Brooks (2015). There is a gap in the literature regarding this specific population's perceptions, feelings, and experiences surrounding parental divorce. This has important implications for mental health professionals, colleges, and universities as well, who may not have adequate tools to best serve this population. In the following chapter, I will explain the methodology that I have selected to utilize in this research study, including the participant section, data collection, and analysis procedures.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

As I discussed in Chapter 2, the current literature addressed the effects that divorce has on a family system and how all parties involved are impacted from a parental divorce. Experiencing a parental divorce for adults 18 years of age can lead to delayed entrance into adulthood and lower levels of self-esteem compared to their peers whose parents were still married (Connel et al., 2015). Parental divorce can also correlate with lower academic performance, behavioral concerns (Babalis et al., 2014), separation issues, adjustment difficulties (Weaver & Schofield, 2015), substance abuse (Arkes, 2013), and mental health concerns (Shimkowski & Ledbetter, 2018). Addressing the lack of information surrounding Black adult children of divorce and their lived experiences was the goal of this study; my aim was to understand the self-perceptions of Black adult children of divorce regarding love, marriage, and intimate partner relations after their parents have divorced.

Based on the negative impacts and consequences of divorce on adult children, as discussed in Chapter 2, a deeper look into specific demographics was needed to understand the phenomenon of divorce as it pertains to race and ethnic and cultural backgrounds (see Mikucji-Enyart et al., 2016; Ricketts, 2016). In this chapter, I discuss the rationale for this study, the research design that was used, the population and the sampling procedures used to select the participant group, the method used to recruit participants, and the sample size. I also describe the data collection process (i.e., the use

of individual interviews and Photovoice) as well as the data analysis procedures (i.e., the use of Atlas.ti qualitative software to record, code, and manage my data.

Research Design and Rationale

I based the research design employed in this study on Moustakas's (2010) phenomenological design with a heuristic method approach because there did not appear to be a construct that defines the phenomenon this demographic is experiencing. Phenomenology is the study of humans and their personal experiences through a first-person point of view (Gallagher, 2012). Through my research study, I sought to better understand the lived experience of Black adult children of divorce and allow them to share their viewpoints and experiences with the goal of discovering meaning and increasing the depth of knowledge surrounding this population. By studying Black adult children of divorce using this method and design, I am collecting their reality and experiences of their parents' divorce and how it has impacted their views on love, marriage, and intimate partner relationships. This approach allows for introspection, observation, and reflective structural analysis, which calls participants to return to their lived reality (Moustakas, 1994).

Moustakas (2010) used various human science modalities to contemplate the behavior of humans and their interactions. In this study, I used a phenomenological, heuristic research design with guided participant interviews to discuss and understand the lived experiences of Black adult children of divorce. I selected the phenomenological method because I aimed to describe, interpret, and understand the experiences of human life (see Bloor & Wood, 2006). In phenomenological studies, the research questions are

designed to understand the experience of a specific situation or phenomena (Bloor & Wood, 2006).

I also included the use of Photovoice as a second methodology to expound on the lived experiences of adult children of divorce and gain an understanding of how they see the themes of love, commitment, and marriage. Photovoice is a participatory research strategy where participants provide photos of life events during the interview process (Kuratani & Lai, 2011). This research strategy allows participants to have a personal and meaningful impact on the research gatherings where they can heighten awareness in their community, increase knowledge, and record their experience with the data that are being collected through their photos (Jarldorn, 2016). Through the images presented by participants' photos as well as their descriptions of the photos, I was able to further interpret meanings to gain a deeper understanding of their internal experiences and emotions that may not be verbally expressed.

In this study, I used a semiguided interview format to gather the rest of the data. Discussion allowed participants to further explore and process the topics in a free-flowing and open conversation. After each interview, I read the transcript from the interview and reassessed the data to determine which questions would be asked of the next participant. There were four participants, who were all female, self-identified as Black, and are adult children of divorce over 18 years of age. To participate in the study: (a) the participant's parents must have divorced after the individual turned 18 years old, (b) they must identify themselves as middle class, and (c) they must come from a home with Black parents. In the interviews, participants were asked a series of open-ended questions to promote

discussions of their experiences after their parents' divorce. After the interview, participants used their own phone cameras to capture photos that they viewed as representing love, marriage, and commitment. Participants had 48 hours to take their photos and return them (via text or hand delivery) to me with their caption attached to the photo.

Role of the Researcher

I was an observer-participant in this research study and had no personal or professional relationship with the participants. Any biases surrounding the study, including confirmation bias, culture bias, and leading question-bias, were managed (see Sarniak, 2015). To achieve this, I minimized confirmation to participant responses (i.e., not nodding in agreement) and challenged my preexisting thoughts and hypotheses. One example of this was expecting adult children of divorce to have several negative effects from their parents' divorce and have a lower desire to want to marry or be in intimate relationships. I am a Black adult child of divorce and, therefore, have certain preconceived notions based on my lived experiences. Unconditional positive regard was shown to participants, and I remained aware of my own cultural assumptions and those of the participants. Summarizing participant statements into my own words was limited and making assumptions of participant feelings and behavior was avoided. Quality questions aligned with the root of this research study were asked. By being aware of bias prior to the study, I mitigated influencing the data results. Throughout the research study, I remained aware of potential bias that I brought into the study and had an open mind to

allow participants to provide their own experiences and perceptions without influencing their answers.

Research Questions

In this study, I aimed to gather information about Black adult children of divorce and explore the influence of parental divorce on middle-class, Black children in the United States. I began with individual interviews of the participants to collect information prior to the photo gathering, then built discussion questions around the gathered responses. The primary question I asked was:

What has been the personal experience of Black adult children in the United States whose parents divorce later-in-life, with regard to self-perception and familial identity?

Methodology

Population and Sampling Procedures

Creswell (2013) recommended having five to 25 participants in a qualitative phenomenological study. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 38.7% of Black children under the age of 18 years old grow up with married parents (Prince, 2016). Of the 38.7%, 12% of these marriages will end after 15 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). In heuristic studies, smaller sample sizes are used to gather a deeper understanding and personal experiences of participants, usually around five participants (Creswell, 2013).

The sample in this study consisted of adults: (a) who self-identify as Black, (b) have legally divorced parents, and (c) are over the age of 18 years old. In addition, to participate in the study: (a) the participant's parents must have divorced after the

individual turned 18 years old, (b) they must identify themselves as middle class, and (c) they must come from a home with Black parents who were married during their childhood.

Because I used a phenomenological approach with individual interviews and Photovoice in this study, there was a need for in-depth, detailed analysis of personal experiences in the data and a larger sample size would not have been appropriate. According to Cleary, Horsfall, and Hayter (2014), in a phenomenological study: (a) participants should be selected purposefully, (b) there should be clear rationale for their participation, (c) they should be selected sequentially rather than predetermined, and (d) the total sample size should be small in order to facilitate intensive study. For qualitative research studies, the sample size may also be determined by the amount of time that the researcher has, the resources that are available, or the objective of the study (Patton, 1990).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The four participants in this study were all female. I asked the participants a series of open-ended questions to promote discussions of their experiences after their parents' divorce until saturation has been reached. Saturation was determined once similar themes resurfaced in the participants' responses two times. After the interview, participants used their own phone cameras to capture photos that they believed represent love, marriage, and commitment. The participants then described the meaning of their selected photos during an interview. The participants that were selected for this study had to meet the following minimum set of requirements to be considered to participate: (a) they had to be

at least 18 years of age at the time of study, (b) could not be pregnant, (c) had the ability to speak and read English, (d) must not have any intellectual disabilities, and (e) had to self-identify as Black.

For this study, I recruited participants from three historically Black colleges and universities in the southern United States. These three schools were selected due to the nature of the study and target population. Since enough participants were not identified through these three universities and colleges, the search was extended to four more area universities. I used flyers, e-mails, texts, and word of mouth to advertise the study as well as social media, such as Facebook and Instagram.

Before beginning the study, I informed participants of the purpose of the study and notified them of any risks that may have occurred, such as psychological distress due to potentially sensitive subject matter. Additionally, the benefits of their participation were reviewed with them, such as closure, self-exploration, and commonality. I also discussed the extent of the confidentiality and disclosed my contact information if they needed to reach me after the study with any concerns. Participants were also informed that they may have withdrawn from the study at any point. Participants had to sign consent forms before participating in the study.

I collected data using in-person individual interviews and photos through Photovoice. Participants e-mailed their photos to me once they had completed the assignment. Since I was not able to recruit 10 participants for the study, I completed the study with four participants, which was deemed appropriate for a qualitative study, per Creswell (1998). At the end of the data collection, participants were debriefed and

provided with a summary of information. Participants were thanked for their time, provided with information on requesting data, and given a \$5.00 gift card to Starbucks.

Instrumentation and Data Analysis

Individual Interviews

When conducting a qualitative study, interviews are the most common technique used for gathering data because it allows the researcher to not only interact with participants but to also have a better understanding of their experience (Kvale, 2006). In this study, I asked participants a series of questions in a semistructured manner on the topic of their parents' divorce and the aftermath of this event. I then asked participants a series of 10 open-ended questions and encouraged discussion based on their responses. The individual interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and took place in a reserved office space with the goal of gaining a more in-depth viewpoint from the participants. The interview questions asked of the participants were:

1. Do you remember the first time you thought your parents' marriage was ending? Tell me about that experience; how did this make you feel?
2. How has your life changed and stayed the same since your parents' divorce?
3. Has your life gotten easier or more difficult since your parents' divorce?
4. Has your desire to get married changed since your parents' divorce? If so, in what way?
5. Has your viewpoint on marriage in general changed since your parents divorced, if so how?
6. How would you describe your perception of love and marriage?

7. Have you experienced any differences in your social group, community, and outside family members because of your parents' divorce?
8. Has your parents' divorce impacted you in ways since you have been in college?
9. Do you desire to get married or date since your parents have divorced?
10. Do you believe in love and marriage last a lifetime? How does this occur?

The interviews were digitally recorded, then transcribed in NVivo 12 software for analysis.

Photo Gathering

After the individual interview portion of the study, participants were asked to use their cell phones (disposable cameras were provided to those without camera phones), to capture images of what love and marriage mean to them now after their parents have divorced. They were given this one question and asked to take the next 48-hours, in order to maintain the spirit of the study, to gather a photo of how they interpret this question and return it to the researcher with a brief description of their photo and why they selected it.

Coding Procedures

Codes are used to organize the data that is gathered by participants (Gibbs, 2015). It is recommended to begin with a starting point of codes and that the researcher creates before data collection; then, as data is collected, new codes are formed (Gibbs, 2015). I began with preset codes of Perceptions towards marriage and divorce, Feelings about divorce, Feelings about marriage, and How the divorce affected "me." These were the

starting groups for organizing the data and emergent codes will stem from the individual interviews. At the end of the interviews, I reflected on the data that has been gathered and begin creating new codes based on their responses and discussion. I used the *NVivo 12 software* to code and manage my data that was retrieved for easier transcription and coding from the interviews.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Reliability (Average Inter-item correlation) is when a group of people complete an instrument with all the same information, then the results are compared to each other (Kirk & Miller, 1986). In this study, I used average inter-item correlation as the form of reliability.

Internal Validity (Criteria related validity) is when the results from the instrument accurately relate to or predict external variables (Kirk & Miller, 1986). Since I measured the impact of divorce, the results could be causally related to the single event all participants have in common: their parents' divorce.

Ethical Procedures

Before any recruitment or data collection was initiated, I waited to receive Institutional Review Board approval for my research study. IRB Approval # 05-23-19-0661717. The participants were treated with respect, beneficence, and justice throughout the entire study. Participants were notified that their participation was completely voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any time. Participants' data was double locked when being transported and participants' personal information was separated from all data materials. Personal data such as age, email address, and phone number were not

utilized in data collection or discussed in the results. Psychological risks that could potentially arise from emotional distress regarding the subject matter were handled by preparing individuals before the study and debriefing the participants at the conclusion. All participants were given the number to community based mental health providers for potential follow up as well.

Informed Consent

Each participant was asked to read over and sign an informed consent form stating they understood the nature of their participation in the study and their role. The participant reviewed statements about what the research involved, why they were selected to participate in the study, as my role as the researcher. An explanation of the research purpose and the procedure was also included. Participants were informed of the 45-60 min individual interviews as well as the photo gathering which was collected at of the completion of the individual interviews. Individuals were informed again that their participation was voluntary and that withdrawing from the study had no penalties. I discussed emotional discomfort that may arise, and the potential benefits to their community, peers, and society that they may experience through their participation. Participants were informed of confidentiality and the limits to this. They also received my contact information as well as the contact information for my committee chair in case concerns arose. I provided all participants with a copy of the informed consent for their keeping. Participants were also informed of the incentive to complete the study: a \$5.00 Starbucks gift card that they received,

Summary

In conclusion, in Chapter 3, I have discussed the rationale and research design for this study. I have outlined my role as the researcher and identified the research questions. I have discussed the methodology that is being utilized and outlined the recruitment protocols and data collection methods. Finally, I have discussed the ethical concerns, validity, and reliability of this study. In Chapter 4, I will report on the collected data.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

In this study, I aimed to gain further insight into the phenomenon of Black adult children of divorce and provide further understanding of their perceptions on love, marriage, and their intimate partner relationships after their parents' divorce. Using a heuristic, qualitative, semistructured format to conduct the interviews, data were generated for analysis in this study. Participants were asked about their own intimate partner relationships and how they view love and marriage. I developed the interview questions aimed at understanding if there was a difference between the perceptions of love as a child compared to seeing the dissolution of the parental union and how that translates into the participants' own adult relationships and mate selection processes. Participants were asked to describe how they feel love, what love looks like to them in their adult lives, their perceptions of their parents' marriages and views of love, and differences between their views and those of their parents. In the closing thoughts from the participants, they were asked if they felt marriage was meant to last a lifetime or if it was something for a moment in time. In this chapter, I explain the process of collecting the data, the demographics of participants, the research setting, and the data gathered from participants.

Data Collection

As I was interviewing participants (see the discussion of interviews and interview procedures in Chapter 3), I used the questions provided in this section as a guide to structure the interview. I also asked follow-up questions and clarifying questions that

allowed for further depth in the participants' responses. Participants responded with their thoughts on marriage and how it has played a role in their viewpoints on love and marriage in comparison to their experiences with their parents. Overall, I designed the interview questions to generate conversation on specific topics while allowing the conversation to naturally flow based on the participants' experiences and stories. The interview questions were:

1. Do you remember the first time you thought your parents' marriage was ending? Tell me about that experience; how did this make you feel?
2. How has your life changed and stayed the same since your parents' divorce?
3. Has your life gotten easier or more difficult since your parents' divorce?
4. Has your desire to get married changed since your parents' divorce? If so, in what way?
5. Has your viewpoint on marriage in general changed since your parents divorced; if so, how?
6. How would you describe your perception of love and marriage?
7. Have you experienced any differences in your social group, community, and outside family members because of your parents' divorce?
8. Has your parents' divorce impacted you in ways since you have been in college?
9. Do you desire to get married or date since your parents have divorced?
10. Do you believe love and marriage last a lifetime? How does this occur?

Demographics of Participants

All participants selected for the study identified as Black, were over the age of 18 years of age, and experienced their parents' divorce after they were 18 years of age. All participants lived in the same state in the South and had no intellectual disabilities, pregnancies, or other disqualifying factors. All participants were female and ranged in age from 31 to 46 years old. I attempted to recruit males for the study; however, locating males that met the selection criteria was a barrier, and those who did meet the criteria were not willing to participate in the study. The age the participants were when their parents divorced ranged as well from 18 to 39 years old. Siblings were another factor that contributed to the study; participants ranged from having two to four siblings. The birth order of the participants varied as well with participants being either the oldest in the family or the middle child but none being the youngest in their family. The participants' siblings consisted of both brothers and sisters; however, two participants had only brothers and the other two had just sisters.

Research Setting

I permitted the participants to select the time and day that was most convenient for them to complete the interview. The participants were interviewed in a secluded, private office space used for therapeutic services that allowed for one-on-one, direct conversation where both the interviewee and interviewer could easily be heard and carry on a private dialogue. The participants were provided with a copy of the informed consent form upon their arrival for the interview, which I reviewed with them, then asked if they had any questions about it or needed clarification before beginning the study. I

informed the participants that a recording device would be used to gather the data and capture the conversation for the study. All participants verified their understanding. I also explained that the questions being asked during the interview would be in a semistructured format and explained what this meant to them as interviewees. The recording and interviews began by participants introducing themselves and the nature of the study, including the title.

Recruitment of Participants

I began scheduling interviews in July 2019 and commenced interviewing participants in September 2019. Following the data collection parameters that were discussed in Chapter 3, flyers were distributed advertising my study. Flyers were posted in public areas, such as parks; outside of heavily trafficked areas; and posts on social media, including Facebook and Instagram. Individuals then reached out to me demonstrating an interest in being a participant in the study. I followed up by providing them with an interest form for their completion. Once it was deemed that they were appropriate for the study and met the study prerequisites, participants were sent an e-mail that included the consent letter for their review. Participants were then asked for the best time in their schedule to complete the interview. Of the participants selected for the study, 100% stated they were informed of the study via word of mouth and two participants stated they came across the flyer as well through a Facebook post after they heard about the study.

Research Process

I asked participants questions that began with having them describe the experience of their parents' marital dissolution. The participants had the opportunity to describe the first time before the divorce they could remember realizing that their parents' marriage was ending. Their story led up until the day when their parents' divorce was finalized. The participants were also asked about their viewpoints on their parents' marriage before it ended and how that impacted them in different phases of their lives. I then asked participants questions regarding what their understanding of love was and how it was shown, verbalized, and demonstrated in their household between their parents while they were married. The next questions asked were aimed at understanding their experiences after their parents' divorce and if and how things were different. Participants described how their lives changed and/or remained unchanged after their parents' divorce as well as how it is impacting them in the present day.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were completed, I transcribed the data using an online transcription software and the interview transcripts were uploaded into NVivo 12 software for analysis. Data were analyzed using the six-step protocol for thematic analysis proposed by Braun, Clarke, and Terry (2014). The first step of analysis involved reading and rereading the transcripts to highlight points of potential analytical interest and to gain familiarity with the data. In the second step, phrases and groups of consecutive phrases that expressed similar experiences, perceptions, or ideas were grouped together into a child node in NVivo. The child nodes were labeled with

descriptive words or phrases and represented codes. In the third step, similar codes were clustered into themes. In NVivo, this step involved grouping child nodes that expressed similar ideas under a parent node, which was labeled with a descriptive phrase. The fourth step involved reviewing and refining the codes and themes by rereading their content to ensure that all data excerpts and codes were appropriately clustered. In the fifth step, I named the themes. Lastly, in the sixth step, a summary of the analysis was completed.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility occurs when multiple methods of data collection are used to gain a more complete understanding of the phenomenon being gathered throughout the study (Golafshani, 2003). While conducting the study, I practiced reflexivity, in which I avoided confirmation biases to the best of my ability. I considered my own personal experience, my professional background, as well as personal biases that may have influenced the participants and the data results. I made sure not to give positive affirmations (by nodding or smiling with answers) and ensured that I did not display facial expressions as confirmation to answers provided by participants.

Transferability

In this study, I looked at Black adult children of divorce and explored the impact that their parents' divorce had on their viewpoints and perceptions of love and marriage. The study required participants to be over the age of 18 years old and over the age of 18 years old when their parents got divorced. This study only included participants that lived

in a single state in the southern United States. While conducting the study I was careful to follow the research plan exactly as stated; when changes or additions were needed, I kept detailed notes of the changes so the study could be replicated in the future. This study would be easily replicated in other states; can be adjusted to focus on specific age groups or isolated groups, such as universities; and the research design can be changed easily.

Confirmability

In this study, I kept detailed notes on the questions and data analysis process to ensure that there was a little bias as possible and my own personal motivations were not impacted by the study.

Summary of Results

While completing the analysis, three major themes emerged to answer the research question. The three themes were: (a) predivorce experiences and perceptions, (b) making sense of the divorce, and (c) reflecting on postdivorce impacts.

Theme 1: Predivorce Experiences and Perceptions

In this section of the interviews, I asked participants to describe their upbringing with their parents and how they remember seeing their parents' relationship as they were growing up. All participants spoke to their family's predivorce dynamics and parental partnership. Participants gave responses such as:

I don't know what that looked like growing up because in my mind, because I was big on like whatever I saw on TV, and I never looked at what was in front of me to really understand what I consider a healthy partnership to look like. (Participant 2)

Another example was: “Um, even between my parents it was like, yeah, you see them kissing, but displays of affection, claiming them. Um, that’s a lot of what I saw, but I don’t know that I defined love that way” (Participant 1).

Participants were also asked to describe any things they remembered observing growing up that they feel may have given signs of the divorce and how it impacted them. Half of the participants spoke to their parents’ struggles within the relationship and internally. Participant 2 indicated that,

My mom experienced more depression than I even realized because my mom does a lot. She did a lot of hiding. She never like spoke about her emotions or not really until she started doing the dumping, but you know what I’m saying. But she, she did a lot of hiding and a lot of suppressing and whatnot. And so, I think subconsciously I started doing the same.

Another participant stated,

And then, um, like maybe weeks before that I was like, I saw my dad crying, never seen him crying. Even when his mother passed, I didn’t see him crying or praying. Um, he held that part of himself until recently. (Participant 3)

Another participant, Participant 2, spoke to her own relationship with her mother and how this impacted her view on love:

She stopped being, um, she was never a traditional version of a mother. And when I say traditional, I don’t even mean like TV. I mean like nurturing, caring, and focused on you in any capacity. No, none of those warm fuzzies come from there.

So, I honestly believe that she is, she is not capable of really loving someone. Um, and she definitely hasn't loved me from the day I was born.

Participant 4, who described a domestic violence relationship between her parents, shared, "So, I just kind of, for me, the way I looked at relationships in the past was just like, okay, well if I want something to last, I just tough it out if I want something."

These experiences that all the participants spoke to how they viewed love and marriages from their point of view as they were growing up in the household with their parents. These questions prompted self-reflection as the participants began to pull from memories on how their foundation was formed and how it impacted them, even at a younger age. Participant 3 shared that:

My mom and dad, they built a house from the ground up, in five months, five acres of land. Um, it wasn't uh, a horrible life. I was the head cheerleader. My brother was a star football player. We had a car, like we had a good life. He just was not, he was a good provider, but he wasn't a good husband and not a good daddy. A good father, but not a good daddy. And I learned things from him that have shaped me to be the woman that I am, but he just wasn't a good daddy.

Please see the remaining discussion in this Results chapter for further information on the themes and codes gathered for theme one. Table 1 indicates the subthemes, codes, and subcodes that indicated participants' pre-divorce experiences and perceptions.

Table 1

Theme 1: Subthemes and Codes

Subtheme (left-aligned), code (single indent), or subcode (italicized, double indent)	No. of participants contributing	No. of data units included
perceptions of love and romantic relationships	3	10
positive examples and expectations	2	4
pre-divorce family dynamics	4	29
observed pattern—lack of communication about relationships	2	10
<i>lacking positive guidance</i>	1	2
<i>lived a sheltered life</i>	1	2
<i>parental internalization of struggles</i>	2	2
<i>problems not discussed as family</i>	1	4
observing parental-partnership dynamics	3	3
<i>enabling and co-dependency</i>	1	1
<i>ongoing conflict and domestic violence</i>	1	1
<i>staying for the kids</i>	1	1
reflecting on parent-child dynamics	3	16
<i>a mother incapable of loving</i>	1	2
<i>dad as provider but not more</i>	2	2

Theme 2: Making Sense of the Divorce

The second theme within the interview asked participants to think back to their memories of their parents going through the divorce—what that meant to them and if and how they noticed their life changing in that process. Table 2 indicates the subthemes, codes, and subcodes that indicated participants' experiences as they tried to make sense of their parents' divorce. Participant responses were grouped into the following categories: (a) being aware of their own emotions; (b) retrospective thoughts on their parents' behaviors; and (c) their own self-perceptions. Based on their responses, there were a mix of feelings such as overwhelmed and angry (as well as relief) as a result of the divorce. One participant, Participant 1, stated, "I was pissed off because it was a cop out." and "Like it's just, it made me angry, even angrier at her than I was already at the time. Cause I was extremely angry with my mother." Some of the participants referred to

trying to rationalize and cope with the experience in the moment and how they felt even at a young age surrounding the idea of their parents divorcing. Participant 3 explained:

So I probably could say that it is at the age of 10, I thought that their marriage was ending. Um, it's not like a lot of pressure. Um, I felt like trying to predict what our future will look like. It was, um, it was overwhelming to be a 10-year-old and in trying to consider, you know, what the rest of our lives would look like, meaning my mom, myself and my sister.

A common theme that emerged with all the participants was a sense of responsibility for their siblings and their parents. The participants spoke to being overwhelmed with the changes and their initial reactions and feelings. Participant 2 indicated: "Um, I think the very first feeling after being afraid was abandoned and angry. I think those were the first feelings." The fear that was experienced—in the moment of knowing something in their lives was drastically changing—was also a topic that was brought up repeatedly. Participant 4 explained:

I came home from school and my mom wasn't home. My mom had two jobs. Um, I thought maybe she had gone to her second job and one was a night job and um, and so when the time came, she worked 2pm to 10pm for that job. 10 o'clock came, 11 o'clock came, two o'clock came in the morning. And, uh, she never showed up. So, I thought, oh my God, somethings happened. So, the next day I waited to daylight, I called my grandma and I said, Mama didn't come home, you know, like that. And um, so my, my dad was in the house, but he didn't seem like he was not concerned. I asked him, did he know where she was? He said no, and

you know, so on and so forth. So, at this time also bear in mind, I am 16 and, um, I am pregnant. So, um, she didn't come home, and I began looking for her. Long story short, I realized that something had drastically changed. Either something had dramatically happened to my mom, in a horrendous way.

The fear and concern that was present at that very moment was felt in the interview with these participants as if they were reliving the experience of their lives changing forever.

After discussing their immediate thoughts during the storm that was occurring, the interview was guided to understand what occurred next in their lives. Participants stated that they remember separate living arrangements being an immediate impact, within hours of finding out their parents were divorcing. According to Participant 2:

My Mom said that we were moving out and that they were gonna they were separating that they were getting, I can't remember if she said they were, they were separating and can't remember if he said they're separating, not gonna be together or not be married anymore, or she actually used the word divorce. But we were moving into my grandparents' house.

Another participant, Participant 1, discussed how she found out she was moving across the county:

Um, but he was so upset because he didn't see it coming. I didn't see it coming either. And my sisters definitely didn't. And she's like, well, I'm moving back to California cause it's just, this is not a good situation between me and your father. And then she's like, I want you guys to come with me. I'm like, wait, what? So, then she's finally got my attention and she's like, I'm leaving in three days. Uh,

the next morning she left, walked out. Um, she didn't realize that I was awake when she came into my room. So, she did the pretend motherly thing and kissed me to say bye, whispered goodbye and I love you. And she took off.

There was also a sense of relief that participants spoke to in regard to their parents finally getting divorced. Participant 1 said that:

For the first little bit, I was really pissed off at them, not because they got divorced though, because as I mentioned, I really was relieved. I breathed a sigh of relief when I learned that the papers were signed and filed. I became even more distant from my dad. Like I never really was that close to him anyway, but living in the house with him and him, quote unquote being my dad, um, was still a part of it because they were married. I felt that at the divorce, it gave me permission to no longer be committed to him as my dad.

Outside of the initial shock and fear that occurred with the announcement of the divorce, the participants spoke to the influences that led up to their parents' divorce.

These reasons included: infidelity, jealousy over the time spent with children, maternal guilt, perception of missing out, and mental health diagnoses within the family system.

All of the above-mentioned stressors contributed to the dissolution of their parents' relationship from the participants' viewpoints.

Table 2

Theme 2: Subthemes and Codes

Subtheme (left-aligned), code (single indent), or subcode (italicized, double indent)	No. of participants contributing	No. of data units included
awareness of own emotions	4	13
mix of anger and relief	1	3
overwhelmed and angry	2	2
protective	1	1
surprised but understanding	1	2
relationships on the rocks	3	20
retrospective thoughts on parental behavior	3	20
<i>influences on marital stress</i>	3	11
<i>infidelity</i>	2	2
<i>jealous of time spent with children</i>	1	1
<i>maternal guilt</i>	1	2
<i>perception of missing out</i>	1	2
<i>sibling mental health diagnosis</i>	1	4
warning signs	0	0
<i>distant and more arguments</i>	1	2
<i>less family time spent together</i>	1	1
<i>separate living</i>	4	7

Theme 3: Reflecting on Post-divorce Impacts

The final theme that came out of the interviews addressed the research question about the experiences and perceptions that the participants encountered after their parents' divorce. The major groups of responses were broken down further within the main theme to include: (a) new family dynamics; (b) the social impacts and reactions of the divorce; and (c) current thoughts on marriage and romantic relationships.

Within the first group, the participants described the changes within their relationships. This included not only their relationships with their parents, but also their siblings and extended family members. All participants spoke to the changes that they encountered from the divorce and how it impacted them. Participant 1 stated:

Um, and it made the dynamics in my family like messy. Like I felt stressed by the relationships, um, for me to be supportive. It was very, very frustrating because nobody really understood or believed what I was saying about how she treated me and, on my father.

Another participant, Participant 3, described further extended family dynamics:

Um, internally with the family, there was a great big separation. So, one side of the family who was always around because that's what I grew up with. I grew up with my maternal family. They felt like they had to be loyal to my mom because that's how she made that. So, she said they can't associate with my dad who they've known since he was 19 years old.

Other participants spoke to trying to navigate their extended family relationships. For example, Participant 2 said:

We didn't do family events together anymore. My dad's family is two hours away from here, so I continued to visit my grandmother and um, aunts and uncles. And if they had events, of course my father would be there, um, and I would spend certain holidays with them. And it's certain holidays when my mom's side of the family had events I may attend.

There also was an undertone of grief and loss within the interviews with the participants.

For example, according to Participant 3:

So, we have things that, you know are different, my husbands from Mississippi also, we go to Mississippi and we spend time with my mother-in-law and my

father-in-law and I, this is weird, my father lost time with my mother. I lost my family.

With participants having to learn the new dynamics in their nuclear and immediate families, there were still other relationships and dynamics that were being navigated, including their relationship with their parents. All the participants spoke to one parent becoming their “primary” parent, and how that relationship developed and functioned post-divorce. As participants are spring boarding into adulthood during their parents’ divorce, some attended college and others did not immediately. Some of the participants spoke to being away at college and learning how to have a relationship with the non-primary parent. For example, Participant 2 stated that:

Then my, my father started coming back in the periphery trying to do stuff but not do stuff like, Oh, here, let me hand you a little bit of money, but Oh, let me not, you know, he was, he was really, he would come in and like be real inconsistent. And that in itself was stressful too because I was just like, how dare you.

Other participants spoke to having to defend and protect their primary parent, from the non-primary parent,

So, um, my dad was telling family members on his side of the family that I convinced my mom to do the divorce, and you know, I hate to deal with having to explain to them that my mom was not a dummy, you know, the thing is, that she was not gonna continue to put up with it. But the thing is, she never talked bad about him. He always had, you know, things to say about her though. (Participant 1)

Participants had a common theme of their parents not taking responsibility for their role in the divorce and the impacts that it had on them: “Leah (mom) and I are not ever going to be like that (close relationship). Um, she doesn’t acknowledge anything she’s done to me specifically, or to other people around me” (Participant 3). While enduring these experiences, participants described how they must hold their parents accountable and responsible for their actions:

You know, I had to tell my father, you know, Daddy, you did this to my mom and how could you think that was me? Like I don’t have anything to do with you guys as marriage. I didn’t put you together. I can’t make you stay together. I couldn’t make her leave you. Like you have to take responsibility for your actions.

(Participant 1)

Role reversal is another topic that was brought up between all participants.

Participants stated that they felt burdened and had to take on the role that their parent would typically fill, and the children found that they had to be the emotional and financial supports for their parents:

My Mom’s financially stressed, and so my mom, I love my mom, but when I got to college, like my mom started doing this, this emotional dumping that she hadn’t done before. I don’t know if know if it was because of the divorce. I don’t know if it was because of the financial strain, I don’t know if it’s because of my age and now she feels like I have a rite of passage, but she, she still does it to this day, but I became like the person that she would go to now, now I was for some reason, like I felt like I was expected to solve her problems or before like she was

the one who was listening and helping me process through my problems.

Something had to give and then my mom's emotionally dumping and like I did not feel emotionally equipped to handle any of that. (Participant 2)

Participants spoke to their own coping and not being able to turn to their parents for support due to their parents still dealing with the effects of the trauma on their own:

There was like that year, my sophomore year, I felt all over the place and like with all these expectations and whatnot and like I said, my mom was the person I normally went to, but then like the roles switched, and so I'm trying to go to her and she was like, nope, I can't do it. I can't help you. You need to go find a therapist. I was like, wait, what? That's when I started therapy. (Participant 2)

Another participant, Participant 1, spoke to the physical housing and financial support she had to provide for her parent:

I moved here to Atlanta in a two-bedroom apartment and she moved in with me and I, I was already paying all my own bills. She transferred her job to a location in another part of Georgia and I think I began to become her parent.

There was a sense of responsibility that all the participants shared; feeling responsible for their parent and their wellbeing:

I never went back to my parents' individually or together. And also, I um, I haven't relied on them as far as a resource. In fact, it's all, often been the opposite, until I just kind of, you know, set boundaries and told them, like, listen, I am not your go to person! (Participant 4)

The participants also described how their relationship with their siblings changed and how they became parentified within their sibling group:

So it was a lot of parentification. A lot of it! I became, I went from my dad's first born to his secretary to being his stand in wife to some degree, not necessarily taking care of him but responsible for my younger sisters. (Participant 3)

Another participant, Participant BL, stated: "Yeah. I became their parents, Um, in every way. If they needed money, if something was going on, if they were upset, if they didn't know how to handle something. So, it was counseling, it was financial, emotional support." A different participant, Participant 3, said:

If they (my sisters) came home from school upset, my sister is 10 years younger than us, so when she would come home from her college break, she came to my house. She, she just, this is where her house was it that she had a room in my house.

The final participant, Participant 1, shared:

And so, um, it was just a lot of stress and then a lot of taking care of my siblings cause my dad was working, still working on a ton of hours, so I'd drive back up from Statesboro where I was in college and it was 4 hours away, and I needed to be closer to take care of them.

Participants described how their new roles and responsibilities took a toll on their sibling relationships; their siblings did not always comprehend their new roles and the enforcement of rules and expectations their older sibling was now enforcing if they were a parent:

And I felt resentful because she (sister) didn't understand that I had to change rules and my roles otherwise she wouldn't have the life she has. And I, I get irritated by it. And by having to say that, because it sounds like I'm trying to say like I made you happen and I'm like, but no, when you were doing all kinds of stupid crazy stuff and nobody was stopping you and it's me that was making it all better. It was me that was fixing you failing out of school. It was me that moved my house so you can live with me and bring all your fricking animals, that destroyed stuff I'd got in the last year, it was me that made sure that you didn't get arrested for some stupidity that you were doing with this little girl that you were talking to, um, it was me that made sure that you found your path. It wasn't me that made that stuff happen. But you're upset with me because I told you quit doing stupid stuff. I was like, what'd you want her, your sister to do? Cause I could let you go get high and you couldn't be a cop right now. Like she was getting high all the time and I was like, quit, go play basketball. She got a scholarship from that. (Participant 3)

While dealing with the transitions within the family and the dynamics, providing emotional support and financial support to their parents and the changes in roles and responsibilities, the participants spoke to their change in self-perception and emotional reflections. Participants described the feeling of having to grow up too fast and have the burden of dealing with family financial responsibilities, ensuring bills were paid, and contributing to the household income:

So, there was a period of time where we the house that we moved into, we only lived in there for a couple of few years and then we my mom couldn't pay the mortgage. So that impacted like I, I was used to certain levels of stability I was used to, and then we were struggling financially for a lot, to the point that when I was in college, there was a, in my mind there was a understanding before I went to college that like I would focus on school and then that ended up not being the case when I got to college because my mom needed help now. So, then I felt that there was a lot of pressure on me to begin working and working and not to say that I don't think people should work during school because it builds character, but it was definitely something that I wasn't anticipating or expecting because I wasn't able to get the help that I was used to the level of support that I was used to. (Participant 2)

Participants described the struggles they faced with their new roles and having to step up and make sure things were taken care of: "So, um, I can't say that it was hard for me to step into that role, but, um, I definitely was forced to grow up faster than, than normal with that" (Participant 2). With their struggles, participants elaborated on the burdens that they felt as a result of their parents' divorce and the impact it was having on them within their own educational pursuits and enjoying their lives as a young adult. Grades in school were mentioned as an impact —"So, my second year of school too was just like a mess. And like my grades suffered a lot" (Participant 2). Educational aspirations also had to be pushed to the side to meet the financial needs of the family: "Because I wanted to go to nursing school. I did not go into nursing school and so I took on all these things, but then

I had to start working” (Participant 3). Also, participants spoke to trying to adapt to their new life in college and making friends, while also balancing their responsibilities from home with their parents:

So, like my sophomore year of school, like I was just really like, I was really stressed out. I was really depressed. I was trying to be social too. Like, I was trying to be social, which meant like I was staying out later and hanging out more, but also working and trying to get this schoolwork done. (Participant 2)

The effects of situations that were still occurring back at home while the participants were in college proved to be extremely challenging:

I did poorly my first year academically, which shouldn't have ever happened. But I had absences, my dad was still working long hours and he got really sick and had to be hospitalized. I've never gotten low grades. You know, I was like good with a B. So, when I got my, um, I think I got a C in biology or yeah, C or D, I was just like, I gotta switch schools cause I gotta be at least closer (to home). (Participant 3)

With the divorce of their parents occurring when they were an adult, the roles they had to fill and adapt to had increasing pressures which showed in their emotional and mental health, social lives, and educational and professional pursuits: “There was some level of resentment that I was just like, y'all are doing a lot. And like I was like, this isn't fair. This isn't fair. All of a sudden” (Participant 1).

Even with all these impacts from their parents' marriage, I was still curious as to what their viewpoints on love and marriage were and if it impacted them as adults in their

pursuits of a romantic partner. Participants all agreed that they still desired to get married but had determined there were qualities that they would be looking for in a mate. These included clear communication and set boundaries, finding value in their partner and their partnership, as well as preparing the best they could for their relationship to last a lifetime. Over half of the participants were married or in a serious long-term relationship. The participants described some of their thoughts leading up to the decision to get married and some of their fears about engaging in this union. For example,

I have been married to my husband now for 10 years. Um, I am a very open person. So, when we first started dating, I let him know some of the things that I experienced. I let him know my role and my mom's life and my sister's lives. Um, he was very welcoming. He helped me with that and also, um, helped me to know like how to fit limitations and how to let them kind of, you know, grow up. He helped me, learn, that love is much deeper and bigger than I thought it would be. Um, I had an idea of what I thought it was, but being married to him and just built, like letting him love me the way that I deserve to be loved, allowed me to love him back that way. (Participant 4)

Others did not share the same sentiment about being in a relationship. For example,

I guess the biggest thing I guess that probably changed to me as I began to kind of mature was maybe that marriage meant some form of confinement. I started to, to try to understand as I got older why I didn't really want to get married because I cohabitate with my now husband for some time with him constantly asking me to marry him. And I was like, no, I don't want to do that. And um, as he kept asking

me and he'd ask why, you know, we were living together, we now have kids together, you know, why not. But I think I saw it as a loss of my individuality in some ways or that I was going to have to give up more than he would have to have given up. (Participant 1)

There was an overarching theme of wanting to maintain independence: "And I never wanted myself to think that I needed someone else. And so, I have grown to a point to where I feel like it's okay that I can want to need somebody, if that makes any sense" (Participant 4). Some of the participants who were not in a relationship discussed their current thoughts regarding one day being in a relationship:

Yes, I still desire a relationship. Me going through that, me looking at just I don't have to, I don't have to be in a hurry. I don't have to stay in a relationship just to make it work, like over the years, like I've found value and in myself and the way I would view relationships is more like the way that my mom and my father had their partnerships, not relationship. Like it was more of a partnership honestly. (Participant 2)

Through the interviews, hope is yet another topic that was shared by all participants. Hope for the future they desire with their mate, hope that everything will work out for their best interest, and hope that they would be one of the ones who have a successful marriage. For example,

I thought about marrying him but I was just like, there were qualifiers to that, because I wanted to, I want to get married and stay married. So no, I haven't been married, I haven't been married yet. But like I still hold that belief that once I get

married, I want to stay married. And so, for me I've been trying to figure that out, I think about what that looks like. I'm still trying, I'm still trying to figure out what that looks like. I think I have a better idea now than before. (Participant 2)

Some of the areas that are pre-qualifiers for a relationship were discussed as well:

When I'm looking for a partner now I, and probably this is probably why I'm not married like I'm looking for are they, are they going to be able to withstand even the tough times, how are they going to withstand the, the unpredictable?

(Participant 2)

I still believe in marriage. I still think there's a benefit in being married. I think there is, I feel like there's, there is something special about choosing someone to trust wholeheartedly and be vulnerable with no matter how long that lasts because you have the moment. (Participant 2)

Participants were also able to provide examples of what love is not; these included accommodating a partner's insecurities, generational-relational trauma, their parents' model of marriage, and finally, recognizing negative patterns in the relationship and resolving them. The participants provided insight to why they feel relationships are not as successful in this current time, compared older generations and historic marriages; for example, Participant 3's thoughts included,

I think everybody's just so, I think it's so easy to just find the next person. There's no reason to fight anymore. There's no reason to fight for anything anymore. But that being said, like, I don't think that the marriage structure, even if I'm looking

back into my grandparents, I don't think that we have a model of how to be successful in marriage, At least I don't.

Other participants, like Participant 4, suggested marriage used to be a sacrifice,

I don't like if you got to work really hard and the marriage is, even as I'm looking at my grandparents' relationship, they're married, they've been married for however many, 56 years now. But that comes with a lot of even abuse that my grandmother has endured. Like she stuck out some stuff and she had, you know, continues to stick out as things that I don't think that she should. But she sticks out because that's what you do here. It's like, it's, I know like when you're married you accept things and you when you're married and stay married, it's like some level of that is accepting other person.

Within what marriages should look like, the participants described not having a *blueprint* for how marriage should function and operate, and this was because they say *dysfunction* in not only their parents' relationship, but also in their grandparents and other peer group family members. Because of the rising rates of divorce, all participants stated that they did not feel there was any social impact from their peer group, and some participants described the opposite effect occurring once their parents divorced, and of those in their peer group, who did not have parents who were ever married or those who had parents who already divorced, they described a feeling of being accepted more within their peer group and like they were truly embraced by group members because they were "like them" now. Table 3 indicates the subthemes, codes, and subcodes that indicated participants' reflections on the consequences of their parents' divorce.

Table 3

Theme 3: Subthemes and Codes

Subtheme (left-aligned), code (single indent), or subcode (italicized, double indent)	No. of participants contributing	No. of data units included
articulating new family dynamics	4	71
changes in relationships	4	48
self-perceptions	4	23
social impacts and reactions to the divorce	4	7
divorce common in peer group	3	5
thoughts on marriage and romantic relationships	4	82
advice to younger self	3	8
figuring out what a good marriage looks like	4	35
<i>clear communication and boundary setting</i>	2	7
<i>finding value in a partnership</i>	3	7
<i>wanting marriages to last a lifetime</i>	4	9
<i>Wavering between motherhood and marriage</i>	1	7
what love is not	4	31
<i>recognizing negative patterns</i>	4	14
<i>understanding why some women stay</i>	3	3

Summary

Overall, the impact on adult children of divorce is extensive and has overarching impacts that were not previously expected. Adult children of divorce are in a unique situation where they are technically an adult by age; however, the sudden change in family status and dynamics has proven to have impacts in not only their personal life, but their emotional and mental health, relationships with parents and siblings, as well as feeling a sense of being burdened and having to take on more than they feel ready for. Participants were asked to give advice to others who are going through the divorce of their parents and suggest how to move forward with a healthy relationship and partner. Some of the feedback included:

My advice, the first thing that I wish that I would've, and I was too young to even want to know this, but I wish that I would've known. I wish I would've known

what my daddy and my mom were both missing the part, the puzzle piece that caused them to not be happy with themselves. (Participant 1)

Another participant, Participant 2, stated,

Um, don't be so naive as to think that they are divorcing regardless of what age you were when it happened. Don't be so naive to think that it doesn't affect you and then be brave enough to dig in and unpack some of that baggage, the baggage that would have occurred prior to the divorce. And that continues to happen even after the divorce. If it's things such as, you know, um, being able to confront your parents when they pull you in the middle of their stuff, uh, your dad did this or your mom said this, being able to draw the boundaries around yourself and say, that's your guys; stuff. Not Mine.

The final thought from Participant 4:

There are going to be tough times. They're going to be tough times and as long as you, you want to fight for your relationship, but you also need to make sure you're taking care of yourself. Because if you're not taking care of yourself, if you're not communicating your needs, you're gonna, you're gonna feel the blow back. Everything else is gonna feel amplified, you're gonna feel the blow back.

Using the other form of data analysis for my study, Photovoice was utilized by having the participants actively contribute to the research study. Participants were asked to use pictures to describe how they see love and romantic relationships today. Participants included the following:

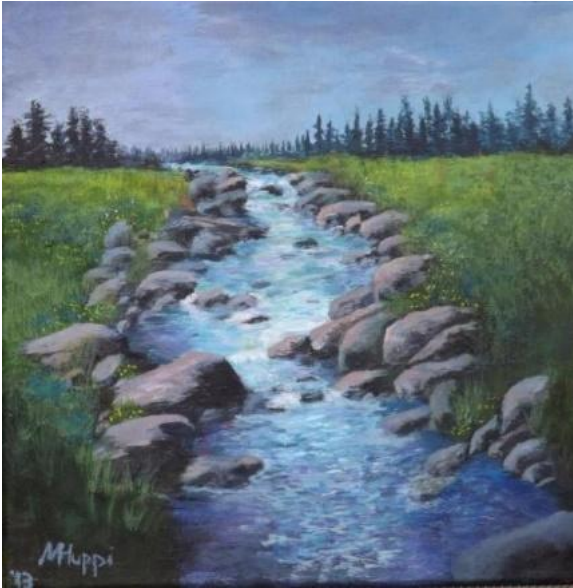


Figure 1. Love as a beautiful river.

Participant 1 wrote:

I see love as a beautiful river. There are rocks and bumps that come up sometimes, but underneath, and just beyond the rocks, there is a beautiful scenery that is majestic and comforting. I want the beautiful picture that comes, even if there are some rocks that have to come along with it.



Figure 2. Love as opportunity.

Participant 2 wrote:

When I see this picture, I think about opportunity. I think about an opportunity for building and for growth. When I see a home, I see the potential for a future. I see the potential to become vulnerable enough either someone that you share your life. You build a legacy together, you set goals for yourself and for each other, and you build; you grow. You rely on your partner for support, you trust them to invest with you, and you keep pushing through the hard times together. I think that finding someone that you can do this with is very special, and it's a beautiful thing. This is what I think about and hope for when I think about love.



Figure 3. Love ebbing and flowing over time

Participant 3 wrote:

The hearts in nature stood out to me because everyone thinks of love as equally felt (same size/amount), which is isn't what it really ends up being. At times, one person may be holding more of the emotional weight than the other. Plus, I love being outdoors with my love.



Figure 4. Love as separate yet connected.

Participant 4 wrote: “The heart with doves stood out because it was almost like two connect to have infinite love and though they are separate, they are still holding on together.”

With these photos, the theme of hope comes back to the surface. The participants seem to have a positive outlook on life, love, relationships, partnerships, and the strengths and difficulties that comes with them. In the photos, there is a dream—as one participant says, “opportunity”—the opportunity to have love and a partner, even with the burdens and heartaches that they have seen love cause in their lives between their parents. Photovoice allowed the participants to showcase their views on love and marriage, outside of the interviews. These photos seem to answer the question of the perceptions of the participants, and the overarching theme that has come from these results, is that no matter what they have experienced, no matter what they have witnessed, they would still rather have loved and lost, than to have never loved at all. The participants speak of connection, opportunity, adversity, and the difficulties that may be faced, however, through their photos, they show their hopes and desires for the future. The photos that

were provided by the participants link their lived experiences, to their real word viewpoints present day on how they see this area in their live now.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the three major themes that emerged from the research study and their implications, as well as provide further discussion on the results. The areas for positive social change, recommendations for future research and final thoughts will also be discussed in this final chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

I designed this study on Black adult children of divorce and their perceptions on love, marriage, and intimate partner relationships to gain further insight into a phenomenon that had been underresearched in this population and to provide a deeper look into the lived experiences of the individuals in this specific demographic. This phenomenological study was conducted using semiguided interview questions, which generated conversation and allowed for participants to each have an open and free-flowing dialogue. In this chapter, I discuss the research questions and the information gathered as well as provide an interpretation of the meaning and significance of the data and its impact on social change. This section also includes the calls to action that I have posed and my recommendations for future research. I close with final thoughts and my experience conducting this study.

Interpretation of Findings

As previously discussed in Chapter 2, Black adult children of divorce are an understudied and underrepresented population within society (Greenwood, 2014; Ricketts, 2015). In this study, I aimed to find meaning in the lived experiences of Black adult children of divorce and to bring increased awareness of this population as well as provide insight to society as a whole. There is a dearth of research surrounding the adult children of divorce, but no research that focused on race (Greenwood, 2014; Ricketts, 2015). The goal of this study was to explore: (a) the relational experiences and family dynamics of Black adult children of divorce, (b) the uncertainty that may be experienced

postdivorce, (c) later-in-life effects of divorce, and (d) relationships between parents and their adult children postdivorce. I wanted to understand whether Black adult children of divorce felt any differently regarding love and marriage or thought that it carried over into their intimate partner relationships. The findings of this study successfully answered these questions and provided further insight and knowledge into an area that was previously not addressed in the literature.

Changes in Relationships

As discussed in Chapter 2, the relationship that is formed between parents and their children prior to a divorce has an even stronger impact on their relationship postdivorce (Kalmijin, 2015). In this study, participants spoke to having a primary parent, the parent that they are closest with and have a closer connection and bond to postdivorce. All of the participants spoke to being closer to their primary parent as they were growing up. As one participant mentioned, once the divorce was finalized, she felt that she was given a *permission slip* to separate from having a relationship with her father. Kalmijin (2015) concluded that fathers who are not engaged with their children prior to divorce and those who move on to other relationships soon after their divorce have strained relationships with their children. I found it interesting that Jappens and Van Bavel's findings (2015), which discussed grandparents playing a crucial role in the lives of children after their parents' divorce, were not true of the participants in the current study. None of them mentioned a grandparent being a support for them through their parents' divorce.

Independence and Adulthood

Cohen et al. (2014) and Kalmijn (2015) stated that the adult children of divorce are impacted during their adjustment periods of becoming independent adults, and this was observed in the current study as well. Abetz and Wang (2017) discussed how there are different roles and responsibilities that the children of divorced parents have to assume, which delays their own development. The participants in the current study were impacted in various ways, as discussed previously, but all of them had a delay or struggle within their first few years of adulthood that they attributed to the major life event of their parents divorcing. Connel et al. (2015) discussed how there is not enough extant research on all of the impacts that first year college students face after they have experienced the divorce of their parents. Participants in the current study described that they had to grow up faster and that new expectations and demands were placed on them after their parents divorced. Some of the participants described it as being *parentified* in that they had to become the parents for their parents. The participants also described that this was a struggle for them because they were not able to gain their own independence and emerge into adulthood like their peers because of the baggage from their home lives.

Mental and Emotional Well-Being

The aim of this study was to increase scholarly understanding of the lived experiences of Black adult children of divorce. The participants spent a great deal of time in the interviews discussing the emotional and mental health impacts, the family dynamics that changed, and their role in managing their new lives. All of the participants mentioned that they had to care for their parents in some way after their divorce and that

they also had to assume responsibility for their siblings. Participants described this experience as being a burden, making them feel like they had taken on too much. Participants spoke to trying to navigate their own adult lives with school, housing, social networks, etc. and still feeling responsible for events occurring back at home with their siblings and their parents. The findings of this study confirmed previous research that spoke to stressors that adult children of divorce experience, the new roles they must rise to, and the impacts on their own mental health and well-being (Shimkowski & Ledbetter, 2018). Participants stated that they had to become their parents' *sounding board* and emotional support. Mermitz et al. (2016) discussed the long-term mental health impacts that are faced by children who experience their parents' divorce. One participant described how she used to be the one to go to her mother for support and advice; after the divorce, that role changed, and she was the one her mother was coming to for the same support from her. The participants indicated that they did not know how to deal with the changes that they were facing and described it having an impact on their own mental health and well-being.

Societal Viewpoints on Divorce

One of the interesting findings in the study was that all the participants indicated that they did not feel any social impacts from their parents' divorce, which is what previous researchers had alluded to. Participants stated that they did not experience any negative consequences within their peer groups and described a phenomenon of being more accepted than when their parents were still married. Participants reported that within the Black community, marriage and two-parent households are already rare, so

most of those in their peer group only had one-parent households growing up. Belavadi (2017) wrote that there can be some uncertainty as to where you belong in a group, and based on your characteristics, there can be additional uncertainty as to which groups you socially belong to. Participants described that within their peer group, after their parents divorced, they felt as if their peers accepted them more and felt that because they were like them now and did not have an intact family unit, they were more accepted or that they became part of the group.

Another interesting finding in the study that aligned with the existing research was that adult children of divorce share similar impacts, feelings, and responses to their parents' divorce as younger children who experience the divorce of their parents. Society has the perception that because these are adults who are experiencing the dissolution of their parents' marriage that they should somehow be able to handle and process the experience in a way that does not impact them (Abez & Wang, 2017). Ricketts (2015) explored how society views adult children of divorce and found that society believed that because they are adults, the impact of their parents' divorce is less impactful, which has proven not to be accurate. In this study, I found this assertion to not to be true as well. The adult children of divorce that participated in this study all shared similar thoughts of abandonment, fear, uncertainty, anger, and being overwhelmed, just the same as younger children who experience parental divorce.

Familial Relations and Dynamics

Participants also described how they felt the most impacted within their extended families. Participants reported having to explain to family members why their parents

divorced and having to pick sides within the family. Greenwood (2014) spoke to these negative consequences—some of them similar to the ones suffered by the participants in this study—regarding having to choose between parents and attending events with separate sides of the family due to discord. Participants described this as being an ongoing issue within their family dynamics and having to separate family events from their maternal and paternal family units.

One of the gaps in the literature that was discussed in Chapter 2 and pointed out by Ricketts (2015) was the longer-term effects on adult children of divorce. The participants in the current study stated that they felt their family was ruined. Participants described needing to begin therapy to cope with their parents' emotional needs and managing the stress of trying to learn to be an adult themselves while also caring for and being responsible for their parents and siblings. Participants were clear that they feel their parents' divorce had overarching impacts on them; participants with children felt that it was impacting their kids as well. According to Ahrons (2011), the divorce of a parental unit is described as a crisis. The findings in the current study are in line with those of previous research studies and their negative effects on children.

Marriage and Dating

One of the most interesting parts of this study was hearing the participants' viewpoints on marriage, love, and how their experience of their parents' divorce impacted how they saw relationships and marriages. As mentioned previously, over half of the participants are either married or in long-term relationships. The participants all agreed that they had always had a desire to get married, and some say that the event of

their parents divorcing changed that desire for them for a period of time. Participants used words and phrases, such as *confinement* and *loss of independence*, to describe the idea of marriage. Participants spoke of their parents' relationships, and (not surprisingly) the majority did not want to replicate them. However, they did take positives from what they had observed and had an idea of what characteristics to look for in a partner (i.e., traits that they felt were vastly different from their parents), which they felt would give them an advantage and increase the chances of having a successful marriage.

Perceptions on Love, Marriage, and Intimate Partner Relationships

All the participants stated that they wanted to have a successful marriage, and they believed that if their partners had a particular set of qualities, then they could make it work. Participants described clear communication, setting boundaries, not allowing their partner to be abusive, and maintaining their independence as a recipe for success. Of the participants who were married, two of them had experienced a previous divorce but were in their current marriages for over 10 years. One of the participants who was not married became emotional during the questions about finding a spouse and stated that she desired having a husband; however, she did not foresee this occurring. The participant stated that she does not feel that the qualities she is looking for in a spouse exist, and because she has seen how not having these qualities impacted her mother, siblings, and her life, she was not willing to settle for less.

The participants had varying associations with love and how it is shown and experienced. Participants surprisingly mentioned that the way their parents showed love to each other is almost the opposite to how they show love in their lives now. This was

interesting because this is not a form of love that they would have seen growing up; however, they have adopted a new approach within their current marriages and relationships.

Overall, the results of the study show that the participants had a positive association with love and marriage and that the divorce of their parents did not sway them from continuing to strive to find a spouse and have a healthy relationship of their own.

Limitations of the Study

As with any research study, there are limitations that must be taken into consideration when understanding the research findings and interpreting the data of this study. The first limitation was the demographics of the participants. All participants selected for this study were Black adults over the age of 18 years old that lived in the same state in the South, though they may have come from other parts of the United States. The geographical location of the study was a limitation because the findings from this study may not apply to groups outside of this geographical location. Another limitation was the number of participants. By incorporating participants from larger geographical regions, the sample population would have been larger and provided more conclusive information on the viewpoints and experiences of Black adult children of divorce. Another limitation was the sex of participants; this study consisted of only females because I was unable to recruit male participants, and this might have influenced the findings of the study.

Recommendations

Though this study brought further insight and shed light on an under-researched population, there are still further research topics than can stem from this work or seek to address the limitations in this study. One of the first limitations is the small geographical area that participants were selected from. By broadening the scope of the research study to a geographical region such as the North or West Coast, there is an opportunity for different experiences and outcomes to emerge. I was not able to find any males who were willing to participate. Because of this, it would be recommended to have a study that specifically focused on the experience of men whose parents divorced after the age of eighteen. Another recommendation would be to look at the impact of sibling relationships later in life. All participants in this study spoke about having to assume responsibility for their siblings. By adding this aspect in a future study on divorce, family relations or dynamics may bring further insight. Lastly, this study specifically looked at Black adult children of divorce; for future research, incorporating comparisons and differences on experiences based on ethnic groups may also be beneficial to see if there are similar experiences or if culturally, they are vastly different.

From a call to action standpoint, it is recommended that Colleges and Universities take an increased interest in this population by becoming more aware of the experiences their students are having, not just for Black students, but for all students who are experiencing a family separation or divorce. This could include holding forums on campus, book clubs, and small groups to bring students together and raise awareness. The research is quite clear that the dissolution of a family system is detrimental; no matter at

what age, providing supports within the university and school setting may provide a safe space for individuals to process their experience during this life change, so they can have support through this adjustment (Amato, 2001; Babalis et al., 2014; Connel et al., 2013). Some ideas for how these assistance programs could be implemented could include bringing awareness to mental health services available on campus, having support groups established for students with their peers, or having programs or resources on campus to help students with money management, time management, and distress tolerance. Also, providing parents who have children going to college, or even just graduating, to understand the life changes that their child is about to face as they are becoming an adult and helping parents to recognize these difficulties that their child is about to face and how they can be supportive, without putting additional stressors onto them. Any services and supports that can be added to support and provide guidance to this population would be beneficial in any capacity. In future studies, having a focus group and individual interviews would also add another vantage point versus just the individual interviews which may be more impactful and dynamic.

Implications

Positive social change that can come from this study can occur on social, professional, or educational levels. First, as a society, we need to change the expectations for marriage and its longevity. Marriage perceptions are outdated and not presented in a realistic or attainable format. According to Miller (2013), divorce rates are at the highest they have been in history. Disney movies and cartoons that are shown to young children contribute a perception that marriages are the pinnacle of happiness and full of positive

outcomes and experiences. Unfortunately, marriage rates are not increasing, and instead are decreasing (Miller, 2013). Providing accurate representations of what love and marriage look like to younger children as they are developing can alleviate some of the emotional and behavioral health concerns that they are facing due to the demise of their parents relationships; with marriage rates on the decline (Brooks, 2015). Developing realistic expectations in children surrounding marriage and divorce may reduce several areas of negative consequences that Greenwood (2014) and Ricketts (2015) speak of such as lifelong mental health concerns (including anxiety and isolation), higher levels of stress, detachment from the nuclear family, and a decrease in close bonds with parents. Developing realistic expectations may involve discussing the struggles that come in relationships, teaching healthy relationships and appropriate boundaries, demonstrating healthy conflict resolution and proper mate selection. These lessons would expose children to multiple vantage points of relationships and what is needed to make them work and be successful. These lessons can be provided to parents for them to teach their children, or the materials can be added to curriculum in schools to address this topic.

From a professional standpoint, the opportunity for social change is also immense. Within the therapeutic profession (including pastors) assisting couples who are experiencing the demise of their relationship, should also include family therapy and individual therapy for their children when couples come in from pre-divorce therapy and marital counseling. Currently, couples can seek therapy services without including their children and extended family, however, when a couple decides to divorce, the entire family should be supported and brought into the therapeutic space to prepare properly for

this change that affects them all. Therapists can cover topics such as managing your own mental and emotional stability, understanding roles and boundaries between parents and children post-divorce, and also assisting parents with coping and interacting with all of their children in a healthy way to prevent the parentification that was experienced by many. Those who work with premarital couples in a secular setting, could also begin helping couples prepare for troubles in their relationship and providing resources and communication skills to the couple before they engage in marriage.

From an educational standpoint, the social change can include the curriculum and awareness that is taught in schools. School is designed to prepare students for the future in a variety of different subjects. Relationships and mate selection are not topics that have previously been covered and would benefit students. Helping children from an early age to learn what healthy relationships look like and consist of characteristics to look for in mate selection and dealing with conflict in relationships, are all skills that youth can take with them into adulthood that would have significant impacts. These themes could be added to their Health or Lifeskills courses with this added curriculum, in order for these topics to be addressed across their educational journey.

Conclusions

Overall, in this study, I aimed to gain further insight on Black adult children of divorce and their perceptions on love, marriage, and intimate partner relationships. As the researcher, I feel that the goal of this study was accomplished. Further insights have been presented, deeper understanding has been gained, and a gap that was in the literature has been provided with more information on the topic. My experience in conducting this

study caused for self-reflection and was therapeutic in a way as well. One major takeaway from the study is understanding that though experiences are similar, no two stories are the same, and by generalizing the results of this study to other individuals, it does not provide a clear story and takes away from their personal experience. The participants in this study were willing to share their story and relive some painful feelings that they experienced as their parents' marriage was ending. It showed the power of perseverance, will to thrive and how negative situations can have positive outcomes as well.

Throughout this dissertation, I have discussed several topics as it pertains to Black adult children of divorce and their perceptions on love, marriage, and intimate partner relationships. In Chapter 1, I discussed the statement of the problem and purpose of this study, along with the significance to practice, theory, and social change. I discussed the need for further research, background information as it pertains to relationships and dynamics within Black culture, and lastly the need for increased knowledge within this population. Previous research was then presented in Chapter 2, during the literature review, along with the theoretical foundation that guided the study and methodology. I outlined why the specific methodology was selected to ground the study and how these were tied together based on previous research studies. Chapter 3 then discussed the research methods, research design, rationale, and coding procedures that were utilized. Finally, in Chapter 4, the results of the study were presented and the impact that Adult children of divorce conveyed through their interviews. I described how the study was conducted, the participants interview and outcomes from their interviews. Finally, in

Chapter 5 I have provided a summary of findings, recommendations for future studies and social change opportunities.

The lived experiences of Black adult children of divorce and their perceptions on love, marriage and intimate partner relationships are significant and impactful to this demographic. From the research that was conducted, it appears that there are not only a number of residual consequences from children of divorce, but also systematic changes within the individual and their family dynamics. Throughout this study, understanding the perceptions of adult children of divorce, was a focal point, and in the conclusion of the results, it is interesting that adult children of divorce, have faced a number of similar side effects of their parents' divorce, compared to younger children. The notion that adults of divorce will cope and deal with their parents' divorce in a different way, has been shown to be inaccurate in this study. The participants shared how they have dealt with the divorce and how it has impacted their lives. Participants still share the hope and desire to marry and find love, post their experiences.

I hope that this study brings awareness, understanding, and insight in order to change the lived experiences for those adult children that come behind us, so that they may have a different experience than those that have been discussed in this study. The aim is to provide insight, awareness, and hopefully provide comfort to those Black adult children of divorce who have experienced their parents' divorce.

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