

## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

S. Greg Thompson

The Graduate School

University of Kentucky

2009

PROMISES WE HAVE KEPT:  
USING GROUNDED THEORY METHODOLOGY TO UNDERSTAND  
DEVELOPMENTAL FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO CAUCASIAN LOW-  
INCOME PARENTS' POSITIVE ASSESSMENT OF MARITAL HEALTH

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
College of Agriculture  
at the University of Kentucky

By  
S. Greg Thompson

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Donna R. Smith, Associate Professor of Family Studies

Lexington, Kentucky

2009

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### PROMISES WE HAVE KEPT: USING GROUNDED THEORY METHODOLOGY TO UNDERSTAND DEVELOPMENTAL FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO CAUCASIAN LOW- INCOME PARENTS' POSITIVE ASSESSMENT OF MARITAL HEALTH

Low-income Caucasian married parents described lifespan processes and conditions that contributed to their individual assessments that their marriage was healthy. Spouses participated in an interview together, followed later by an individual interview with each. Interview scripts referenced the study's primary research questions which sought their reflections on (a) external conditions that they considered to be important to their development, and (b) personal thoughts, emotions and behaviors they deemed relevant to the success of their marriage. A third research question called for integration of participants' reflections into a cogent grounded theory regarding successful low-income marriages. Analysis incorporated grounded theory methods, and those procedures were assisted by computer software such as NVIVO 7.0 ® and Microsoft Excel ®. This work revealed a developmental systems theoretical framework that posits that individuals' developmental factors gave rise to certain personal *actual* qualities, and also had affect upon the qualities individuals *desired* and *perceived* in their partner. Qualities desired and perceived in their partner may have greater or lesser priority to a spouse depending upon the *range of acceptable variance* that the spouse assigns to any given quality. While several high-priority qualities emerged from the words of the twenty spouses who participated, four high-priority qualities emerged as fundamental to the success of the marriage: (a) being loving, (b) being committed, (c) being appreciative, and (d) being child-centered. Four abstract sets of developmental factors, assigned the term *synergists*, strongly promoted these qualities among study participants: (a) a sensitizing experience, (b) a partner-as-rescuer mindset (PARM) preceded by a person's adverse history, (c) influences from one or more parents, and (d) religious influences. These findings provide a foundation of information critical to those researchers and practitioners interested in the quest toward an increase in successful marriages among households whose income falls within 200% of the published guideline for poverty as determined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

KEYWORDS: Marriage, Low-Income, Human Development, Grounded Theory  
Methods, Positive Psychology

S. Greg Thompson

April 25, 2009

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## DEDICATION

I am blessed to be one of those fortunate people whose parents have taken so seriously their job of being parents—who cared enough in my childhood to support me and to discipline me, and who have made countless personal sacrifices, some of them extraordinary, throughout the course of my life in order to convey to me the fullest and most meaningful existence possible. While those words bring to mind some specific private reflections, I am simultaneously convicted that I likely do not know even half of what they have done on my behalf; and further, am moved by the spiritual implication of that probability. Taking a page from this research document, I am grateful to them for being loving, for being committed, for being appreciative and for being child-centered, and I am grateful that they have had those qualities for 53 years and counting. With that preface, I dedicate this document and all of the time and effort spent in the research that resulted in its creation to Joe and Virginia Thompson.

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In addition to those with whom I shared a professional connection to this work, there are a number of people who assisted in promotion of the study, helped with certain administrative tasks such as transcription, or who simply provided good advice. Those included several associates from Bluegrass Healthy Marriages Partnership, colleagues from the Kentucky Healthy Marriage Initiative, participants in the Commonwealth Marriage Initiative Task Force, staff of the Office of Public Relations and the Upward Bound program at Berea College, members of the Madison County (KY) Chapter of the NAACP, and several individuals who are friends and former students: Jamie Miller, Hope Bullock, Lolita Sengupta, Rae Ann Johnson, Dan Deal, Judy van de Venne, Paul Huber, Kerri Ashurst, and Linda Trollinger. Last but by no means least, my parents, my wife Tess, and my son Paulo have all offered support when and however it was needed. I genuinely cannot thank them enough.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

#### *Background*

The state of marriage and its potential for acting as an effective lever to address social concerns like poverty and child well-being has been at the center of public policy discussions for more than a decade (Graefe & Licher, 2008; Huston & Melz, 2004; McLaughlin & Richter, 1997). Federal legislation passed during the Clinton administration established welfare reforms mainly intended to limit perpetual use of public assistance by individuals for support, and to constrain otherwise healthy individuals to enter the labor force (Graefe & Licher, 2008; Ryan, 1998). Embedded within those reforms was an explicit allowance for states to encourage marriage among low-income populations using welfare funding, or what became known as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funding (Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing & Social Indicators Survey Center, 2003; Seefeldt & Smock, 2004). This element of welfare reform sought to reverse the marriage-eroding trends that proponents traced back to unintended consequences of the original welfare legislation—the premise being that it encouraged couples to not marry by providing a financial incentive to unemployed unmarried men and women who had children. In 1998, Oklahoma became the first state to incorporate the marriage-strengthening element into their overall TANF funding strategy, and their Oklahoma Marriage Initiative has continued to receive support by both Democratic and Republican governors since that time. TANF was reauthorized by Congress in February 2006, and as part of that package, \$500 million was redirected from programs that were deemed unproductive toward grants

to governmental and non-profit institutions for marriage strengthening (PR Newswire, 2006). Many, though not all, of these grants were awarded based on the grantee's design of programs directed to benefit low-income individuals, couples, and families.

*Low-income* is not an official designation, but rather is a socioeconomic strata typically considered in research literature to represent 200% or less of the published poverty guideline set each year by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). At the time this study launched in 2006, a family of three constituted a low-income household if their combined annual income totaled \$33,200 or less; for each additional child in the family, that figure grew by about \$6,800 (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2007). Slightly less than two out of ten married women lived in low-income U.S. households in 2005 (Fein, 2004).

The reliance upon marriage strengthening as a prominent component of TANF was buoyed by a consensus of family science research that said, on average, child well-being factors are improved – including a decrease in the likelihood of family poverty – when a child's own biological parents are able to maintain a marriage that is not characterized by high conflict (Amato, Loomis & Booth, 1995; Huston & Melz, 2004; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Moore et al., 2004; Seltzer, 1994; Waite and Gallagher, 2000; Wilcox et al. 2006). Thus, it is reasoned, government's efforts to strengthen marriage ought to yield better conditions for children. It has been asserted that the benefits to these children in terms of outcomes are rooted more basically in their biological parents' capacity to commit sufficient time, money, and affection to their development, as opposed to the time, money, and affection that parents in other family structures typically are able to afford (Coleman, 1988; Gibson-Davis, 2008; McLaughlin

& Richter, 1997).

The relationship between marriage and improved family economic status is well documented. A 2008 summary of recent research literature regarding poverty in the U.S. noted that individuals' employment, education, and marital status are strongly correlated with individuals' capacity to avoid poverty, exit poverty, and limit the duration of periods spent in poverty (Cellini, McKernan, & Ratcliffe, 2008). Rector, Johnson, Fagan and Noyes (2003) calculated that, among unmarried couples having a child, for every 10% increase in the marriage rate for those single mothers, poverty for them and their children would be reduced, on average, by 7%. Furthermore, marriage appears to be a plausible option for many low-income couples. In the course of conducting the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, researchers at Princeton and Columbia have estimated that one third of unmarried parents are viable candidates for marriage, with no serious financial or mental health obstacles to prevent them from being married if they decided to do so (Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing & Social Indicators Survey Center, 2003). It is important in any discussion pertaining to family economic status to recognize that the circumstance is often dynamic instead of static; that is, for a significant number of households, their incomes will rise and fall in dramatic ways owing to changes in health, education, employment status, family structure, and so forth. About half of all families experiencing poverty will endure that condition for one year or less, and about three-quarters will emerge out of poverty within four years (Cellini et al.).

Reaction by other family scholars to these developments has been considerable—particularly to TANF developments, but more broadly to how marriage in the United States has changed and is changing. The National Council on Family Relations placed the

topic of marriage at the center of its 2003 conference by giving it the theme, *What is the Future of Marriage?* At that gathering, keynote speaker Andrew Cherlin (2004) asserted that marriage may or may not be destined for a reduced role in American society, but that it most certainly appears to be destined for a different, what he called *deinstitutionalized*, role. By this, he sought to convey that the societal norms that had undergirded marriages of the early 1900s in America have eroded, and as such, that marriage cannot be defined in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a societal *institution*. Paul Amato, Chairperson for the conference, later gave support to Cherlin's conclusion, and said that marriage today is more accurately defined as "companionate" (p. 960) marriage, wherein the marriage contract of today is held together almost exclusively by the prospect of being "soulmates, sources of deep personal fulfillment, and facilitators of personal growth" (Amato, 2004, p. 961). Later, Amato amended those thoughts, and in his most recent book, *Alone Together* (2007), he made the case that the term that best fits the most contemporary conception of marriage is "individualistic marriage" (p. 16).

Other scholars weighed in with their contributions to the October 2004 issue of *Journal of Marriage and Family*, which also followed the theme of the future of marriage in the U.S. Huston and Melz (2004) voiced concern about the policy makers who had led the effort to strengthen marriages through projects funded by TANF legislation. They contended that there had been a failure to comprehend the ecological complexity of the problem of children living in households with insufficient economic resources. Among those concerns, Huston and Melz listed needs for greater economic development, education, job training, drug rehabilitation, and access to reproductive health services. They added that funding earmarked in TANF reauthorization legislation—at the time,

\$1.2 billion over a five-year period was being considered (Parke, 2004)—was insufficient to achieve the goal of healthy, stable marriages for the sake of children.

In the four years since that time, TANF reauthorization has occurred, and as mentioned previously, \$500 million has been allocated toward the creation and implementation of literally hundreds of community marriage initiatives across the nation. Ordinarily, these initiatives feature couples and relationship education as a centerpiece of their work, and vendors/providers of these education programs have attempted to fill every imaginable niche with specially-written curricula. As a result, there are literally dozens upon dozens of programs, featuring everything from programs that coach middle school students about dating, to programs that assist engaged couples in identifying areas of strengths and weaknesses prior to their wedding day, to programs that teach relationship skills particular to a given ethnicity, to programs that are geared toward couples enduring infidelity situations. As a local example, a community action organization in Madison County, Kentucky won a federal award and began in 2007 to provide free to married couples a popular 13-session financial education program that normally costs participating couples about \$200.

Thus, we live at a time when there is heightened activity regarding marriage among those involved in public policy, scholarly and practitioner sectors. Even as the purposes of marriage in the United States appear to be evolving, it is, concurrently a time of unprecedented support for using public funds to mount widespread educational efforts to assist couples in making and keeping the lifelong commitments they make.

#### *Statement of the Problem*

#### *Insufficient Representation of Low-Income Couples in Healthy Marriage Research*

There has been a general concern among family social scientists that this taxpayer-supported pursuit of more “healthy” marriages among the low-income segment of the U.S. population lacks a solid foundation of research beneath it (Karney & Bradbury, 2005). That is, the vast majority of research conducted and now cited in support of healthy marriage was not performed with subjects representative of those living in the lower socioeconomic strata, but rather with subjects who mostly do not share the same daily economic constraints.

The existing evidence has been limited in two main ways. First, research on marital interaction and premarital education programs has addressed primarily white, college-educated, middle-class samples. In terms of their risk of experiencing marital dysfunction, the support available to them, and the demands they face outside of marriage, such samples differ greatly from the low-income populations of interest to policymakers. It remains an open question whether programs developed within middle-class populations can be effective for improving the marriages of low-income couples. Second. . . [research has been conducted less frequently as to] how marital interactions and relationship processes themselves may vary and develop over time. (pp. 172-173)

Accordingly, there has been a pervasive notion that the proverbial cart has gotten before the horse and that basic research had not been implemented prior to committing funding to the broad implementation of community marriage initiatives. Such research would allow models and tools to be developed or re-conceptualized to fit the low-income population—rendering a better understanding of how relationships are impacted by the enduring personal characteristics of each individual, and understanding of the social and economic environments in which those relationships operate (Fein et al., 2003). Scholars such as Fein, Karney, and Bradbury have made the point that large numbers of low-income individuals may be predisposed to profound difficulty in their intimate relationships due to lower levels of education and higher levels of depression, mental illness, and substance abuse. Edin (2000) concurred, stating that current theories related

to marriage insufficiently apply to women of lower socioeconomic status. Indeed, studies have consistently shown that economic pressure and hardship has a negative effect on marital quality, and upon the resilience of a couple's relationship (Conger, Rueter, & Elder, 1999). There is evidence that husbands' behaviors are especially affected by economic hardship, perhaps because of the responsibility many feel to be the family breadwinner, and a sense of failure in the absence of fulfilling that commonly perceived role (Conger et al., 1990). This economic hardship is reduced and marital resilience is increased when high marital support and effective couple problem solving occurs.

#### *Insufficient Consideration of Healthy Marriages in Research of Low-Income Marriage*

On occasions when scholars have conducted research pertaining to married couples, it has been fairly rare that an asset-based approach is taken. A recent study of African Americans in happy, long-term marriages represents one of those exceptions (Marks, Hopkins, Chaney, Monroe, Nesteruk, & Sasser, 2008). While their approach was an asset-based one, it turned out that participants identified for the study most likely would not qualify as having low-income status since the couples' average household income was roughly \$58,000—which would require couples to have averaged more than 6 children per household. Instead, the average number of children was between 2 and 3.

Two-parent homes made up about 40% of those surveyed using the Family Strength Index in a 2004 study that sought to identify strengths of low-income families (Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, & Williamson, 2004). These families exhibited confidence in their problem solving skills, and in their capacity to pull together in tough times. On the other hand, they often wrestled with communication skills. While informative to the current research, there are important aspects left unaddressed in the article found by the

investigator. Among those were an indication of what family members (husbands, wives, or perhaps even older children) participated in the phone surveys that were the basis of the data collection, and moreover, the number of two-parent homes that were headed by the children's own biological married parents, as opposed to other forms, such as cohabiting parents, or grandparents functioning as primary caregivers. Finally, where the present study is concerned, it would have been advantageous had there been some indication of the degree to which married respondents considered their relationship to be strong; however, that was not the case. Still, the Family Strength Index would appear to be a promising tool for future research that finds its genesis in this current study.

The U.S. Administration for Children and Families commissioned Fein (2004) to compile a thorough analysis of descriptive statistics specific to low-income marriages, with assistance from Paul Amato, a noted scholar in the field. Essentially, Fein provided information on the differences *between* low-income marriages and those of higher income brackets (education and employment level, occurrence of pre-marital birth, relationship quality and stability), as well as the differences *within the population* of low-income marriages with respect to differing ethnicities, types of government support received, and pre-marital cohabiting. There were no references, however, to studies that contrasted *marital quality* within the population of low-income marriage.

In conclusion, the literature to-date on the subset of healthy marriages that are also low-income marriages is relatively thin. And, that of the subset of low-income marriages that appear to be healthy is practically non-existent insofar as this author has been able to ascertain.

#### *Other Basic Areas of Inquiry Ripe for Additional Exploration*

Beyond socioeconomic status, there are other important variables that beg for additional exploration in marriage research. One of those is to continue to build upon Fowers' (2000) theories focused on marital virtues, which are similar in nature to what positive psychology researchers have labeled character strengths (Seligman & Peterson, 2004). Stronger conceptualization and understanding of the greater or lesser significance of different virtues to marital health would provide optimal development of tools and curricula designed to improve marriages. (This area will be more thoroughly considered in the next chapter.)

At the most fundamental level, though, the area where greater scholarly exploration would be most valuable arguably is the need posited in the current study—to implement basic research that serves to engineer theory that provides foundation for other researchers' and practitioners' work. One notable example of such an effort, though it was a summary of research and not a project unto itself, sought to provide a common theoretical basis for the term *healthy marriage*. In 2004, scholars associated with Child Trends determined that they would review and analyze approximately 50 journal articles pertaining in some way to marital strengths (Moore et al., 2004). The five-component model that emerged from their study asserts that, for any given couple, there is a *background* into which both individuals are born (i.e., family and social context), possible *antecedents* to a healthy marriage characterized by decisions within some degree of an individual's control, and all of which contribute to ten *characteristics* of healthy marriages that they gleaned from the literature. These include: (a) commitment of the couple, (b) satisfaction, (c) communication, (d) conflict resolution, (e) lack of domestic violence (f) fidelity (understood as sexual), (g) interaction and time together, (h) intimacy

and emotional support, (i) commitment to the children, and (j) duration and legality of marital status. These characteristics, in turn, are linked to certain *outcomes* with regard to the adults' well-being, as well as their children's. It is the principal investigator's understanding, as a result of personal correspondence with Moore et al., that their team has began to develop a healthy marriage survey instrument based on this framework, with the intention of establishing a more empirical, objective measurement of healthy marriage. Simultaneously, their work has provided a conceptual framework for the research of others, albeit in a very specific, defined way (discussed later in the chapter on Methods) with regard to the present research.

### *Summary*

The Child Trends project effectively brings this discussion full circle, simultaneously demonstrating how the construction of a model has multiple benefits, and concurrently lending support to Karney and Bradbury's contention that marriage research often under-represents low-income marriages. Of the 52 references conveyed in the research brief that explains the framework, only three (Edin, 2000; McLanahan, Garfinkel, & Mincy, 2001; Horn, 2003) had specific reference to low-income marriages. Studies that have looked at low-income marriage routinely have done so from a perspective of identifying demographic characteristics or relationship obstacles, and thus have been limited or silent in shedding additional light on those marriages that would be considered healthy. There is, therefore, an important gap in the knowledge base that could otherwise serve to understand characteristics of low-income healthy marriage and the context within which it evolved and exists, for the purposes of better-informed public policy development, educational curricula development, and future family social science

research.

### *Purpose, Salience and Use of Theory*

#### *Purpose*

Given these conditions, this study was constructed to increase knowledge about low-income marriages, and more specifically, those that both spouses consider to be *healthy*. The current study is inspired by a pioneering ethnographic study performed by Edin and Kafalas (2005) to intensely and empirically explore the backgrounds, experiences, beliefs, and attitudes of low-income unmarried mothers in urban Philadelphia titled, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Low-Income Women Choose Motherhood before Marriage*. In fact, the title of the current study, *Promises We Have Kept*, purposely was derived from the title of that work because of common characteristics between the two. For example, while Edin and Kafalas sought out unmarried mothers to describe the lifespan mileposts and constants that have contributed to their commitment choices, the current study has sought out low-income parents in healthy marriages to describe the lifespan mileposts and constants that have contributed to their commitment choices. Both studies, in essence, have explored how disadvantaged people arrived at, and now think about, their relationships. Qualitative portraits like these are helpful to arrive at a higher knowledge of the current realities—how people come to make the decisions they make, what outcomes flow from those decisions, and how the ecology of their world influences both their decisions and the outcomes (Rosenblatt & Fischer, 1993).

And so, the purpose of the study has been to identify basic components of low-income healthy marriage, and to conceptualize a model informed by the data as to how those components function and birth the condition of experiencing a low-income healthy

marriage. Thus, the final product is a grounded theory that will serve other family social scientists, practitioners, and policy makers in building a more sophisticated understanding in an area lacking attention. It has accomplished all of this through interviews with low-income parents in marriages that each independently affirmed as a healthy marriage. In these interviews, participants were asked to talk about their backgrounds, antecedents, and qualities of themselves, their spouses, and their relationship, effectively providing a pool of data from which the following three research questions were addressed:

1. As low-income couples describe their marital and life histories, what conditions (backgrounds and antecedents) do they describe as most relevant in helping them create and maintain a healthy marriage?
2. With respect to personal qualities of one or both, what thought processes, emotional states, and behaviors do they describe as most relevant in their marriages being “healthy?”
3. Taking all of the data emanating from questions 1 and 2, what key concepts arise from that data, and how do those key concepts relate to one another in a grounded theory?

#### *Salience*

Fein (2003) attempted to identify basic characteristics of low-income marriage, and encouraged others to follow his work with research centered upon “populations distinguished by characteristics such as family background, education, poverty, and neighborhood environment” (p. viii), all of which will be addressed in this study. He also called for better data collection that (a) reflects on both the male and female spouses, (b) encompasses relationships beyond first marriages, (c) looks at relationship onset and the

entirety of the life course of the individuals, and (d) builds upon a consensus definition of measurement of relationship quality. Congruent with that, those elements have been cornerstones of the current study. Fein hoped for “stronger conceptual frameworks” and “richer measures,” emerging from “theoretically grounded models” (p. x), and of course, the design of this current study is also congruent with those ambitions.

### *Use of Theory*

The current study has applied grounded theory methodology in order to conceive and formulate a grounded theory of low-income healthy marriage (Glaser, 1992). Because the study was, in fact, intended to yield a new theory, its foundations are not pre-determined by any current social science theory or theories. However, the study’s interview scripts, in particular, have been informed by a theoretical framework produced by Moore et al. (2004), which provided categories of initial inquiry, which are *backgrounds, antecedents, and characteristics*. In other words, these categories have given a rational structure to the design of the couples interview guide, which was the first interview conducted. (The guide for the individual spouses’ interviews, i.e., the second interviews, was constructed on a case-by-case basis to maximize insight into important revelations from the first interview.)

### *Definitions of Key Terms*

The following terms are used with some regularity through the course of this manuscript, and are offered in order to assist the reader toward a more precise understanding of scholarly context and intended meanings.

*Antecedents.* Moore et al. defined antecedents essentially as the pre-conditions that are, to some degree, dictated by choices that an individual makes for her or himself

(Kristin A. Moore, personal notes from phone conversation, October 20, 2005), and which affect or influence marriage. Moore et al., referencing the literature at-hand, proposed these antecedents: (a) employment/income, (b) physical health, (c) mental health, (d) stress, (e) social support, (f) social skills, (g) substance use, (h) incarceration, (i) children from a prior relationship, (j) community context, (k) religiosity, and (l) attitudes/values.

*Assessment overlays.* This term is essentially a word picture used to connote the idea that a person (a) desires certain qualities in a lifelong relationship with an intimate partner, (b) that that set of qualities is mentally compared to qualities perceived in another individual, and (c) that for each quality, there is a range of acceptable variance that the person determines. The desired qualities are represented by histogram, with the horizontal axis listing each desired quality, and the vertical axis listing the intensity of that quality. The perceived qualities, likewise, are represented by a similar histogram. With those histograms overlaid on top of each other, similar to how one would display them on a clear sheet on an overhead projector, a third histogram representing the range of intensity that the person is willing to accept (i.e., acceptable variance) lays on top of the other two. Taken together, this is illustrative of how a person assesses marital quality; or, in a premarital situation, how a person assesses the current relationship quality, and makes judgments regarding potential marital quality. To the degree that the person's partner exceeds or fails to meet their minimum standards, a positive or negative assessment of relational congruence is formed, which is one of two parts of the person's assessment of the health of their relationship.

*Axial coding.* Axial coding is the second phase in LaRossa's (2005) triadic

approach to grounded theory methodology. It is characterized by giving intense scrutiny to each category determined in the open coding phase by asking basic questions (e.g., when, where, why) that serve to create subcategories—envisioned as spokes around a hub.

*Backgrounds.* In the same personal conversation with Moore, she established that background is intended to connote the (a) social and (b) family context into which a person is born, and therefore, has no power to modify.

*Category.* In grounded theory methodology, a category is a label given to a group of concepts related through some property or dimension. LaRossa (2005) uses the term *variable* interchangeably with category.

*Concept.* In grounded theory methodology, a concept is a label given to a group of related indicators.

*Characteristics of healthy marriage.* A characteristic is any of “the elements that help to define a healthy marriage” (Moore et al., 2004, p. 3). The ten characteristics of healthy marriage they cited were: (a) commitment of the couple, (b) satisfaction, (c) communication, (d) conflict resolution, (e) lack of domestic violence, (f) fidelity, (g) interaction/time together, (h) intimacy/emotional support, (i) commitment to the children, and (j) duration/legal marital status. Each of these elements were identified as specific areas that previous studies had affirmed as indicators of the degree to which a marriage is healthy. (See also *Healthy Marriage* and *Qualities*.)

*Developmental factors.* For the purposes of this study, the term developmental factors is defined as the variables that contribute to an experience at a given point in time, all of which are categorized as either biological conditions, environmental contexts,

intrapersonal operations, and self-determination. The aggregate of developmental factors (and thus experiences as well) over a period of time portrays a given person's development over that period.

*Focal category.* In grounded theory methodology, a focal category is discovered through trial-and-error. The researcher attempts to place each category at the center of the other categories, and in so doing seeks to determine whether a given category works in some way as a bridge of understanding to all of the concepts.

*Healthy marriage.* Defining healthy marriage was the central purpose of the research brief by Moore et al. (2004). They wrote that healthy marriage is not binary, but rather, that the health of a couple's marriage will vary, and will do so over time. They also said, quite consistently with the present study, that an evaluation of the health of a couple's marriage must be sensitive to the context and issues they face. And lastly, their concept of healthy marriage is that it is not a matter of fate, but rather, that healthy marriage can be developed as couples participate in educational activities designed to for that purpose.

*Indicator.* In grounded theory methodology, an indicator is the smallest element of analysis—normally a word, phrase, or sentence that the interviewee spoke. Related indicators are grouped together as a concept.

*Low-income marriage.* When a couple's income is 200% or less of the poverty threshold, which is a dollar amount determined annually by the federal government, theirs is classified as a low-income marriage in scholarly literature (Ooms & Wilson, 2004).

*Marital virtues.* Marital virtues are character strengths that are thought to be

implicit within the individuals that maintain a healthy marriage. Hawkins, Fowers, Carroll, and Yang (2006) have posited these nine as those that appear to be most salient according to their research: (a) others-centeredness, (b) generosity, (c) admiration, (d) teamwork, (e) shared vision, (f) loyalty, (g) courage, (h) maturity, and (i) goodwill. (see also *Qualities*.)

*Open coding.* Open coding represents the initial phase in performing grounded theory methodology. Essentially, open coding is the process of identifying the key words, phrases, or sentences (i.e., indicators) in a given transcript, ascertaining how those may be most reasonably grouped together into concepts, and then seeking linkages between concepts to form categories, also known as variables.

*Outcomes.* Moore et al. (2004) used this term consequences interchangeably with outcomes. These are measurements of adult and child well-being that are correlated either positively or negatively with a healthy marriage. Under adult well-being consequences, they listed (a) employment, income, and wealth; (b) physical health/mortality; (c) mental health; (d) social support, (e) satisfaction and happiness; (f) risk-taking, substance abuse, and illegal activities; (g) parenting; (h) religiosity; and, (i) attitudes/values. They also listed these as child well-being outcomes associated with healthy marriage: (a) socioemotional outcomes, (b) cognitive attainment and educational achievement, (c) health and safety, (d) attitudes/values towards marriage and child-bearing, (e) dating behavior, (f) sexual activity, (g) relationship skills, and (h) marital stability of offspring in adulthood.

*Personal integrity.* One of the two basic types of assessment that a given spouse considers in contemplating the health of their marriage, with the other being relational

congruence. Personal integrity is a matter of a spouse recognizing the qualities that their partner perceives in them, and reaching conclusions about the degree to which the partner's perceptions are accurate. Within the model, it is represented by the dotted double arrows that span between a spouse's actual qualities and their partner's assessment overlays. Essentially, the idea is that, for instance, the husband is endowed with actual qualities that he compares to the wife's desired and perceived qualities, and based on that, the husband arrives at a partial assessment of the health of his marriage; and, of course, the same is as applicable to the wife and her assessment.

*Qualities.* Qualities pertain to any aspect of a person that describes some part of their nature. For instance, a quality may portray an aspect of their character, such as being patient or being fair. Alternatively, a quality may portray some factual state of being, such as that a person does not abuse their partner or that they speak with a loud voice. The former are congruent with the concept of marital virtues as set forth by Fowers (2000), while the latter are just as likely to be congruent with the concept of characteristics of healthy marriage as reported by Moore et al. (2004). Additionally, three types of qualities are examined by the current study: (a) *actual* qualities, (b) *perceived* qualities, and (c) *desired* qualities. A given quality may be an actual one, which means that it is a fairly accurate descriptor of a person according to their own words and those of others. When a quality is perceived, it may or may not be fairly accurate, but it is nonetheless understood to be accurate by an observer of the person. And finally, when an observer desires a certain quality in another person, it represents the establishment of a mental, and possibly spoken, expectation that the observer has set. Observers go beyond merely naming desired qualities to establishing an ideal intensity that is desired. For

instance, a person may desire someone who is affectionate, and beyond that, they have a sense of how much affection is too little and how much is too much. If the observer's desired minimum and maximum levels of affection is relatively broad, this suggests that the quality is less of a priority. The converse is that if the observer's minimum and maximum levels of affection are relatively constricted, the quality maintains a higher priority. Analysis for the current study focused most strongly on high-priority qualities.

*Range of acceptable variance.* Ordinarily, the intensity of a given quality that an observer *desires* is somewhat different from the intensity they *perceive* in their partner or potential partner. Theoretically, some number could reflect that difference. Whether an observer is willing to participate in the relationship's progress is dependent upon whether that difference falls between the minimum and maximum difference that the observer has determined they will allow. Imagine, for example, an observer who enjoys the company of a potential partner, except that the potential partner smokes tobacco. The observer may have a very narrow range of acceptable variance that says they refuse to enter a relationship with someone who smokes. They may have a less narrow range of acceptable variance that says they strongly prefer someone who does not smoke but that they will consider someone who has promised to quit within a short time after they begin dating. Or, they may have an even less narrow range of acceptable variance wherein they establish that they will date a smoker as long as the smoker does not do so when in their company. In any of these cases, there are criteria that establish the desired quality's ideal, a proximity of the perceived intensity compared to that ideal, and a minimum and maximum proximity that the observer is willing to allow. The minimum and maximum proximity, then, is synonymous with the range of acceptable variance.

*Relational congruence.* It is the second of two basic types of assessment that a given spouse considers in contemplating the health of their marriage, with the other being personal integrity. Relational congruence is conceptualized as the degree to which the spouse perceives their partner as meeting all of the qualities that they desire within the assorted ranges of acceptable variance for each quality. Within the model, it is represented by the same dotted double arrow as personal integrity, but begins with the wife, for example, observing her husband who is endowed with certain actual qualities, perceiving those qualities (whether accurately or inaccurately), comparing those perceptions to the qualities she desires and her range of acceptable variance for each, and then reaching conclusions about the health of her marriage.

*Selective coding.* Selective coding is the third and final phase of grounded theory methodology. It is in this phase that the grounded theory itself actually emerges following intense analysis of each category and its relationship to the other categories.

*Synergists.* In the course of analyzing qualities, particularly those that were found repeatedly and universally among the spouses involved with the study, the principal investigator sought to consider what developmental factors were connected to the evolution of those qualities. In doing so, the investigator found that participants' words coalesced around four kinds of experiences, or sets of developmental factors, that seemed strongly associated with those qualities: (a) a sensitizing experience, (b) a partner-as-rescuer mindset (PARM) that arose with reference to an earlier extended period of hardship, (c) influences from parents and sometimes grandparents that were overt and recurrent, or *acute*, in nature, and (d) influences from religious sources to which they had had exposure and that they said had a bearing on their development. It would be incorrect

to suggest that, minus a synergist, that the person would not have developed an actual quality or would not have come to desire a particular quality, but rather that the rapidity and intensity of growth of a quality was strongly affected by one or more synergists.

## CHAPTER 2

### Review of Literature

The present study seeks to inform efforts at strengthening low-income marriages by qualitatively researching couples who describe their marriages as healthy. Following a short explanation of the scope of the review of literature for a grounded theory study, this section explores previous research that helps to (a) establish expectations for the recruitment of a sample of low-income healthy marriages, and (b) establish some general areas of inquiry that give guidance to how the interview scripts were constructed. Again, a better understanding of how low-income couples have attained this state of healthy marriage on their own may provide a foundation for future research and future prevention and intervention programs.

#### *Limited by Design: Summarizing the Role of the Literature Review in a Study Using Grounded Theory Methodology*

As demonstrated in the Introduction, a number of scholars (Fein, 2004; Karney & Bradbury, 2005) have appealed to the social science community for research designed to provide conclusions that better inform the quest toward strengthening low-income marriages. Primary research questions have been developed and grounded theory methodology (GTM) has been adopted specifically as one appropriate response to those appeals. Because the study employs GTM, it is generally more appropriate (i.e., than it would be in a quantitative report) to recognize and synthesize any related theories and models from previous studies in the *Discussion* section (Creswell, 2003). Nonetheless, there are two roles intended for this *Review of Literature*, both of which follow this brief explanation of some elements that make GTM unique.

Researchers conducting GTM are expected to approach the data on its own basis, without making presuppositions about where it should or could lead (Charmaz, 2004; Glaser, 1992; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1993). Consistent with that, Charmaz considered it a hallmark of GTM that preconceived concepts and hypotheses do not dictate the units of analysis within a given study (Charmaz). Instead, the units of analysis are to emerge directly and solely from the data. By “units of analysis,” Charmaz is speaking of the most basic and key variables emerging from a study, and is asserting that under GTM, they are a product of the subjects’ words. By contrast, in a quantitative study, units of analysis are ordinarily pre-selected by the investigator, and typically involve ascertaining measurements on variables like marital satisfaction scores, duration of a marriage, or married households’ mean income. Essentially, then, as it pertains to the conceptualization, proposition, execution, and documentation of a research project such as the current one, the purpose of a review of literature is somewhat limited in comparison to other types of research study designs. Creswell (2003) asserted that the proper role of a review of literature for a study that uses an inductive process—as GTM does—is for the review to evolve simultaneously with data collection. The review, then, should be presented within the Discussion chapter, where the study’s results are to be integrated with the literature and interpreted.

Charmaz’ (2004) perspective was congruent, though possibly slightly different, from Creswell’s. She said that the review of literature should produce initial information adequate to identify the broad areas of inquiry that ought to be considered in the script of the qualitative interviewer.

Grounded theorists attempt to use their background assumptions... to sensitize them to look for certain issues and processes in their data... [They] often begin

their studies with certain research interests and a set of general concepts... [or] *points of departure* (Charmaz' emphasis) to look at data, to listen to interviewees, and to think analytically about the data... developing, rather than limiting, their ideas. (p. 501)

In an attempt to conform with this prevailing wisdom from qualitative scholars, then, this review attempts to convey *points of departure* that were considered at the beginning of the study, including information that served (a) to guide the recruitment of study participants, as well as (b) to help delineate areas of inquiry—all, so that the data collection process could be optimally characteristic of the population under study, and relevant with regard to both their low-income and their married status (Creswell, 2003; Dilley, 2000). Compliant with Creswell's instruction, material that is more pertinent to the actual results of the study are contemplated in the Discussion section.

#### *Literature Suggesting Expected Characteristics of Low-Income Married Parents*

A primary tenet of grounded theory design is to obtain a “sampling of different groups to maximize the similarities and the differences of information” (Creswell, 1990, p. 14). To that end, Fein’s (2004) work establishes a number of different groupings that would seem to be appropriate to assembling a robust sample of low-income married parents in healthy marriages: (a) a given couple’s ethnicity, (b) their decision to cohabit (or not) before marriage, (c) the birth of children prior to their marriage, and (d) their work and income circumstances are salient to a study of low-income relationships. Based on these findings, each of these characteristics are examined in this section of the review as a function of understanding what should be typical for most couples who volunteer for the study. Because the current study sought to produce a grounded theory of how low-income Caucasian (aka, Non-Hispanic White) marriages develop, a more intensive discussion of the implications of ethnicity will be conducted in Chapter 5.

### *Ethnicity as a Consideration of Recruiting Subjects*

*Non-Hispanic Whites.* It appears that it is rare that Non-Hispanic Whites have been the intentional population addressed by studies of low-income married couples, since none of the studies reviewed in advance of this current study were designed precisely and exclusively to address Non-Hispanic White marriage. And yet, while that is not the precise or exclusive intention, virtually all studies of marriage and low-income in the United States prominently have collected data from Non-Hispanic Whites (unless, of course, if the study was designed to consider specific non-Caucasian races). Since Non-Hispanic Whites continue to be the nation's most populous race—about 70% according to the 2000 U.S. Census—this should not be surprising. Of all low-income married couples in the United States, Non-Hispanic Whites make up just over half of that population (Fein, 2004). Three out of ten low-income Non-Hispanic White married couples have at least one school-aged (6-17) living at home, and almost half have at least two dependent children. Compared to other ethnicities, it is relatively rare for Non-Hispanic White married couples to reside in an urban area. Instead, just over half live in a suburban locale, and just over one-third live in a rural area.

### *Cohabitation as a Consideration of Recruiting Subjects*

Cohabitation has been less likely to lead to marriage for less educated women than for those who are better educated (Fein, Burstein, Fein, & Lindberg, 2003), even though, many cohabiting females consider marriage to be a personal goal (Lichter, Batson & Brown, 2004). A qualitative study of 37 low-income, cohabiting fathers revealed that those who had become fathers during adolescence were less inclined toward marriage than those who had fathered children at older ages (Forste, 2006). Additionally,

they indicated that while marriage remained a personal goal, that goal was confounded by financial, employment, and parenting concerns (e.g., some indicated specific concern about having sufficient self-control to discipline their child without being abusive).

Whitehead and Popenoe (2001) and Wilson (1996) considered the hesitation by couples to be married and couples' openness to cohabitation to be a natural consequence of weaker societal norms against pre-marital sex, as well as a consequence of a constant, and possibly stronger, concern for economic stability in a mate. This assertion hearkens back to the comments by Cherlin (2004) about marriage's deinstitutionalization, and that, when society no longer expects sex to be conditioned upon marriage, the question of marriage is much more strongly a question of personal trust between two people that they will cooperate together economically. The common theme is that marriage becomes a viable option to cohabiting couples only after they believe they have "enough" money, signified by being able to afford a "real" wedding as well as a checklist of other financial goals (e.g., home ownership, getting out of debt, a certain salary level, or a certain amount of savings), and implicitly, when they experience less conflict as a result of financial stress (Smock, Manning & Porter, 2005).

Marriages preceded by cohabitation appear to have higher disruption rates than other marriages (Lillard, Brien, & Waite, 1995; Teachman, 2003). Should we assume, then, that cohabitation before marriage is a risk factor for eventual divorce? Fein et al. (2003) reported that the research remains unclear. Their examination suggests that studies that have shown lesser marital quality in such marriages have not sufficiently accounted for self-selection biases, and, while other studies that have shown no more propensity to divorce appear more methodologically sound, there are too few of them and need to be

replicated.

Ethnically, cohabitation is different for Non-Hispanic Whites compared with African Americans (Fein et al., 2003). For Whites, it is commonly considered a gateway to marriage. For African Americans, it may be more typically an alternative to single parenting. Fein theorizes that this may be strongly related to the fact that blacks place more emphasis on financial prerequisites for marriage than do whites. Cohabitation is appreciably less common among Hispanics (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1995) who live in the U.S. Only 27% of Hispanic women have ever cohabited, compared to 42% of Non-Hispanic Whites. The implication to the current study is that a history of cohabitation prior to marriage should be somewhat expected among the couples who volunteer for the study, tied somewhat to the degree that wives have attained less education and to the degree that husbands' first children were birthed following adolescence.

*Conception or Birth of Children Prior to Marriage as a Consideration of Recruiting Subjects*

A major finding of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing & Social Indicators Survey Center, 2003) is that almost 75% of unmarried mothers-to-be and 90% of unmarried fathers-to-be indicated an intention to be married to each other, only to find that just 15% of them actually do that by their child's first birthday, and even more of those parents-to-be, 21%, had dissolved their romantic relationship by that point. This is particularly interesting in light of the earlier point that one third of the unmarried fathers would normally be considered to be reasonable prospects for marriage—that is to say, they are employed, are

not involved with substance abuse, do not have a mental illness, nor are they violent toward their partners (Rector, Johnson, Fagan & Noyes, 2003). Further study has revealed that some of the discrepancy is explained by simple overstatement by the respondents, but the largest part is explained by financial and relationship prerequisites to marriage that the couple establishes that often have proven to be too difficult to meet (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005).

Generally, when low-income females have children outside of marriage, they are less likely to marry (Lichter & Graefe, 2001); and when they do marry, they are likely to have spent three years or more as a single parent (Fein et al., 2003), and they are more likely to divorce eventually (Lichter, Batson & Brown, 2004). About half of all low-income married couples are raising children from a previous marriage (Fein et al.), which is consistent with the finding that 43% of unmarried mothers have had children by more than one father (McLanahan et al., 2003). Mincy (2002) reported that having other children outside of the couple's relationship confounds their ability to achieve an acceptable level of marital quality.

The implication to the current study is that, while it should be expected that some number of subjects experienced the birth of their first child together before they married, others who have had children from previous relationships will be less likely to consider themselves as participants in a healthy marriage due to the difficulties inherent with that circumstance.

#### *Work and Income as a Consideration of Recruiting Subjects*

Rogers (2004) found two important conclusions when wives' income is studied with regard to divorce: first, that as a percentage of family income, divorce was least

likely when one spouse or the other contributed more substantially, and more likely when incomes were closer to 50%; and second, that there is a positive linear correlation between wives' income, measured in dollars, and the likelihood of divorce. Using deduction, these findings support a probability that, in low-income healthy marriages, husbands ordinarily should be expected to be the breadwinners by some margin. And concurrently, that also would support the notion that stay-at-home wives are more likely to maintain a marriage resistant to divorce. Nock (2001) contributes to this discussion, having demonstrated that equally-dependent marriages are likely to become increasingly common, and additionally that the divorces that occur from these marriages routinely are spurred by a lack of marital quality as perceived by the wife. Naturally, reduced marital quality sometimes could be associated with marital discord. Rogers' 1999 study of 771 married men and women sought to explain a correlation between marital discord and wives' increased income. Essentially, Rogers posed the question of whether an increase in a wife's income predicts greater marital discord or that greater marital discord predicts an increase in a wife's income. The study concluded that, indeed, marital discord tends to cause wives to pursue increased income, either by virtue of unemployed wives entering the workforce, or employed wives gaining a second job, or wives' becoming more involved with their current job, ostensibly in an effort to limit the time spent at home.

Not surprisingly, too much overtime at work and economic strain at home tend to compromise marital quality (Voydanoff, 2004). Low-income parents typically face more severe work- and income-based barriers to their families' well-being (Dodson & Bravo, 2005). Casual time to interact with family is often lacking because of the number of hours required to attain sufficient income to pay the bills, and reciprocally, the lack of sufficient

income precludes low-income parents from taking time off from work for family emergencies or general caregiving to children or elders.

The implication here is that, overall, recruitment for this study should prove to be challenging because of how economic context may erode low-income spouses' capacity to work together and to endure scarcity of resources, and for those who are employed, scarcity of time as well.

#### *Literature Identifying Potential Areas of Inquiry for Low-Income Married Parents*

Having addressed what is characteristic of the population, it is important also to consider contemporary areas of inquiry that may be particularly relevant to the pursuit of conceptualizing a grounded theory of the development of low-income parents' healthy marriage.

#### *Revised standards and purpose for marriage*

The finding that, according to Edin and Kafalas (2005), lower income individuals overall are less prone to marry may be a consequence of higher standards in Western society for what a marriage should be (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005), and accordingly, reduced faith that they can aspire to a marriage like that. Many social scientists, however, regard these higher standards to be unreasonably high such that, even when poor couples marry, failure to meet lofty, so-called "soul mate" expectations of marriage has resulted in compounding marital discord (Fein, Burstein, Fein & Lindberg, 2003). For the low-income mothers that Edin and Kafalas interviewed, a "real" wedding and marriage is the holy grail of having "made it." "In the worldview of the poor, marriage and class respectability still usually go hand in hand. Thus, for a poor single mother to say she's abandoned the goal of marriage is the equivalent of admitting that she's given

up on her dreams for a better future" (p. 202). By the same token, divorce is the ultimate embarrassment because when it happens, they face the "I told you so's" of all of their family and friends. It is a threat taken very seriously by the poor women with whom Edin and Kafalas spoke, as those women know intimately the behaviors that have destroyed attempts at marriage: infidelity, domestic violence, substance abuse, and criminal activity. Edin and Kafalas concluded that the low-income women of their study considered marriage a luxury—one that they desired, but not at any cost. However, more often than not, they considered motherhood to be a necessity. That essentially is why they choose motherhood before marriage.

There is a compelling argument, then, that the bar for a relationship suitable for marriage been raised, and that, simultaneous to that, the cultural understanding of the purpose of marriage has changed. Gibson-Davis (2005) noted that, in their qualitative study of 47 low-income parents, participants did not conceptualize marriage and childrearing together. "The expectations that couples have of marriage—financial stability and a relatively high degree of relational quality—apply only to matrimony, not to parenthood" (p. 1311). Consistent with Edin and Kafalas, Cherlin (2004) asserted that the practical importance of marriage (e.g., providing an environment for raising children) has decreased, even while the symbolic importance of marriage (e.g., indicating a level of financial success) has increased.

The primary implication of these themes to the current study is that subjects should be asked to describe meanings and expectations they hold for their own marriage, it has been roundly concluded that meanings and expectations regarding marriage have been in a state of evolution.

### *Character strengths*

Should marital *quality* be thought-of as the sum of two spouses' scores on marital *satisfaction*? Some may take that position, which is inherently an individualistic perspective, that says, in order to understand the quality of a marriage, one must conceptualize it as an endeavor of barter exchange between two people—each content for as long as each is *receiving* what they need from the other. Hawkins, Fowers, Carroll, and Yang (2006) counter with the perspective that the quality of a marital relationship is better defined by what each is *giving*. This shift in paradigms conveys a switch from an *individualistic-rewards* model to a *marital virtues* one, wherein the emphasis is less a pursuit toward being happy with one's partner, and more an exercise toward becoming the best person that one can be (Fowers, 2000).

What character strengths are common to marriages that last (which is not necessarily the same as marriages of superior quality)? Lauer and Lauer (1986) studied 351 couples married at least 15 years, and identified friendship, commitment, consensus and humor to be most related to those marriages' endurance. Two years prior, a meta-analysis of studies on enduring marriages had settled upon enjoyment, fulfillment, endurance, tolerance, and perseverance as those aspects most commonly attributed with helping endurance (Sporakowski & Axelson, 1984). The most recent study found in this regard was conducted by Robinson and Blanton (1993) who conducted interviews with 15 couples married for a minimum of 30 years. The results of their work concluded that intimacy, commitment, communication, congruence (in terms of adaptability to each others' interests), and religious faith were most salient. It is important to note that none of these studies gave emphasis to participation by low-income couples' participation. And

again, it should be emphasized that duration may be an indicator of marital quality, but is not its equivalent—that is to say, two people can live together in a low quality marriage for many years if, for instance, there are social or religious barriers that prevent them from considering divorce.

At a broader level, without specific implications to marriage, Peterson and Seligman (2004) have attempted to formalize a process for synthesizing concepts of character strengths and virtues, essentially toward the goal of yielding a useful, scholarly classification system for character strengths. They compared their pursuit to that of the first mental health practitioners and theorists who attempted to construct the initial *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, or what is commonly referred to as the *DSM*. After considering a plethora of writings steeped in the literatures of ethics, philosophy, psychology, theology, and cultural folklore, their work culminated in six general classes of character strengths: (a) Wisdom and Knowledge, defined as “*cognitive* strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge” (p. 29), (b) Courage, defined as “*emotional* strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal” (p. 29), (c) Humanity, defined as “*interpersonal* strengths that involve tending and befriending others” (p. 29), (d) Justice, defined as “*civic* strengths that underlie healthy community life (p. 30), (e) Temperance, defined as *self-regulatory* “strengths that protect against excess” (p. 30), and (f) Transcendence, or *spiritual* “strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning” (p. 30).

Because of its congruence with morality, all of this effort begs the question: Is virtue development a legitimate area for attempting scientific study? Fowers and Tjeltveit

(2003) contend that, not only is it valid, but even foundational:

Social scientists' attempts to do without virtue in their theory and practice have not eliminated concepts of virtue (or virtues themselves) but simply obscured them and the crucial role they play in the pursuit of various goods within professional and lay endeavors. The authors argue that behavioral science theories and their attendant practices are necessarily dependent on implicit understandings of the good and a set of virtues indispensable for pursuit of that good. The praiseworthy characteristics necessary to be a scientist, a therapist, or a teacher, for example, are essential to the goods that are being pursued in these endeavors and integral to the communities in which social scientists and practitioners participate. (p. 392)

And more exactly to the research nexus between virtue development and marital quality, Hawkins et al. (2006) contended that social scientists in the marriage arena failed to recognize that the individualistic-rewards model of marriage represents only one, rather recent and culturally-biased, construction of marriage. In so doing, he asserted, other scholars dismiss a more complete view of marriage, one where spousal strengths are the beginning point rather than spousal deficits, and where fulfillment is more than an emotionally-influenced measure of happiness.

Fowers (2000) posited that “the good marriage” (p. 34) is not merely a matter of people learning relationship skills (often, *communication* skills), nor of husbands and wives acting specifically to meet one another’s needs in order to get what they want for themselves. (Fowers considered such behavior a sort of marital oxymoron, since one pretends to selflessly care for the other’s needs for the purpose of acquiring what they need for themselves.) Instead, he argued that a man and a woman bring certain virtues in various states of development to a marriage. Then, to the degree that those virtues are successfully developed and encouraged to be developed in one another, those two people enjoy a marriage that is greater and more permanent than what is conveyed by the more primitive idea of marital happiness (or satisfaction). Huston and Melz (2004) concurred,

saying that marriage education programs are too often focused on problem-solving, and not enough on what they called “a reservoir of good will” (p. 955). Fowers (2000) originally proposed four primary virtues central to a thriving marriage, but more recently, his work with Hawkins, Carroll and Yang (2006) expanded to center upon nine virtues: (a) Other-Centeredness, (b) Generosity, (c) Admiration, (d) Teamwork, (e) Shared Vision, (f) Loyalty, (g) Courage, (h) Maturity, and (i) Goodwill. Their recognition of these virtues was considered to be a *point of departure* (Charmaz, 2004) during the course of the present study’s individual spouses’ interviews, depending upon the degree to which they any one of them were coded in the initial couples’ interviews.

Where the current study is concerned, the overriding expectation to be taken from these theoretical points is that there are a number of character strengths that should be expected to be elicited from the stories, assertions, and explanations provided by participating spouses. The investigator should be cautious to not prompt responses that inordinately raise certain character strengths in the course of the discussion to the exclusion of others that spouses might volunteer. Yet, he should be familiar with those that other scholars have indicated appear to be prominent, and ready to pursue those more deeply as a result.

#### *Summary of the Review of Literature*

Cognizant that Chapter 1 spoke to the significance of conducting a study that probes existing healthy marriages among low-income parents, Chapter 2 began by hypothesizing that such a study would represent a novel venture, and that the results would establish foundations for additional research. Grounded theorists generally assert that researchers who propose to use GTM need to be cautious, and not allow their

previous knowledge of related research to cast an excessive influence upon the analysis of the data. Rather, they should use other research findings to create points of departure from which to structure the study, and then, as the analysis phase progresses, to look for literature that may further affirm the themes they glean from the data. The points of departure discovered for the present study evolved from a survey of prominent concepts in literature contemplating low-income marriage and marital quality. Those concepts congealed around several that indicate population characteristics that should guide the recruitment of participants (ethnicity, cohabiting history, child-bearing history, and employment and income), as well as others that should guide the design of the interview guide (new conceptualizations of marriage, character strengths, and outcomes correlated with either low-income or healthy marriage).

## CHAPTER 3

### Methods

There are three research questions that have guided the current study, stated on page 12, each of which probe the components of how a low-income couple's healthy marriage came into being. As a consequence of the nature of that intent, it seemed most efficacious to choose to employ qualitative methods. Rosenblatt and Fischer (1993) wrote

Qualitative family research methods are most useful when one wants answers to theoretical questions about meanings, understandings, perceptions, and other subjectivities in and about families... [they are] useful for investigative matters that are sensitive or touchy for people to reveal. Nonqualitative approaches might completely miss such sensitive areas... Qualitative strategies are also advantageous in studying topics where feelings, thoughts, meanings, and accounts are complex..." (pp. 172-173)

Accordingly, low-income parents who self-report themselves as having a healthy marriage were asked to participate in two interviews: first, as a couple, and then, individually. As interviews were completed, transcriptions were performed, and analysis was applied using grounded theory methodology (GTM). The following provides details of the work performed, and rationale for decisions made as the process developed.

#### *Participant Recruitment and Selection*

At the beginning of the study and consistent with the parameters of the research questions presented, the investigator chose a purposive sampling design (Greenstein, 2006) in order to identify a sufficient number of couples who would be representative of the desired population—low-income parents who consider their marriage to be healthy. This is somewhat different than identifying a number of couples whose marriages are qualified, by some empirical measurements, as having a marriage that is healthy. Ultimately, the reason of reliance upon self-report is prefaced on the state of the science as revealed in Chapter 1, which is that theory regarding low-income healthy marriage had

not yet been developed prior to this current pursuit. It has been desirable to develop theory, first, on the basis of couples' own definitions and portrayals. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, future studies, then, may begin to explore these couples' meanings and portrayals in comparison to other studies of healthy marriage.

Ideally, the purposive sampling design was intended to render a sample of participants that is characteristic of all of the major areas delineated under the section titled *What is Characteristic of the Population?* in the previous chapter—that is, couples who are characteristic of healthy marriages based on their (a) ethnicity, (b) their employment status, (c) whether they cohabited prior to their wedding, and (d) whether they conceived a child prior to their decision to marry. It was definitively *not* a purpose of this study to contemplate the comparisons or contrasts between these different groups. Rather, the idea was to maximize the richness of the data by attempting to obtain an appropriately diverse sample of participants. In so doing, a theory that is versatile, having input from low-income healthy marriages representing each of these groups, would have been more likely to materialize. Inherently, the investigator has almost no control over the actual outcome of the convenience sampling recruitment process, except to try to ensure that promotional efforts are targeted to reach different racial communities. Diversity in employment status, cohabiting experience, and premarital conception was accomplished.

Special efforts were made to achieve some level of ethnic diversity, and particularly to include African American couples (though, as a matter of limiting potential religious bias in the sample, those efforts did not include working through African American churches). Over the course of the two years of data collection, there

seemed to be promising opportunities to involve African American couples on three occasions. Ultimately, however, those did not work out, and as a result, the study was completed with only low-income Caucasian couples having volunteered to participate. This circumstance also is further explored in Chapter 5.

Promotion of the study primarily occurred via small posters and small cards (approximately the size of a post card) that conveyed to the reader that the study concerned healthy marriages, as well as these qualifiers: (a) that the prospective couple considered their marriage to be healthy, (b) that the prospective couple had at least one school-aged child together (either through normal biological means, or by adoption), and (c) that the prospective couple lived within a reasonable driving distance of Lexington, Kentucky. All promotional materials received approval of the dissertation committee and the University of Kentucky Institutional Board of Review (IRB). (See Appendix F for copies of these promotional media.)

As suggested earlier, the investigator arguably made the first major decision of the study when, following consultation with the dissertation committee, it was determined to recruit couples who *self-report* that they enjoy a healthy marriage together. And at least one alternative would have been to employ one or more quantitative instruments to attempt to establish a threshold at which marital quality would be adequate for participation in the study. Again, that would not have been consistent with the pursuit of cultivating a theory, since by implication, a quantitative inquiry would have imposed pre-conceived meanings as a basis for the study. But even setting that aside, there would have been some pragmatic barriers and consequences to conducting the study if couples had had to meet greater third-party scrutiny. For instance, prospective couples might be

discouraged from volunteering because of the additional barrier to participation. Others would be discouraged, perhaps, because they would consequentially fail to meet the threshold established, and would feel their marriage threatened by the deduction that their marriage is not “good enough” after all. These concerns, in combination with the understanding that a qualitative study by its nature is an attempt to understand participants’ perceptions and descriptions of a given phenomenon, compelled the investigator and his committee to agree that selection for inclusion would occur on the basis of the self-report of both spouses. The lone caveat to that point was that each spouse should indicate *independently of the other* their belief of that their marriage is “good or very good.” Of course, it also stands to reason that when both spouses consider their marriage to be good or very good, then it is arguable that the two individuals with best access to the deepest understanding of the phenomenon have provided the most salient vetting.

An outside observer could ask why the investigator chose to restrict participation to married couples with school-aged children together. The concise answer is that, for the purposes of the study, this qualification was thought to provide a better delimiter than other options such as duration of the marriage or duration of the relationship. In order to understand why it is “better,” one needs to recall that increased child well-being is one of the driving forces behind the promotion of relationship education (U.S. Administration for Children and Families, 2005)—essentially that stronger marriages normally correlate with stronger child outcomes (Wilcox, et al., 2006). From the study’s conception, there has been an explicit desire that the results and conclusions be specifically informative to those who are interested in constructing relationship education curricula that help young

couples achieve stronger marriages. Therefore, these married parents of school-age children are the embodiment of the goal that is sought for others.

Because of the degree to which premarital cohabitation has become common, duration of the couple's marriage was thought to be less relevant. Likewise, duration of the couple's relationship was discounted because of the potential for wide variances between couples that may have created ambiguities in the sample, which in turn may have served to reduce internal validity. An example of this would be a couple who were "just acquaintances" for an extended period of time, then "just friends" for an extended time, all before they began their romantic relationship, and thus could have competing perceptions between the two of them regarding their relationship's beginning point. In establishing a minimum relationship longevity that was based on the date of the birth of a child together, the investigator believed he had chosen the best option to establish the desired sample validity. Sample validity and the desire for consistency also was the concern that led to the exclusion of parents of children younger than school-age, and those of older children. Some parents of younger children may not have had sufficient time in their relationship, and thus would be at a disadvantage, to evaluate the strength of their marriage. Parents of older children, on the other hand, potentially could have represented a very different generational cohort, and thus the investigator felt it best to contain that possibility by including only parents who currently have a child in school.

The investigator and surrogates kind enough to offer their assistance tacked posters in locations that each thought might be suitable and effective. Surrogates included professional associates of the investigator, as well as personal friends and family. It should be noted that the investigator did not recruit any personal acquaintances to join the

study, and in the interest of study validity, would not have accepted the offer had any extended it. In addition to the posters, surrogates also distributed the cards, referred to as “pass-along” cards, to others within their own networks. Beyond this, the investigator placed either posters, cards, or both in locations more likely to be frequented by low-income people such as laundries, rent-to-own stores, charitable health clinics, and established second-hand “flea market” facilities. (For reasons to be discussed later in this section, the investigator purposely did not distribute these promotional materials to places of worship.)

Couples voicing an interest in the study contacted the investigator to indicate their interest, usually by phone, but on a few occasions told the surrogate to have the investigator call. If the other spouse was not present for the initial phone conversation, the investigator would affirm with the spouse that, indeed, they considered their marriage to be good or very good, and then make an appointment to call back when he could explain the whole of the study to both spouses at the same time. It was during the conversations when both spouses were on the phone that the investigator would elaborate on the study, answer any of the spouses’ questions, and then ask the spouses the questions necessary to qualify them (or not) to join the study as subjects—all of this, performed according to phone scripts approved by the IRB.

Publicity for the study began during the summer of 2006, and the first couples interview occurred in October. By the beginning of the summer of 2007, six other couples indicated interest in and began participation in the study. After an unsuccessful bid to gain couples through an entire afternoon of door-to-door distribution of the pass-along card in a small town (estimated population 20,000), the investigator sensed that

recruitment was an even larger challenge than anticipated during composition of the research proposal. He made the decision that he would need to become more creative and aggressive. First, committee and IRB approval was gained to incorporate a small incentive into the recruitment effort, which was that all participating couples would be included in a drawing for a \$50 gift card. Probably more importantly, he pursued new tactics for disseminating study information. A new website, [www.GoodMarriageStudy.com](http://www.GoodMarriageStudy.com), was established, giving those with access to a computer an easy and unimposing way to learn about the study. Also, pass-along cards were sent as an insert to an Upward Bound newsletter regularly mailed to parents of about 3000 low-income middle school students in Central and Eastern Kentucky. And finally, a press release was generated and distributed to a number of media outlets within a radius of approximately 200 miles of Lexington, including a daily newspaper that gave the story space at the bottom of its front page.

Two additional couples volunteered as a direct result of the press release, and one couple responded to the pass-along card mailing. In February 2008, the committee chair advised the investigator that she had consulted with other committee members familiar with qualitative research, and that they had agreed that it would be sufficient to conclude the study with 10 couples. Unfortunately, one of the couples who had completed the couples interview did not respond to requests to schedule the follow-up (individual spouse) interviews, so the data collection phase had to continue until a tenth couple was identified. That couple eventually surfaced later in the spring, and completed their interviews in June 2008.

#### *Data Collection*

### *General Procedures*

For any given couple participating in the study, a total of four separate-but-related mechanisms for data collection occurred: (a) the couple interview, followed later by (b) a confidential interview with the husband and (c) a confidential interview with the wife, and finally, (d) completion of a 29-question questionnaire. The investigator attempted to build each interview script so that the interview would be completed within a time frame of 1-2 hours. In order to effectively conduct these interviews, the investigator established a basic structure to which each script would conform (see Table I below).

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Table 3.1

*Interview Script Guidelines for Couples' Interviews and Individual Spouses' Interviews*

<i>Type</i>	<i>Topics of Interest</i>
Couples	General history of the relationship, defining traits of the relationship, personal virtues developed over the course of the relationship.
Individuals	Pre-relationship background, critical milestones and antecedents to the marriage, personal virtues developed prior to the relationship, additional exploration of relationship's history, and any additional questions generated from couple's interview.

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While couples originally gained an overview of the study during the initial phone conversation, they were told again during the initial couple interview as part of the review of the IRB-approved consent form (see Appendix A). In the midst of that

discourse, the investigator reviewed with them how their confidentiality would be assured, and the spouses chose their own aliases.

Regarding location, with only a few exceptions, couples chose to be interviewed in their own homes, either in their living rooms or at their kitchen table. This was advantageous since, there, the couple could be expected to be most at-ease, which Yow (1994) asserted is an important consideration. On other occasions, interviews occurred at a picnic table in a secluded park close-by their home, or during a weekday in a quiet space at the church where they were members. While it was not desirable, due to time constraints of one spouse's job in combination with the investigator's travel constraints, it became necessary on one occasion to interview both spouses over the phone for their second interviews. Of course, it is recognized that circumstances sometimes make it necessary to deviate from the ideal when conducting qualitative interviews (Dodson & Bravo, 2005). All interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder, and the file containing any given interview was transferred immediately afterwards to the investigator's personal computer, which is password-protected. Consent forms and the notebook used to catalog contact and qualifying information remain in a locked file cabinet in the investigator's home office.

As conveyed by the information in Table I, the first interview essentially intended to map the history of the couples' life together, factors that they believed to have been vital to their establishing a healthy marriage. To achieve this, an interview script was developed, and the basis for its construction is described later in this chapter. Following an initial interview with a couple, the transcription of that interview had to be completed in order to appropriately prepare for the interviews with individual spouses. To

accomplish this, the investigator used a variety of outside sources to perform the work, all of whom were selected to reasonably assure disassociation from the subjects' social and professional networks, just in case one or both spouses' voices could be recognized. For instance, student labor at the college where the investigator is employed transcribed all but one of the couples interviews, since all of those lived outside of the immediate area. One couple, however, did live within the vicinity of the College, so the investigator arranged for professional transcription from an individual living in another state. In a few cases, the investigator was able to arrange for transcribing to be performed within two weeks of the couples interview, but on other occasions the work took a few months to finish. As soon as that occurred, contact was made with the couple to schedule a time to return and interview each spouse individually.

With transcript in-hand, the investigator immediately could begin examination of the first interview for the purpose of developing questions that would probe areas of seemingly-rich information. Alongside the first interview, he also took into account contributions from other couples in their first and second interviews. In both of these ways, the investigator attempted to incorporate a basic tenet of grounded theory methodology, referred to as constant comparative method (Creswell, 2007). In its purest, most systematic form (Stauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998), the idea of this method is to collect data in the field, bring it back to the office for consideration against previously collected data, determine whether new areas of inquiry are evident or if older ones appear to have stronger grounding, then return to the field and repeat the process until a point of saturation is reached—that is, all new data has become repetitive with older data, and there appears to be no additional evidence to be incorporated into the emergent grounded

theory. Charmaz (2006) advocated a constructivist approach to grounded theory, and thus one emphasizing depth of content and endowed with more flexible guidelines. It is maintained by both the investigator and committee members with whom he consulted through the process that the current study accomplished the intents of the systematic form of constant comparative method. Yet as a matter of practical consideration (e.g., ebbs and flows in recruitment, financial realities of obtaining transcriptions, and the added complexity of a second interview component not necessarily present in other studies), the actual orchestration of the study is more congruent with the constructivist ideal.

The second interview considered the information gained in the first interview, as well as information discovered from others' interviews, and accordingly probed for important milestones and constants in the individual's life that may have contributed to their capacity to help form this healthy marriage with their partner. For instance, in their couple interview, Mike and Carol (not their actual names, but rather their chosen aliases) told about some of their financial struggles, and so, in their individual interviews, the investigator sought to mine that area more deeply and found that, in fact, there had been an occasion when Mike mishandled their finances to such an extent that he convinced himself that Carol would not want to be married to him any longer. Her response was "that can't be what you want, and I know that's not what I want," and the extent of her anger over the situation along with the extent of her determination to work through the problem as a team solidified his faith in their union like never before. This generated new questions for the investigator about Carol's developing years: What might have led her to be this kind of person that could be so frustrated with her husband, yet so undeterred and committed to their marriage? Without going into too much detail here, Carol reported a

particularly deep bond with Mike from their first extensive discussion on a summer night in a small park. Prior to any hint of romance between them, he incited such a sense of warmth and acceptance that she, for the first time ever, revealed to another person the sexual abuse she suffered throughout so much of her childhood. So, at least one possible answer to the question above is found in the fact that Carol had made such an emotional investment in Mike from the beginning, and she carried with her such a deep appreciation for how he had, to some degree, helped her shoulder a significant psychological weight.

While one spouse would be engaged in their second interview with the investigator, the other, understanding the expectation for confidentiality for the individual interviews, removed themselves from earshot of the conversation, often going outside or to another area of the house. During that time, the other spouse completed the questionnaire (see Appendix B), designed to provide some demographic information so that interview time could be focused on the qualitative areas intended. Following the individual spouses' interviews, their audio files were transcribed, and again, by typists geographically separated from the area, so as to severely limit the remote possibility that any voices could be recognized.

#### *Development of Interview Scripts*

The initial, couples interview was conducted according to an interview guide developed with reference to (a) the broad categories (i.e., backgrounds, antecedents, characteristics, and outcomes) found in the framework of the Child Trends model (Moore et al., 2004), (b) the characteristics of low-income married couples outlined by Fein (2004), (c) the work of Fowers (2000) and his colleagues (Hawkins et al., 2006) on virtue development, and (d) Edin and Kafalas' (2005) interview guide, used to collect data for

their study with unmarried low-income mothers. Those interviews then were transcribed, and reviewed for areas seemingly ripe for additional inquiry. New scripts for the second, individual spouses' interviews emerged based on findings from the original interview performed with each couple, and, consistent with grounded theory methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998), the investigator's previous findings from interviews with other couples.

Since there is a lifespan development foundation underlying the research questions in this study, the investigator relied heavily upon his understanding of oral history principles in constructing scripts. According to Ritchie (1995), oral histories are recorded interviews, structured by an audible interviewer, that capture individuals' spoken memories and personal commentaries. They typically concern a theme of public interest, and individuals' life experiences within the boundaries of that theme. Ordinarily, according to Guidelines and Principles of the Oral History Association (1992), oral histories are treated as a scholarly record, meaning that they are to be transcribed and indexed for ready reference, then archived in a library or a similar repository accessible to future researchers. As a matter of compliance with IRB concerns about confidentiality, however, the interviews of the current study have been and will continue to be held by the investigator, unavailable to the general public.

Oral history researchers ordinarily plan the path they want the interview to take, and as such, compose the questions they want to incorporate, cognizant that the exact order of those questions is to be flexible. (Dilley, 2000; Kelleghan, 1999). The skill of the interviewer is largely apparent in how well they lead the interviewee in a conversation that naturally flows from one topic of inquiry to the next, with each answer by the

interviewee providing an effortless segue to the interviewer's next topic of inquiry (Yow, 1994). There is a generally accepted assumption in oral history literature that, to the degree that an interviewer can be successful in that skill, they enhance rapport and their subject's willingness to "let their guard down"—and as such, the interview can probe deeper and unearth the most salient, genuine, and truthful responses.

Oral historians are instructed to research their subjects before actually conducting the oral history interviews through whatever means are available (Ritchie, 1995). The initial couples interview essentially served a similar purpose, allowing the investigator to identify areas meriting closer examination. In a broad sense, the research of Edin and Kafalas (2005) and Fein (2004) also served this purpose, since they both offered instructive data about low-income marriages, directing the researcher toward areas of likely significance.

### *Data Analysis*

Analysis of the data followed coding processes regularly associated with grounded theory methodology, called (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, and (c) selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Glaser, 1978). It is important to understand there is a "cyclical connection among the three phases" (LaRossa, 2005, p. 840), and thus a "non-linear nature" (LaRossa) that occurs in the process of analysis, such that coding does not follow as stepwise procedure so much as it, once it has commenced with the initial round of open coding, follows a continuous back-and-forth between types of coding in order to distill a grounded theory rooted in a solid rationale.

In addition to coding, Charmaz (2004) encourages the use of memo-writing, which are notes that serve the researcher by providing a trial and error apparatus to

compare and contrast emerging variables and their components, with an eye toward the final narrative. They also help the researcher reflect upon the process, and provide points of reference and clarity for later stages of the writing process. To efficiently and productively accomplish these coding and memo writing processes, the investigator utilized two computer software applications often employed by qualitative researchers with whom the investigator is acquainted—NVivo ® and Excel ®.

### *Open Coding*

For any given transcription, the investigator perused the subject's words first for indicators (Glaser). An indicator is a segment of text, possibly as short as a word or as long as a few sentences, which makes some assertion considered to be noteworthy. NVivo ® made it possible to conveniently highlight that segment, label it appropriate to its content, and place the segment in an appropriate place in a hierarchy that developed over the course of classifying several segments. As indicators accumulated, many of those were found to be strongly related to one another such that they could be grouped together into a concept. Similarly, as concepts accumulated, the investigator recognized that many could be grouped together into a category. To illustrate, LaRossa (2005) gave the example of a subject that speaks about romantic love, other places where they speak of platonic love, and still other places where they speak of courtly love. Each of these should be labeled as such, and considered to be concepts. Finally, all of those may be contemplated and assembled under a category of “types of love.” Yet another set of indicators from the same interview may contribute to concepts like low-, medium-, and high-intensity love, and then those concepts may birth a category called “intensity of romantic love.” Beyond that simple example, LaRossa encouraged the researcher to

embrace a dimensionalization approach at the category level, or a heightened sense of the need to think abstractly to consider possible threads that run between concepts. He provided an example that “toy grabbing” and “toy hiding” among a research sample of children at play could be considered as the category, “strategies for toy accumulation.”

In the current study, the principal investigator strove to follow that guidance, testing different ways of combining concepts into categories. Chronologically-based categories, for instance, separated those concepts that appeared to be prominent before couples ever met from those that arose during the courtship phase, and those that arose during the course of the marriage. Another attempt at open coding involved recognizing and distinguishing those concepts that demonstrated some internal actions, such as having a certain perception about the opposite sex, from external actions (i.e., behaviors) that corroborated, or not, internal actions. Still another effort grouped concepts according to whether they emerged from the husband, from the wife, or if the concept were implicit to the relationship between the two rather than to one individual.

Ultimately, the principal investigator gained insight from all of these attempts, and then, eventually settled upon categorization that focused upon personal development factors made extant by individuals’ descriptions and stories, and also the personal qualities that those descriptions and stories brought to light. Furthermore, individuals conveyed biological conditions, environmental contexts, intrapersonal functions (cognitions, emotions and behaviors), and decision-making as categories under the umbrella of developmental factors. And among the qualities, there appeared to be those qualities developed within a person, plus other qualities that a person came to desire and, to some degree, perceive in their partner.

### *Axial Coding*

The next phase of GTM, axial coding, is portrayed by LaRossa as taking each category/variable and temporarily focusing intensely upon it for what Glaser (1978) called, “the six Cs:” causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariances, and conditions. LaRossa considered this “the distinctive feature of the axial coding phase” (p. 847). The researcher essentially comes to develop hypotheses by testing each of the different categories as a potential *focal* category, incorporating questions that naturally arise from the “six Cs,” and considering which category appears to offer the best fit. Charmaz (2004) referred to this phase as *focused coding*, and generated five key questions that may be employed: (1) What process is at issue here?; (2) Under what conditions does this process develop?; (3) How does the research participant(s) think, feel, and act while involved with this process?; (4) When, why, and how does the process change?; and, (5) What are the consequences of the process?

As it applies to the current study, Microsoft Excel ® proved particularly useful to re-organize, index, and tabulate the incidence of categories by individuals and by couples so that focal categories became more distinct.

It was from this phase that key qualities were identified. The investigator analyzed those according to the consistency and priority that participants placed upon different qualities, and settled upon four that appeared to be most unanimously fundamental to each participating couples’ assessment that their marriage was good or very good: being loving, being committed, being appreciative, and being child-centered.

Having established those, the investigator went back to analyze individuals’ developmental factors that had a cogent bearing upon the development of those qualities.

The fruit of that analysis was the recognition of four sets of developmental factors, or synergists, that occurred with impressive frequency in the participants' lifespans. Those were sensitizing experiences, partner-as-rescuer mindset, acute parental influences, and religious influences.

### *Selective Coding*

Using the analogy of a good novel, LaRossa might have said that selective coding is essentially considered the main plot and storyline. In performing this phase of the analysis, the central task was to excavate the core variables that tie the whole of the data together into a coherent, tangible, explainable whole. In speaking of selective coding, LaRossa said "In short, the stories that researchers put together should be lucid, understandable, and hopefully compelling" (p. 850). Denzin (2004) writes that this final product "should be judged by the range, density, linkages between and systematic relatedness of its theoretical concepts, as well as by the theory's specificity and generality" (p. 329).

It was in this phase, then, that the investigator developed the entirety of the model, weaving together the focal categories and processes identified in the previous coding phases into a coherent composition, and plotting out additional intricacies and ways of describing the grounded theory to be most explicable. The output of this final level of coding is the substance of what is conveyed in the next chapter.

### *Use of Qualitative Software*

The actual analysis of interviews largely relied upon the use of two types of software. First, NVivo ®, a popular product from QSR International, allowed the investigator to efficiently code splices of text into indicators, then to group indicators into

concepts, and concepts into categories. Finally, the investigator analyzed the resulting categories for discovery of the focal categories, and for discovery of themes that emerge from the focal categories. Also, Microsoft Excel ® benefitted the process, particularly in the attempt to recognize how repetitive certain concepts and categories appeared among the 20 spouses who participated.

### *Other Methodological Considerations*

#### *Researcher's Role*

The investigator designed and implemented the study with occasional consultation with scholars on the dissertation committee. As contrasted with quantitative research where the questionnaire or experimental treatment is the instrument that yields the data and conclusions, in qualitative research, the researcher himself performs those functions. For that reason, it is important to convey who the researcher is, in order to ascertain what biases and assumptions may have been present throughout (Creswell, 2007).

At the commencement of the current study in 2006, the investigator was five years removed from a divorce from his first wife, a marriage that lasted slightly less than 15 years. He had remarried within one year of that divorce, carrying with him a strong conviction that there were correctable errors from that first marriage that he personally desires to avoid in the second, but also would desire to help others avoid, too. Professionally, the investigator currently teaches at a small private college, and is the former director of a federally-funded community healthy marriage initiative, which strongly espouses the usefulness of relationships education.

Additionally, the investigator was born and raised within what is commonly

considered Appalachia. Many know Appalachia as a mountainous region in the Eastern U.S., and associate the area with people of lesser means and with less education. It is true that by comparison, Appalachian areas of the country generally lag behind in those ways (though, the researcher maintains that the common characterization of the area's people as shoeless and living in trailer parks has been exaggerated). As a result, the investigator has been exposed to low-income marriages for much of his life. It was a premise to the study when he first conceived it, that indeed, several of those marriages were healthy in spite of their financial condition.

That premise is further grounded in the investigator's family history. His grandparents on both his father's and his mother's side headed low-income families, with both grandfathers working in a coal mine while both grandmother were a stay-at-home moms. Family income was supplemented by small gardens that they raised, and by clothes-making at home. Both marriages remained intact until death. Unfortunately, one grandfather died before the researcher was old enough to have an appreciation for that marriage; however the other set of grandparents remained alive until the investigator became a young adult. To some degree, it is his personal experience and witness to that marriage in particular that fueled the assumption that low-income couples are capable to maintain a healthy marriage. (The distinction should be understood, however, that this only prompted the researcher to think more intensively about the general topic, but his perceptions of his grandparents' marriage did not consciously frame the design of the study.)

Turning to another aspect, the investigator's adult life has evolved around a theme of youth development, and he has a particular interest in the future to study virtue

development among adolescents that occurs in association with wilderness experience programs. Accordingly, he has been inclined toward the belief that the development of virtues is a critical component to an increase in pro-social, rather than anti-social, behavior among youth. That inclination, then, represents a bias toward the importance of virtue development within marriages, as well.

As a check against these assumptions and biases, the investigator maintained a discipline of memo writing concurrent with performing his analysis, so that an introspective assessment occurred throughout the process. Further, he will enlisted the feedback of other scholars, especially those on the dissertation committee, who did not necessarily share his assumptions and biases, and who, therefore, were able to suggest other perspectives that may have reflected more substantive themes embedded in the data.

#### *Ethical Considerations*

As described previously, interviewees were given explanation over the phone at first contact, and later furnished with a printed informed consent form advising them of the purpose of the study, what they were agreeing to do by participating, their privileges to cancel the interview and rescind their participation, and any other considerations of importance.

#### *Credibility*

Eisner (1991) persuasively argued that it is more appropriate to use the term credibility than validity in speaking of qualitative research, and that there are standards against which qualitative research may be examined to establish higher levels of credibility.

First, he offered the standard of *structural corroboration*, which calls for a researcher to utilize multiple sources of data in order to affirm or debunk their interpretation. “We seek a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility, that allows us to feel confident about our observations, interpretations, and conclusions” (p. 110). Where the current study is concerned, then, structural corroboration is strengthened through the fact that multiple informants have been used to construct the data set. Those interpretations that were most universally observed among the subjects are, therefore, the most credible and worthy of inclusion in the grounded theory.

Similar to this idea, Charmaz (2004) suggested that it is an advantage of GTM that it offers integral checks to validity:

A major contribution of grounded theory methods is that they provide rigorous procedures for researchers to check, refine, and develop their ideas and intuitions about the data.... [they] offer systematic approaches for discovering significant aspects of human experience that remain inaccessible with traditional verification methods. (p. 497)

In addition to structural corroboration, Eisner spoke of *consensual validation*, which is “an agreement among competent others that the description, interpretation, and evaluation and thematic” (p. 112) are, in fact, accurate. Creswell (2007) used the term *external auditing* to convey a similar standard. The investigator of the current study sought consensual validation through regular consultation with committee members who were well-informed in the areas of marriage, socio-economic status, and qualitative research. One committee member, in particular, provided extensive insight as a consequence of his familiarity with grounded theory methods and with using NVivo ®.

Finally, the discipline of memo writing captured the informal and contemplative thoughts of the investigator throughout the course of analysis. The NVivo ® software package made it efficient for the investigator to write and catalog memos. Where the

credibility of the study is concerned, these notes will continue to provide raw reviewable evidence of the researcher's reasoning in view of the data.

*Auditability*

The artifacts of the current study, particularly the transcribed interviews and coding information contained in NVivo ® and Excel ® files, will be made available for further inspection by other researchers. In the interest of protecting confidentiality, audio files will not be released unless written permission is obtained from a given couple who participated in the study. Contact information for the subjects will remain the exclusive property of the investigator, and also will not be shared.

## CHAPTER 4

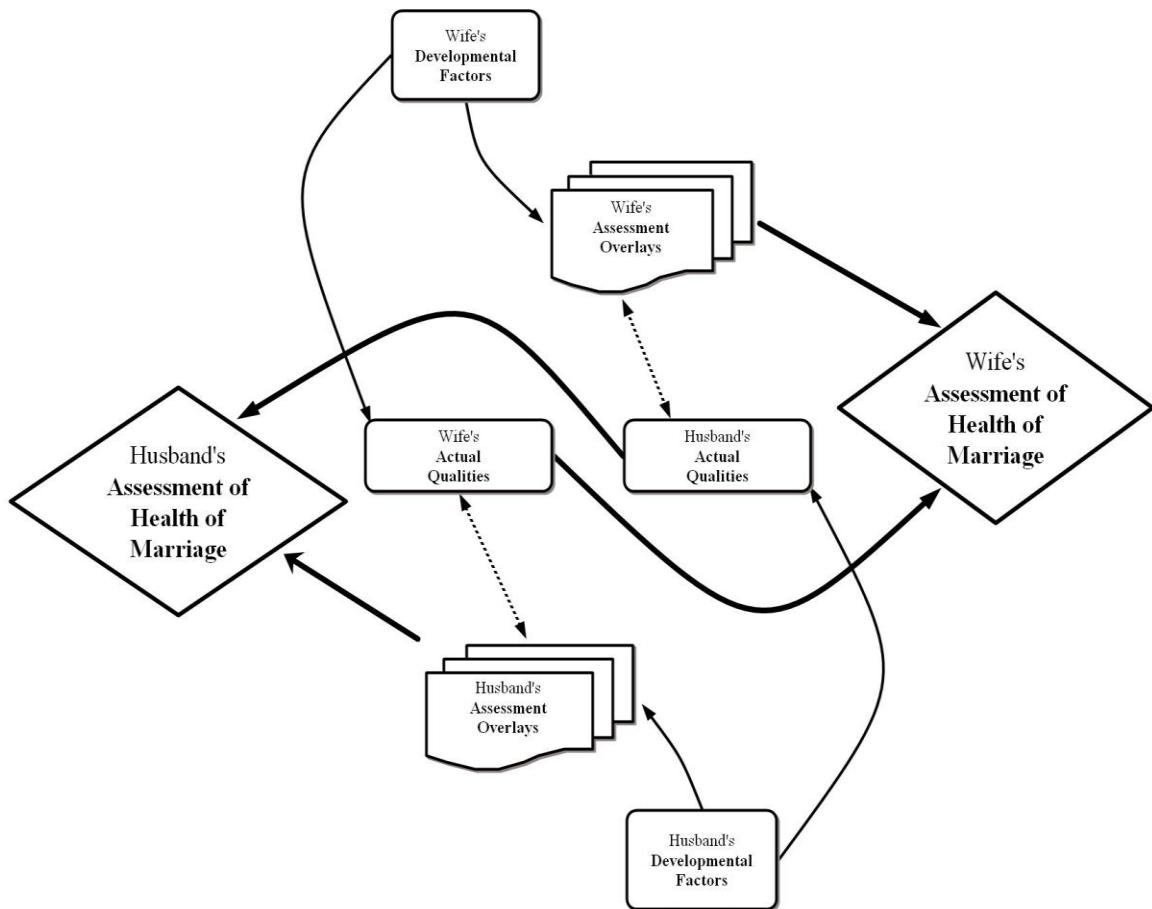
### Results

In the course of analyzing the ten couples' interviews and twenty individuals' interviews, the model shown below emerged. It illustrates how spouses who consider their marriages to be healthy arrive at that conclusion. The first section of this chapter provides an overview of the model. It is followed by closer examination of (a) developmental factors that materialized as *synergists* of individuals' high-priority qualities, and finally, (b) *high-priority qualities* that the individuals of these healthy marriages routinely developed within themselves, or routinely desired and perceived in

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Figure 4.1

Process Map of Spouses' Assessment of Marital Health (Simplified Version)



their partners.

### *Overview of the Theoretical Model*

The following focal categories emerged from the interviews of the current study, effectively addressing research question three (see p. 12) which asked, “What key concepts arise from that data, and how do those key concepts relate to one another in a grounded theory?” First, subjects characteristically spoke of combinations of key *developmental factors* through their lifespan—which will be called *synergists*—that led them to become a person endowed with certain *qualities*. These qualities, then, are more specifically categorized according to (a) a person’s own set of personal qualities, called *actual qualities*; (b) their individual criteria for the qualities they desire in a lifelong intimate partner, called *desired qualities*, and (c) their individual perceptions of the qualities they consider their partner to possess, called *perceived qualities*. “Qualities” are intended to connote any character strength or virtue contemplated by Peterson and Seligman’s *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (2004), any marital virtue contemplated by the work of Hawkins, Fowers, Carroll and Yang (2006), or otherwise, any personal characteristic that could be reasonably considered a factor in a person’s fitness as partner in marriage.

Dale, a truck driver married to Marlene, cultivated certain qualities predicated upon certain sets of developmental factors over the course of his 33 years. In this section, elements from his life will serve as a specimen of the process contemplated by this model; other study participants’ input will be explored in succeeding sections.

#### *Developmental factors as synergists of a person’s quality formation*

Throughout the course of the interviews conducted, spouses were prompted to tell

stories and to provide personal insights from their own lives', as well as from their partners' lives. The vast majority of developmental factors and personal qualities were deemed to be likely anecdotal, coincidental, and benign; that is, they only arose in conversation with one or a limited number of participants, did not seem rationally connected to the couples' healthy assessment of their marriage, and therefore, did not appear to be sufficiently relevant to the current study. On the other hand, analysis of the revelations from these participants, all of whom considered their marriage to be healthy, collectively portrayed a progression framework of *developmental factors* that coalesced into recurrent sets of factors, or *synergists*, that directly contributed to certain *high-priority qualities* of that person.

Broadly speaking, an individual's qualities are the product of one or some combination of four types of developmental factors: biological conditions, environmental contexts, intrapersonal operations, and self-determination. A person's experience, then, amounts to a snapshot of the state of those four factors at a point in time, and the accumulation of those experiences is equal to a person's development (hence, the term "developmental factors").

Probing further, a given quality in a person may be predicated to some degree upon the person's own biological nature as manifested in their appearance, in their physical health, in their mental health, in their psychological tendencies and how those are expressed behaviorally (sometimes considered *temperament*), and as they exhibit one or more intelligences as theorized by Gardner (1993). These are qualities that are innate.

Second, a quality is predicated on the influence of contexts within which that person functions and that are outside of the person's ability to independently control.

There are physical contexts such as the home, school building, and place of work where the person ordinarily conducts their life. Beyond these, there are a number of different socially-constructed contexts constituted by the person's family, by their peers and authorities at school or work, and perhaps by other groups with whom the person has relationships—possibly consisting of those who live in their neighborhood, who worship with them religiously, or who volunteer with them for a common cause. At a macro level, there are still more contexts: economic contexts that govern a person's capacity to obtain and manage resources, political contexts that define expectations of individuals to the benefit of the greater society, and cultural contexts that influence how the person identifies him or herself in comparison to others who share their heritage, thereby establishing certain social customs and norms.

Third, the development of a given quality in a given person is partially a product of that person's intrapersonal operations, which encompasses previous and current observations, cognitions (perceptions, standards, goals, and concerns), emotions (feelings and attitudes), and behaviors (verbal and non-verbal). Any of these may be characteristically anecdotal (such as the cognition of an oceanfront image from a childhood vacation) or cumulative (such as the emotion rooted in a series of exposures to the salty scent of beaches).

As defined here, intrapersonal operations may be influenced by biological conditions and contexts. However, within any person lies a fourth factor that, in many ways, is the ultimate determinant of intrapersonal operations and how one interprets and reacts to their current experience: self-determination, or in psychoanalytic terms, the ego. It is that part of the individual that renders a decision, hopefully often and usually

optimally on the basis of the fullest awareness of and accounting for biological conditions, contexts, and intrapersonal operations that are salient. However, there are those occasions when a person makes determinations and decisions that are largely contrary to the rote state of their conscious cognitions and emotions. A decision to become thoughtful and intentional about losing weight would be one example, in that, the person may reprioritize eating for the purpose of nourishment over the eating for the purpose of pleasure. Under the same premise, the person may reprioritize their desire for exercise over their desire for rest or other activities. The will is the self's mechanism for rendering a decision between competing priorities. This helps to show the justification for holding this self-determination factor as distinct, though technically it is also can be viewed as a function of one's intrapersonal operations. That is, the person's will is inclined to congruence with, but not irreversibly beholden to, their previous ways of observing, thinking, feeling, and acting.

As a brief aside, it should be noted that there are certain biological conditions that are obscured to the social scientist, and beyond the purview of the present study to investigate. In particular, genetic make-up may have given a participant an inclination toward greater intelligence academically, resulting in a superior achievement in their education. The degree of educational achievement could be understood, of course, while the degree of inherent intelligence could not. Other biological conditions are more empirical, such as one's natural appearance or self-report of physical and mental health, and therefore those could more legitimately be included and assessed as a function of the study. It is conceivable that a future study could explore the connections between intelligences and the components of the model proposed in this one.

The principal investigator posits that these sets of developmental factors come together at a single point in time or repeatedly over the course of time, and give rise to the development of certain qualities that are sought either for one's own improvement or established as a requirement for a potential mate. The medical term *synergists* most accurately conveys the essence of these combinations of developmental factors because, while a given actual or desired quality theoretically could have developed within a person anyhow to some degree, the development appears to be largely enhanced, if not triggered, by one or more of the four synergists indicated through the words of the spouses in the present study. Merriam-Webster's Medical Dictionary (2006) uses the example of drugs that produce a pronounced effect when taken together instead of individually, and, of muscles that exhibit enhanced effect when they work in combination with one another. These analogies help to explain the same idea. The state of Dale's biological conditions (perhaps his intelligence especially), the contexts within which he conducted his life (his family and other influences that suggested moral direction), his intrapersonal operations (the observations and perceptions from which he made conclusions) and his self-determination all combined earlier in his life to render the conclusion that he desired to acquire personal qualities consistent with a dedicated, responsible father someday. Dale's story as well as others' will serve to illuminate the two synergists that this manuscript will refer to as *sensitizing experiences* and *acute parental influences*. These are distinct from one another, though there are some overlapping characteristics. Other synergists that arose from the participants' interviews were termed *partner-as-rescuer mindset predicated upon cumulative adverse history* and *religious influences*. All four synergists will be explored later in this chapter.

### *Actual qualities of the person*

Subjects of the study regularly indicated qualities they saw in themselves, and additionally described their own thoughts, words, and actions. Both of these were taken as evidence of actual qualities the person possessed or possesses. Then, theoretically, for any of the several qualities that a person possesses, they may say or demonstrate through their behaviors and temperament that they hold that quality to a higher degree or lesser degree than other qualities they possess. By way of illustration, one could imagine a simple histogram with each quality named along the horizontal axis, and the intensity of each quality charted by the vertical axis. The study does not aspire to any such measurement, except to generally acknowledge that some qualities are more strongly apparent in a given subject than others.

Furthermore, subjects' responses revealed evidence of the qualities that characterize their intrapersonal operations, which can be interpreted as the qualities of the external identity they convey and those of their internal one. External identity was shown in verbal and non-verbal behaviors, as well as the temperament that accompanied any behavior—essentially anything outwardly observable by seeing or hearing. Internal identity, on the other hand, was revealed by subjects' telling about their perceptions, as well as the standards by which they live, and the goals and concerns that propel them to behavior and action.

According to the words of the study's participants, then, the theoretical model proposes that a person's actual qualities result from the interaction of the four developmental factors cited above. For instance, Dale told of the less than favorable familial *context* that surrounded him as a child, of the lack of warmth he *perceived*

*cognitively and emotionally* (i.e., functions of intrapersonal operations) from both his biological father and his stepfather, and of the *self-determination* he exerted when he told himself that someday when he had children, he would not allow them to feel a lack of paternal nurturance as he had felt. At that moment, whenever it took place, Dale established a standard that was deposited into his conscience. Essentially then, that set of factors birthed in Dale actual qualities that could be described as (a) responsibility, which is a form of being a trustworthy person (i.e., capable of keeping a commitment), (b) compassion, which is an emotion-laden component of the quality of being a loving person, and (c) child-centeredness.

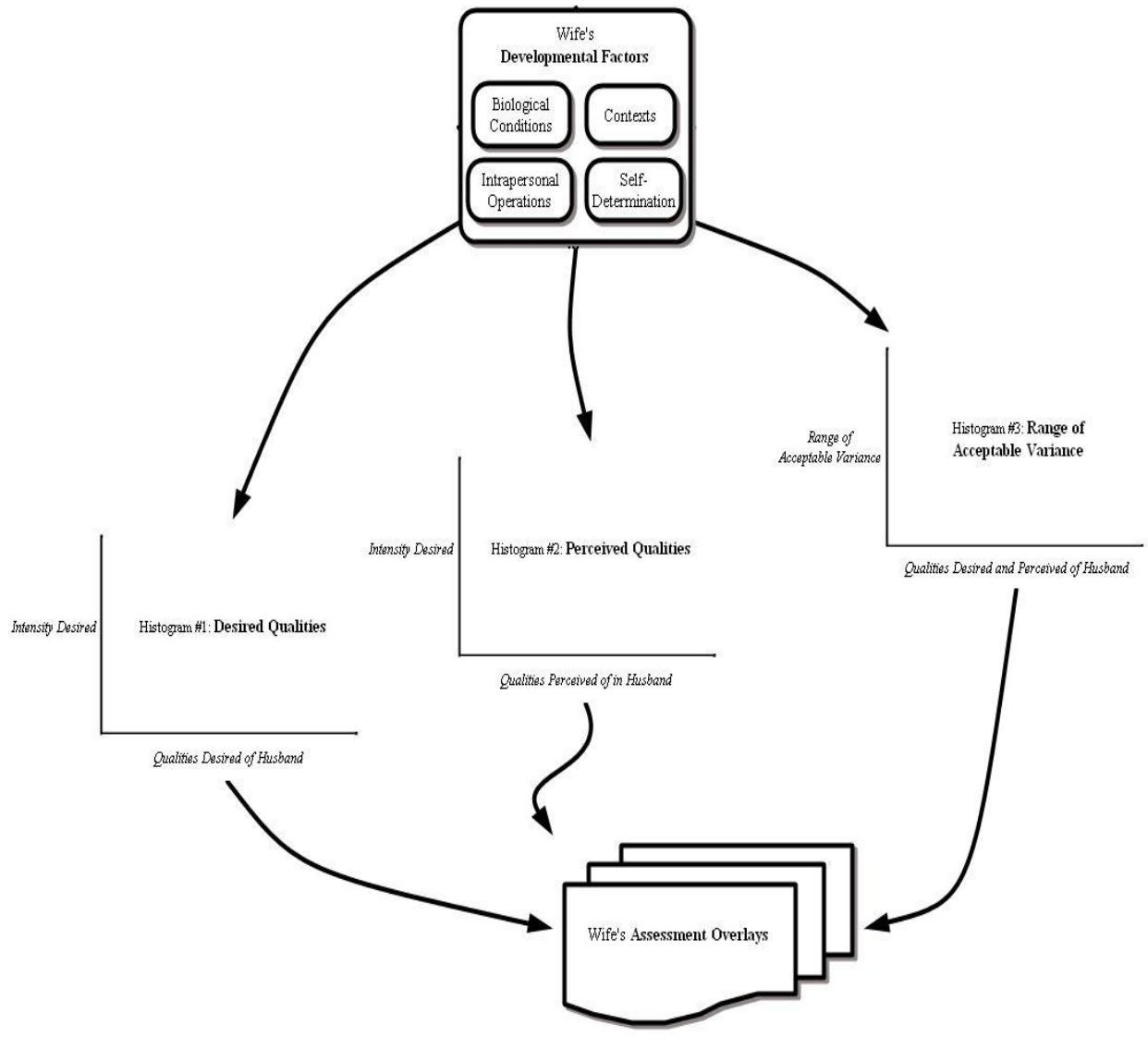
*Assessment overlays: Differences between qualities desired of and perceived in the other person*

*Desired qualities.* Besides development of a person's own actual qualities, the model establishes that the same person grows to establish qualities that they desire in a lifelong partner. Similar to the image of a histogram for actual qualities, these *desired qualities* also may be considered in terms of a range of specific qualities desired along a horizontal axis, and along the vertical, an intensity desired for each of the qualities specified. During the course of that person's social monitoring and screening for potential mates, they regularly refer mentally to this set of criteria, sometimes consciously and other times subconsciously, in order to evaluate whether they want to pursue additional interaction with others. This set of criteria can oscillate between being static and being dynamic, as individuals may encounter factors that influence them to make modifications to the criteria. In fact, even after engagement and marriage, a set of criteria continues to exist, though again, with likely fluctuations in terms of the list of qualities desired and the

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Figure 4.2

Expanded View of Developmental Factors and Assessment Overlays from Figure 4.1



intensity desired. An example of this would be that intensity of physical beauty in a female partner may be found to be more pronounced on the list of desired qualities of an unmarried adolescent than it might be for a father of four married for 20 years.

*Perceived qualities.* Implicit with this idea of social monitoring and screening is the idea that a given person constructs a perception of another person based on their

observations of that other person. Hence, with each observation, yet another mental histogram dedicated to that person is formed or altered—but, this one, indicative of the range of *perceived qualities* another person possesses, and the degree to which they possess each. What happens afterward is what determines whether the relationship has a future. Think of the desired qualities and the perceived qualities as transparent overlays placed on top of each other and projected onto a screen. The resulting comparison or contrast between desired and perceived qualities is a predictor of the person's decision of whether they choose to continue pursuit toward a loving, lifelong relationship with the other person.

*Caveat regarding the reality of desired and perceived qualities.* It is important to note that desired qualities often are explicit in a person's mind, and obvious in the things they say to others about what they desire; however, sometimes there are desired qualities and intensity of those qualities that are not so explicit or obvious. For example, a person may, to their conscious mind, minimize sexual characteristics as desired qualities, perhaps in response to standards they had previously established for themselves. Yet, the same person may find that their desire for that quality is more intensely held than they had consciously recognized, and thus, they may continue in a relationship based on the reality that certain sexual characteristics are intensely desire after all. As long as those characteristics remain desired at that level and as long as the perception continues to be that the other person fulfills that desire, the relationship may continue to progress, at least until that point where another desired quality would be perceived to be too incongruous. Perceived qualities, on the other hand, are clear and uncomplicated; what the person perceives is, by definition, the reality they perceive and the reality they own.

*Range of acceptable variance between desired and perceived qualities.* It was stated above that the comparison and contrast between desired and perceived qualities is a “predictor” of a person’s decision as to whether to pursue a relationship with another person. It is important to understand that it is just that, and not a determinant. And indeed, this point serves to introduce a third, and crucial, assessment overlay. Assume that, similar to the example just provided, a certain quality is desired and desired at, hypothetically-speaking, a numerical level of 75 out of 100. Further, presume that that quality is perceived in the other person to be present at a numerical level of 20 out of 100, clearly incompatible and insufficient with what is desired. One may conclude that, given that contrast, that a relationship should be terminated. However, this is where the additional consideration becomes salient. That is, a person also establishes a *range of acceptable variance*—in other words, a range of difference that they are willing to accept between the net of a desired quality and the degree to which that quality is perceived in the other person. In the theoretical example above, then, the person would have to prescribe a range of acceptable variance of, at least, 55; otherwise, they would extinguish any relationship they had with the other person. One may suggest that this is, in essence, prioritization of certain qualities over others. Indeed, it is, however, it is not prioritization in the normal sense of *ranking* desired qualities. Rather, it is prioritization in the sense of a person allowing for only a narrow gap between desired and perceived for those qualities they give greatest priority, and conversely, allowing for a wider gap for those given lesser priority. Marlene, Dale’s wife, had a narrow range of acceptable variance with regard to those qualities that are implicit with being a good father to her children, including such things as responsibility, compassion, and child-centeredness, and therefore those qualities

carried a high priority for her.

To elaborate further, different ranges of acceptable variance amount to, in layman's terms, different "fudge-factors." Say that a person gives greater priority to the quality of self-control, as exhibited by marital faithfulness, than they do to the quality of fairness, exhibited by their equitable participation in household chores. In terms of the range of acceptable variance, the other person would have a greater fudge factor if they were perceived to be lax in taking out the trash than they would have if they were perceived to be lax in maintaining sexual boundaries. For the former, the person may allow greater flexibility, placing a lower priority on fairness; while in the latter, the person may expect a high degree of precision from the other person with regard to what the person desires and what they perceive in the other person, thus placing a higher priority on self-control.

Returning to the illustration of overlaying the desired qualities histogram with the perceived qualities histogram, the picture becomes complete when this third overlay is added—one which shades the overlay of the first two with color, denoting the range of acceptable variance between the desired intensity of a quality and the perceived intensity of a quality.

*How developmental factors influence desired and perceived qualities.* Like a person's own actual qualities, the qualities that the same person desires in a spouse are rooted in the developmental factors explained above: (a) their biological make-up, (b) the contexts within which their lives function, (c) the state and progression of their internal and external self, i.e., intrapersonal operations, and (d) the decisions they make. (As an aside, conventional wisdom might suggest that this helps explain why individuals

occasionally appear to aspire to marry someone like themselves—that is, the same developmental factors that interact in the production of a person's actual qualities are the factors that interact in the production of the qualities a person desires.) Earlier, in this section, factors in Dale's development demonstrated how he came to be endowed with the actual qualities of social responsibility and compassion. His wife, Marlene, was raised in a home where, similar to Dale, she felt neglected by her biological father. He was a truck driver about whom Marlene said

Dad was always what I consider to be a very hard-headed, selfish person.... When he could be home, [he was out] hunting and fishing.... I seen what it done to me growing up. Dad was never there. I really, truly, honestly do not have any memories of my dad as a kid outside playing with us or anything....

So, when Dale gained his commercial driver's license and became a truck driver, Marlene told Dale that she was “passionate” that he be different than her mother's husband.

I made that abundantly clear [to Dale] that wasn't going to happen to me, and so I think that definitely was a huge thing in my life was to make sure my girls had more of a relationship with their dad than I did with mine.

Accordingly, one may observe that Marlene's familial and economic context (i.e., her father's employment as a truck driver), her intrapersonal operations (i.e., perceptions of her father's indifference and stubbornness, and her thoughts and feelings of neglect), and her self-determination (i.e., explicit decision “to make sure my girls had more of a relationship with their dad than I did with mine”) led to Marlene's formation of desired qualities that can be expressed as social responsibility and compassion. When compared with qualities she perceives in Dale, and further compared with the priority Marlene has placed upon those qualities, this serves to explain some significant part of why Marlene feels good about her marriage.

Perceived qualities (a person's perception of another person's qualities) also arise from developmental factors, since perceptions are interpretations of a person's observations, and those interpretations may be influenced by (a) the perceiver's biological capacities, (b) the contexts surrounding the person's observations and interpretations, (c) and other intrapersonal operations (e.g., memories of other observations, current feelings and attitudes, other simultaneous observations and perceptions), that affect how the perceiver interprets an observation. Ultimately, self-determination in this case is equivalent to perception since, implicitly, the perceiver reaches a conclusion of what their perception is. Therefore, Marlene perceives qualities in Dale according to her capacity to observe and her intellect. The qualities she perceives in Dale are affected by the contexts and intrapersonal operations she experienced as a child. And finally, Marlene's *determination* that Dale possesses a given quality and that he possesses it at a particular intensity, then, is another way of saying that this is her *perception* of Dale's qualities.

#### *Primary dimensions of marital health assessment*

Ultimately, the model argues for two areas of assessment that yield the individual husband or wife's determination of the degree of health in their marriage. One is called *relational congruence*, and is the product of the three overlays suggested above: desired qualities, perceived qualities, and range of acceptable variance. Using Dale and Marlene as a specimen couple, here is how that part of the model is translated from their descriptions of their realities: Marlene's *developmental factors* led her to establish *qualities she desired* in her partner, both prior to the marriage, and thereafter. Among those desired qualities were social responsibility and compassion, and beyond that,

Marlene also formed in her mind *a level of intensity she desired* for each of those. This forms the first overlay. Dale's *developmental factors* led him to acquire social responsibility and compassion as actual qualities, which emanated from a feeling of disconnection with both his biological father and his stepfather. Marlene's developmental factors and Dale's actual qualities provided the basis for the *qualities she perceived* in Dale, which constituted the second overlay. And finally, since social responsibility and compassion were high priority qualities Marlene desired, owing to a disconnection similar to Dale's with his father, *the range of acceptable variance* was minimal. Thus, just looking at Dale and Marlene in this limited way, the model posits that Dale's perceived fulfillment of two of Marlene's highest priorities should reasonably indicate a positive assessment of the health of the marriage from Marlene's perspective. A fuller discussion of the health of Dale and Marlene's marriage would go on to examine other qualities Marlene desired and perceived, and moreover, the other qualities that Dale desired and perceived in Marlene.

The second area of assessment is *personal integrity*. This part of the model essentially asserts that the qualities of the husband that Marlene perceives are, indeed, the qualities that Dale also perceives in himself. Hypothetically, if Marlene perceives qualities in Dale that he considers to be erroneous perceptions on her part, this could affect how Dale assesses the health of the marriage, perhaps in a much different way than Marlene. Assume that Marlene perceived Dale to be sexually loyal, yet he had had a secret affair; then, his honest assessment of the marriage most naturally would be to consider the marriage to be unhealthy. Personal integrity would dictate a decidedly different analysis than what relational congruence on its own dictates. The example

illustrates that both must be assessed positively in order for the spouse to believe their marriage to be healthy.

Having noted all of this about personal integrity, data collection for the current study nonetheless approached each individual under the presumption that personal integrity was high. That is to say, there was no extensive effort to cross-examine partners to check for inconsistencies. In the couple interview, the question always was asked, “What do you believe makes a good wife (or husband)?,” and the respondent would characteristically gravitate toward some quality of their spouses that they considered salient. The only question that may have revealed some personal integrity defect was that, as a follow-up to this couple interview question, individual spouses were asked to comment on why they believed their spouse cited that particular quality as important. And, characteristically, they would own the quality that their spouse had conveyed, and would proceed to talk about their own theory for why that quality had evolved to its high-priority position. At no time did a participant reject their spouse’s perception as invalid. Thus, of the two types of assessments, the current study more thoroughly examines the relational congruence assessment because personal integrity went unchallenged by each person’s spouse.

#### *Synergists Relevant to Individuals’ Healthy Marriage Assessments*

Analysis of the current research focused on cognitions (perceptions, standards, goals, and concerns), emotions (feelings, attitudes and temperaments), and behaviors (both verbal and non-verbal) observed through the lens of semi-structured interviews with both the individual and their spouse. A foremost intention of the analysis was to identify one or more high-priority qualities that appeared salient to each person’s capacity

to be a partner in a healthy marriage. This is the essence of research question number two (see p. 12), which asked, with respect to personal qualities of one or both, what thought processes, emotional states, and behaviors do they describe as most relevant in their marriages being “healthy?” (All of this is explored beginning with the next section of this chapter.) The other foremost intention of the analysis was to settle upon one or more lifespan developmental factors that appear to reasonably account for the acquisition of that quality or those qualities. This is the essence of research question number one (see p. 12), which asked, as low-income couples describe their marital and life histories, what conditions (backgrounds and antecedents) do they describe as most relevant in helping them create and maintain a healthy marriage?

As part of the selective coding process, individual explanations were compared and contrasted with each other in order to identify those that were collectively alike. Accordingly, the evidence of this study supports that one or more of four principal synergists fundamentally explain why each of the 20 subjects considered their marriage to be healthy. The synergists posited are (a) sensitizing experiences, (b) an accumulation of personal history that led to a perspective of their partner as their rescuer, (c) acute parental influences, or (d) religious influences. The following sections attempt to examine each of those synergists, and inherent with that examination, will offer some limited, coincidental perspective on the quality or qualities that appear to be associated with a given synergist.

#### *Sensitizing experiences*

The journey of Dale and Marlene is common to four other couples (Duke and Daisy, Tyrone and Sarah, Bill and Claire, Tyrone and Dharma, and Roy and Marie), plus

two other individual spouses (Carol and JoAnne), in that, all of these had at least one experience that had significant influence both on the actual qualities they developed within themselves, and the qualities they came to desire in a person with whom they would choose to make a lifelong commitment. More specifically, a repeated characteristic of these experiences is that they were *emotionally sensitizing*. The person came away from the experience with more than a cognition—as in, a lesson taught, or a new goal or a standard of behavior in their mind. Rather, they came away with a cognition intensified by an accompanying deep feeling or attitude. Spouses regularly attributed the emergence of the qualities they most wanted to develop within themselves to a sensitizing experience. And concurrently, they regularly indicated sensitizing experiences to be important in the determination of the highly prioritized qualities they sought in a lifelong partner.

Childhood abuse is a sensitizing experience reported by six of the ten wives (Daisy, JoAnne, Sarah, Carol, Claire and Dharma) who participated in the study. The abuse that Daisy endured came at the hands of a controlling boyfriend when she was a high school sophomore. The exact nature of the abuse was not indicated, but was so extreme that Daisy said, when she finally stood up to him, it was “the defining moment” of her life. JoAnne also did not specify in her interview the type of abuse that she had experienced, but indicated that it was the cause of her being removed from her parents’ home at age 14 and her placement into foster care. For each of the other four, the nature of the abuse was explicitly sexual molestation. While Sarah did not specify whether the source was a family member, others did. For Carol, it was an opportunistic uncle. For Claire, it was more than one of her brothers. For Dharma, it was her biological father.

These sensitizing experiences in these women's development had at least one common influence on the qualities they desired in a committed partner. Here's how Carol answered the question of what quality she desired in a lifelong partner, just after her husband Mike had said he thought "open communication" was a key:

I would say not just "open communication," but being able to talk about anything, and knowing that you will still be loved and accepted no matter what you say.... you know, no matter what comes out of your mouth. No matter what comes out of your past that gets remembered or brought up for whatever reasons, but he's gonna be there.

Daisy responded to a similar question that she wanted someone who would communicate with her "like I'm a human... [and that they] will engage with me on the same level, not as a lesser, because I'm a female." JoAnne, Claire, and Sarah also spontaneously said that the other person needs to be a good listener. Dharma broke up with Tyrone, who is now her husband, just once during their courtship; the causal issue was that she "felt he didn't communicate enough." Now, to be clear, all of these wives desired other qualities in addition to this, however it is substantive that none of the six failed to think of "being a good listener" as one of their highest prioritized desired qualities.

Perhaps Carol's remarks are most illustrative of how good listening is both a desired quality, and one that she perceives in her husband, Mike. Their first "official" date was a long evening of simply talking, just sitting on some swings in a park after a church group event. It was there that Carol revealed to Mike, for the first time to anyone, the misery of the secret she had been carrying inside. Carol remembers that that conversation endeared Mike to her in a profound way. "We *connected*... we talked for *hours*... we each knew separately, 'there's something *special* here'... [though] we just didn't tell each other for another few weeks.... It was like a best friend date."

A given synergist—in this case, the sensitizing experience of childhood abuse—

can precipitate multiple high-priority qualities for a person. For instance, Carol also characterized her relationship with Mike this way: "...a very safe feeling... very, 'I'm so glad I have you, because this is what I can always rely on, and you're always gonna be there.'" Congruently, it is the same sense in which she spoke about her older brother, recalling how his presence kept her safe from her uncle: "...when he was around, nothing happened. So he has always been to me my hero, my rescuer, my savior, my best friend. He was my safety net." Once her father returned from military service, he provided a similar benefit to his daughter.

He was very loving to me.... he taught me how to ride on bike, you know. That wasn't my mom, it was my dad... he helped me with math problems... he looked after me when I would get sick... he was very fatherly. But, not very communicative.... Not verbal. Very loving—hug me, touch me, hold my hands—so, I got tactile stimulation always.... When my dad came home, it was like total security for me and just very much, you know, 'When he's around, everything is fine. Nothing can go wrong if my daddy's home.'

What she sought and found first in her brother, then in her father, Carol also sought in a lifelong intimate partner. That provision of a secure feeling, plus the quality of being a good listener, appeared to have had important impact on how Carol assessed her marriage to Mike. She found both qualities well within her range of acceptable variance.

(Incidentally, Carol did not find the provision of a secure feeling in her mother, or at least not to an acceptable level. At another point in her individual interview, she confessed to having held a grudge against her mother, confused and angry that her mother was not more diligent to protect her. It is an attitude shared by at least one other subject, which will be salient later in this section.)

Some husbands are more adept than others in terms of being a good listener, or the intensity of their listening performance. Similar to how Carol characterized her

earliest conversations with Mike, Daisy said of her earliest conversations with Duke,

We didn't talk about anything.... but we'd talk forever about nothing, you know... Just the fact that he cared about what I was saying... that was 'big time' for me cause I would never talk, even about stupid stuff, I would never talk on the phone for that long about nothing... and the fact that I would call him when I got home—I would be partying or drinking or whatever, and I would call him and just, we'd sit up all night and talk. It was because he respected me and he listened to me, and actually cared about what I was saying. I knew that. I don't know how I knew that, I just knew that. So, yeah, that was the big turning point for me.

JoAnne indicated that it is and has been her routine with her husband Dominic through the course of their marriage to set aside time on a daily basis for one-on-one conversation. Sarah also felt good about how her husband, Jose, not only would listen but characteristically would embrace her suggestions instead of acting defensive. Supporting that, she told of a book she had recently read about nutritional benefits of eating raw foods. "He didn't just bash down the raw foods idea. He was like, 'Well, maybe we should try to eat more of them and see where that takes us.... So he was definitely very open about that kind of thing."

Other husbands were adequate to their wives' desired intensity of listening, but clearly still had room to grow. Both Bill (Claire's husband) and Tyrone (Dharma's husband) were said to necessitate some prodding from their wives occasionally, but in distinctly different ways. For Claire, her concern was mostly a matter of Bill being a good listener in the context of family issues that arose, not necessarily her personal communications with him. She described times when a situation may have surfaced with one or more of their daughters, and Bill would initially seem disconnected, even though physically present to the conversation. As a result, she had developed a concise but effective phrase: "Bill, engage!" Typically, upon hearing those words, she said Bill would be responsive, and she would feel obliged to have him "take over." In his own

interview, Bill also recognized listening as an area where he could stand some improvement for Claire.

Dharma, on the other hand, said she sometimes seeks a deeper personal intimacy in her conversations with Tyrone—for him “to see me.” He acknowledged as much when he said

I am still trying to connect with [her] in a way that she wants to be connected. It has been recently that... [she said], ‘You don’t listen to me with your heart. You hear with your head, but not with your heart.’ You know, that one threw me back, and I was like, ‘Okay, so that means I need to really be attentive’ [Tyrone’s tone indicating he was guessing at the meaning].

Later in the same interview, Tyrone made it clear that he recognized Dharma’s need, and desired to meet it, though he knew it would be very challenging for him.

It’s a growing experience, trying to ‘listen to [her] heart.’ Yeah, it’s like, ‘You are making me do something I don’t want to do. I am not that person.’ But in the same way, same point, I need to do that, because that is what Dharma is needing from me, so it’s, I have to do it. Even though it makes me uncomfortable and I have no clue what she means, I have to try to figure that out.... I think it is for both of our happiness. I think that will be a way that we connect that we’ve never connected before. I mean, when she said, it was kind of like, ‘Oh, I see what you mean,’ but I was just like, ‘I have no clue how to get there.’

The lack of communication that had caused a break-up when Dharma and Tyrone dated, again nearly broke them up when his job demanded too many hours away from her and their new baby. And even at the time of their final interviews, they were having this on-going dialogue about her need for him engage her at more emotional level.

For both Bill and Tyrone, it appears that they are within the range of acceptable variance for listening, though maybe barely so; and, that concurrently, both may have received some credit under the desired quality of responsiveness, since both recognize their wives’ desire for a greater intensity.

Dharma’s sexual abuse as a child also presented as a sensitizing experience that

yielded another important desired quality for her future mate, though admittedly not one that would have eliminated very many men from consideration: capacity for fatherhood. She revealed that throughout her childhood and teenage years, when she fantasized about being married, it was only coincidental to having children.

That was big. That's why I got married as young as I did. I was afraid I would never get to be married and have a baby. At least.... I always thought [once I was married] I was going to have lots of babies. I was gonna have six, seven, lots of them.

Dharma said that her motivation was rooted in the abuse she experienced from her dad, and simultaneously, in the lack of protection she felt she should have received from her mom.

She should left him you know. She's [supposed to be] protecting me, that kind of thing, but my adult [perspective knows] that she did the best she could.... I always dreamed of being home, you know, taking care of family.... I [wanted to be nurturing]. I didn't have it. I wanted to give my kid what I didn't have, and I always thought when I was little that the problem was that my mom worked. I know now that that was wrong.

That Dharma wanted to have children and be nurturing to them in a way contrary to what she received from her own parents is an example of a reoccurring theme similar to what Dale and Marlene conveyed—that is, that individuals reacted to their sensitizing experiences by determining to pursue actual qualities in themselves and desired qualities in a partner that would support their goal to reverse a familial trend that they detested. Dharma strove to develop qualities befitting someone who is a good nurturer, and desired a reproductively potent mate. Dale sought to develop qualities befitting the good father that he felt his own father and stepfather were not. Marlene said she was determined to find a mate whose qualities she perceived to mirror those of a good father. Essentially, they all purposed to become a kind-of intergenerational buffer, developing qualities in themselves and seeking out qualities in an intimate lifelong partner that would positively

alter the otherwise-expected negative trajectory of their family's history and future. This theme appeared among others who exhibited this synergist of sensitizing experience, such as Claire who will be introduced soon. It also appears with regard to the synergist called partner-as-rescuer mindset and acute parental influences.

Interestingly, Dharma did not have "lots of babies" after all; she bore only one son who came into her and Tyrone's life after about three years of being married. However, the strength of her relationship with Chris (not his real name) has turned out to be more than sufficient, and as a result, Tyrone gained credit with meeting that highly prioritized, though not unique, desired quality.

Sensitizing experiences may occur and have affect upon qualities developed *prior* to the relationship, as in these cases of abuse. They also may be developed *during the course* of the relationship. Following their marriage, Roy and Marie had their only daughter, Brittany (not her real name), and soon discovered that she had autism. As a result, their marriage faced its greatest challenge, which was conflict with their own parents who believed Roy and Marie's parenting behaviors was at-fault for their grandchild's deficit. Roy commented that

I believe that if me and Marie didn't have such a good relationship and the patience we would have never made it. God, it was unbearable. It was like you get blasted by your parents, nobody wanted nothing to do with you, and you just felt so alone.... I tell you one thing. You know, we lost the house in that fire, no insurance, I've been injured, she's had old injuries coming up. I mean [Marie] was even on a bedpan. I had to stay with her, what, you been in a bed for close to two weeks, couldn't even walk. But I mean, out of everything that we have been through, [dealing with our parents through the ordeal with Brittany's autism] been the toughest thing... the toughest.

They both remained emotionally shaken even at the time of their interview as they shared that Marie's mother once proposed that Roy and Marie give up the child so that Marie's parents could raise Brittany instead. Marie said her relationship with her mother

had never been the same since that moment. Concurrently, where their marriage was concerned, the state of affairs pushed Roy and Marie to close ranks and to bond even closer together. Shared adversity and their shared child-centeredness resulted in both Roy and Marie desiring to be able to rely upon each other for social support. Perceiving that kind of commitment from the other partner, the marriage relationship congealed and increased its resiliency.

Just a few years into her marriage with Duke, Daisy encountered a situation that is reminiscent of Roy and Marie's in several ways. In the couple interview, when asked about milestones that had occurred over the course of the marriage, Daisy responded almost instantaneously:

I think the biggest milestone for me is when Caleb got sick. Instead of [me] pushing [Duke] away, we became closer. Usually when I get stressed out, I would've pushed everybody away, and I would've done it my own way, but I think that's the first time I ever really let myself go completely, and it was so scary.

She went on to explain that their second child had a posterior birth, which means that he was born upside down from a normal birth; and that, at five months, he began having seizures that were apparently shutting down all of his physical development according to doctors. It was very likely that their son would suffer mental retardation and that, potentially, he might never even gain the motor skills necessary to walk.

*Duke:* And so I was spending nights at the hospital...

*Daisy:* ...and I was spending days. We would go back and forth and somehow managed to keep it together... and I don't know, still I don't know how, but...

*Duke:* Oh, it was, and it was weird at moments because the neurologist came in at one point, I remember, it was our first hospital visit and she comes in and there's like this team of other doctors that are in training...

*Daisy:* [The condition] was very rare.

*Duke:* Yeah. And so, they were, “This is a child with West Syndrome or infantile spasms,” and, oh my gosh, it was just after he had had some spinal fluid taken, and so we’re sitting there trying to keep things a little quiet and here comes this team of doctors and they’re whispering to themselves and, but at the same time we’ve got a few questions that are more personal and, you know, I can remember almost breaking down just wanting some answers and they weren’t really being clear on the answers. But with this whole crowd of strangers in the room, I remember our...

*Daisy:* I broke down, I lost it. Cause as soon as they said... I’d done internet research, I knew if they said “infantile spasms,” I know it’s bad. And they said it, and I lost it.

(Later, Duke and Daisy would find a knowledgeable doctor who successfully treated their son’s condition. At the time of the interviews, Caleb was six years old. While his parents shared that he was still somewhat developmentally delayed, that was not readily apparent.)

The experience sensitized Daisy in a profound way in that, she said she was presented with a crisis that totally overwhelmed her. It demanded that she give up control, something that, it seems plausible to believe, she may not have relinquished to another person since the time of her fateful encounter with the abusive boyfriend in high school. Related to that, she would have to allow someone else to pick up some part of the responsibilities for what she held most dear, her suffering child. “I think with me, in the past, I never had anybody I trusted enough to turn towards... I guess [this time] I knew that I couldn’t do it by myself. It would have killed me.” Duke said that he recognized early in the crisis Daisy’s normal inclination toward pushing everyone else away, and her desire to remain in control of everything having to do with managing Caleb’s situation. In spite of the fact that Caleb was, after all, his son too, he took no offense. Instead, he determined that he just needed to exert more patience with her than ever, interpreting Daisy’s controlling inclination as “her big heart going through some turmoil.” Duke

attempted to anticipate the qualities in him that she would need, and so he began taking a greater share of housework and anything else that would allow his wife to get the time she would need to recuperate emotionally between hospital visits.

When asked to elaborate in the individual interview as to why she was able to draw closer to her husband and to let him shoulder some of the effort, Daisy responded that she was strengthened through Duke's faith:

I knew that he could help me because he's got a great deal of faith, and that's when my faith grew. Even in the hardest time, it really developed, so.... I guess I just knew that I needed him.... at least I had somebody who was going through the same things with me and can help me.

So, prior to Caleb's ordeal, the desired qualities of leadership and faith may not have appeared very significant in Daisy's mind. However, this sensitizing experience was the harbinger for a recalibration of her desired qualities in her mate, and as that occurred, she perceived rather quickly that Duke was sufficiently endowed with her newly prioritized qualities.

Duke observed in his individual interview, "Life just brings us all little storms. Ours was called Caleb. For somebody else, it might have been called the IRS. But, it strengthens the connections or it... fractures them... for some people it becomes the turning point."

Duke also carried sensitizing experiences with him into his marriage to Daisy, spawning important actual and desired qualities from what he referred to as "the two major intimate relationships I've ever been through." He described a girl in high school with whom he had become especially close following the suicide of her mother. There were even periods of romance between them. "I loved this girl that did not necessarily love me back the same way.... Then she would be breaking my heart and go off with this

other guy.” Speaking of her on another occasion, Duke said, “She wanted to have feelings for me, but then she would say ‘Oh, we’re just friends.’” He paused, and through a smile and tone of voice that seemed to betray the pain of his youth, said “I *hated* that line.”

The second major intimate relationship was his first marriage. Notably, Duke was the only spouse in the current study to have attempted marriage previous to his current one. He described it as almost passionless from the beginning. They had become friends in college. When he summoned up the courage and voiced an interest in pursuing a relationship with her, at first she responded by saying she would rather remain friends, and in fact, she would like to “hook [me] up with her cousin.” He continued, “I should have taken that as a... sign that she has made her mind up and I should move on.” But, instead he persisted, thinking at the time that he had so much love to give, and that he needed to regard the love that she needed as paramount to his need to feel loved. Now, at 35 and with the benefit of hindsight, he also understood that he was pursuing affection that he felt he had missed in high school.

Before I even asked her to marry me... I realized, “She is not wanting physical intimacy the way I wanted physical intimacy”.... I guess she had her own motives for relationships but it didn’t have to be with a lot of physical affection even holding hands, and even kissing became just something that she didn’t necessarily... want to do.... I can remember thinking on the night of our wedding the wedding rehearsal that you know, “I don’t know if I should do this or not,” and yet part of me [said] “I don’t want to be embarrassed. My money has been spent”... I can still look back realize I was doing it even as I was hugging her in the church, [thinking] to myself, “Oh my gosh.” My brother had already warned me. He already knew that she and I weren’t going to operate together. It was tough.

The relationship ended after four years of frustration. Looking back, he saw more clearly his rationale for trying so hard. “I [was] trying to listen to my [inner] voice [which said] ‘I want to make this about *real love* [as opposed to lust].’” He had seemed to find an

ironic comfort in the fact that she was so cold romantically, such that it put him in a position to test his own ability to love without necessarily gaining, in return, any of the physical affection he so desired. He had told himself early in the marriage, “As much as you’re not getting from this relationship, she still has a lot that she needs from this relationship.... I remember just wanting to make it selfless.” Eventually, he became tired and exasperated. He learned that he had limitations.

I [now] begin to understand first of all that marriage just had to be a balance of what I want and what she wants. It has to be there, has to be a little bit more compatibility. I was just hoping that my own God-love inside of me... would help me to change what I wanted, but I still had my wants I still had my hopes and aspirations. Plus, I was looking for a fundamental basic respect and a sharing.... In both of my previous relationships, also, one of the things that occurred to me is both of them, at one point, said, ‘Oh, I just wanted to be just friends.’

These sensitizing experiences shaped Duke into a different person, teaching him qualities he should have desired more, and conditioning him to become a person with a greater inclination for patience, an unassuming approach toward others, and a basic self-respect. “I decided, ‘Marriage? I’m never going to do that again. Let’s just focus myself in other areas.’” So when he encountered the “absolute beautiful gorgeous woman” at work, there was no compulsion to imagine anything beyond a casual friendship with her. Though her beauty was undeniably alluring, ironically, he was content to be “just friends.” He had no idea how equally alluring he was to her when he spoke to her in a way that validated her, and conveyed respect. Seemingly on a whim, Duke asked her if she would like to catch a movie after her shift ended. He remembered his reaction when she surprised him and said, “Okay.” “Appreciate this for what it is,” he said to himself. “This absolute beautiful gorgeous woman... said ‘Yes’ to going on a date. I thought, ‘Wooow.’ I was just blown away by that.”

While it was a low-key, casual beginning, the weeks that followed were almost

magical because in so many ways, the desired qualities of Duke's heart would be realized in ways that left him in awe. To him, it was simultaneously peaceful and exhilarating; using his own analogy, very much like playing in the ocean surf:

Never once did she talk about 'just being friends'.... Normally, in past relationships, I was the pursuer. [But] she came to *me*. She called *me*. She drove over to *my* house. And so I felt like... I was riding this wave.... and I was completely content just to see where it went. This was different for me... because I was forcing the waves in earlier relationships, and now I'm riding this wave. And you know, it seems like it's coming together here, [and then] here comes another bigger wave.... We would ride to this thing, and suddenly it just found its way just going perfect... it just came together in ways I just could not believe.

Increasingly, Duke began to feel confidence that the relationship actually could go somewhere, and at that point he began to let himself think more soberly about the assessment overlays that had developed—what he genuinely desired, how Daisy's qualities compared to what he desired, and whether the intensity of those qualities fell within an acceptable range.

There were markers that I had learned to look for: Can we speak to each other honestly? Can we share our feelings honestly? Can we accept one another for who we are? Can we take the good and the bad? But also, with that good has to come a balance with what each of us want from this relationship, what each of us are looking for.... In the areas where we contrast, can they still work together?... Where we do compare, [and] where we do come together, where we do well.

Duke desired honesty. He desired openness. He recognized that he needed to perceive both of those within his range of acceptable variance before he could have confidence that his perceptions of her other qualities were well-informed and valid perceptions. And once having that, he stated here that he desired knowledge that her qualities were within his range of acceptable variance and that his own qualities were within her range of acceptable variance—a circumstance to which the term *mutual compatibility* is often applied.

Duke continued, analyzing his own actual qualities, and more about how his

desired qualities had been reformed through the trials of the two earlier significant relationships:

It taught me a lot about patience. It taught me a lot about, when I entered a relationship, go with the flow of it, don't force it... Also, it taught me about what to look for. I wanted somebody to respect me. I also wanted somebody who wanted some of the things I wanted—the affection, the...emotional connection.... I keep coming back to respect. You know, we appreciate each other for who we are, and we are not trying to change each other. And that is one thing I refuse to do. I wasn't going to try to change her and along the way she wasn't trying to change me and that it just seemed to come together so well... I call it a miracle and even now looking back I just don't know how it happened except by the hand of God.

Sometimes, sensitizing experiences mainly affect the qualities a person desires in another, as seen in Daisy's development. Other times, sensitizing experiences have a dual effect upon both the qualities desired and the person's actual qualities, as seen in her husband Duke. And then, sometimes sensitizing experiences are most strongly and precisely associated with the actual qualities developed within a person. Consider Bill, whose sensitizing experience just after high school graduation also was unique in that it first worked against his marriage rather than for it. Regarding the girl he had dated for about 18 months, he said "for me, the sun rose and set with [her]." He "had complete trust in her." But later he found out that, in the late stage of their relationship, she had begun dating, not one, but two other guys. Bill recalled that the discovery

....really crushed me. I was devastated. I had a hard time, and that caused a lot of problems [later] in my relationship [with Claire, his wife]... because, you know that would always flash back... And that was... probably the hardest thing we had to overcome. You get past the arguing, [and the hardest thing we had to overcome were my] control issues.

Claire corroborated his conclusion. She recalled that, when they were first married, Bill was content to leave her at home every day without a car and without a phone.

I became very isolated... he was concerned that at any moment, [his beautiful new wife] would get tired of him and hit the road or something or go find somebody else, which was so frustrating, because the trust was not there.... I eventually learned that it wasn't necessarily a matter of trust as much as his low self-esteem—which surprised me [since] I was the one who was supposed to have low self-esteem. And it was his problem, not mine, and I couldn't fix that.

The difficulties met their zenith a few years later when Claire went to work at a large manufacturing company, and Bill's fears about his wife potentially finding another man became practically unbearable for Claire.

Trust on his end was a problem for a really long, long time and finally, I would just submit myself to the grilling thing. That is what I would call it—he would grill me. “Where you been, what are you doing, dadadada....” He would say “I’m just so afraid.” After I had just had enough and I said, “You know what? This is your problem, not mine, and I refuse to submit to the [grilling].” And I had nothing to hide.

In the end, Claire perceived Bill's victory over the trust issues brought on by the sensitizing experience of his late adolescence as a testimony to an actual quality of bravery, which she said she came to regard as the most important factor in their marriage's success.

I am very much a people person, and I needed out in the world [when we were first married]. He didn't even want me to have my license. I mean, [earlier in the interview] I said no *car*, but I [didn't even have] a *license*.... Part of it was, I had this explosive need for people, for variety, for difference, for lots of things. And he, in essence, [just] needed *me*. So, he [eventually] was willing to change those things that smothered me. And he actually—he has said this before—he actually enjoyed the metamorphosis. He enjoyed stepping back and giving me a little bit of breathing room and watching me turn into who I am now. It takes a big man to say that, and it takes a big man to be willing to change like he has. I think that saved our marriage more than anything I ever did.

Interestingly, then, this lingering sensitizing experience that Bill brought to the marriage, and that created this substantial difficulty with trust, created new sensitizing experiences for Claire with every “grilling.” She felt harassed and, at times, interpreted Bill's distrust as if he believed his wife was “cheap.” Consequently, his belief in her

commitment toward him, which also could be termed trust, became a high-priority quality desired by Claire. Both spouses told the story that the relationship was on the brink of finally imploding one evening as Claire drove to work for her normal third shift, following yet another argument. In desperation and in tears, she thought to call their pastor, and he responded by going to their house and talking with Bill until the early hours of the morning. He became convinced that Bill was likely suffering from depression, and persuaded Bill that it was critical that he receive some professional help. Bill acquiesced, and Claire regarded that as having been a turning point in what she now assesses as a healthy marriage.

Summarizing Claire and Bill’s marital health, Claire was asked in the couple interview to talk about qualities of a good husband. As stated earlier, “being a good listener” was one that she volunteered. However, first on her list was “someone deserving of love and respect.” As Claire indicated above, in the final accounting, not only did Bill emerge to meet her desired quality regarding *trust*, but he also emerged to meet her desired quality of *courage*—a personal courage that, she indicates in the quote above, she greatly *respects* and is a primary reason for the success of their marriage.

The extent to which mental health challenges impacted participants’ marriages will be examined more extensively later in this chapter, but within the current discussion of sensitizing experiences, it is important to note that Bill was not alone in his internal battles. In fact, for eight of the ten couples participating in the study, at least one partner spoke openly about dealing with some evident mental health concern, such as depression. Dharma was one of those, and in her case, it was specifically diagnosed as a bipolar disorder. Like Bill’s marriage to Claire, Dharma’s marriage to Tyrone encountered a

rocky period when divorce was explicitly contemplated; what is more, like Bill, this occurred sometime before doctors had evaluated her mental health condition. However, that is where the comparison ends. Bill's depression presented itself in a way that made Claire feel untrustworthy, and that worked against the marriage's success. On the other hand, the psychotic episode that Dharma suffered presented itself in a way that gave Tyrone an opportunity to affirm his commitment to her as never before.

Dharma and Tyrone had worked for a church-run boarding school for adolescents with behavioral deficits located in a rural area of Kentucky. He was hired to perform maintenance services for the campus, and she was assigned to tutor students outside of their classes. They had intentionally sought something different from Tyrone's previous job, which had demanded so much of his time that their marriage almost suffocated from the lack of interaction. In this new situation, the job conditions were reversed to the other extreme—it allowed them to be together for an extended time practically every day. However, as they explained in their couple interview, it still required some sacrifices.

*Tyrone:* We had lunch, breakfast, dinner together, constantly. That in itself was good. The fact that, you know, I was able to be home, and that was really a blessing....

*Dharma:* It was a commune environment.... You're hours from anywhere, took you an hour and a half to get to Super Walmart. Give you culture shock. No radio. Couldn't afford cable. Couldn't rent movies, because you couldn't get them back on time. They didn't have NetFlix yet, and we couldn't have afforded it anyway.

*Tyrone:* Yeah because for those two, two and a half years or so we ended up not even having TV. I remember my mom mailing... cartoons... for Chris.

*Dharma:* ... We weren't accustomed to [the strict religious] lifestyle.

Over several months, the closed environment and the rigors of working with behaviorally-challenged youth wore on Dharma. When her mom contracted cancer and died within two months of the diagnosis, she began to experience what she called a

“meltdown.” “Her death was a huge drain,” Dharma said. “That was a milestone. I lived and breathed my mother.” The meltdown eventually culminated with Dharma’s admission to a hospital for psychiatric treatment.

*Dharma:* I started dealing with repressed memories concerning my dad. And um... I was crashing and burning.... You know, I think it was isolation, there was a lot of isolation.

*Tyrone:* I think... each little thing was a factor. You know, you just can’t blame it on one. It was just a snowball. We were in isolation, and then the kids, and then her mother’s death, and, you know, the whole thing...

*Dharma:* Yeah, I lost, everything, except for my relationship with [my son], as far as my emotional relationships. Um... but we [looking at Tyrone] didn’t really struggle. I mean, you know, it was stressful...

*Tyrone:* It was very stressful...

*Dharma:* But it was a different kind of stress. I don’t think we felt like we were falling apart. Did you feel like we were falling apart?

Tyrone: No.

*Dharma:* He was right there. I had major ups and downs and ended up having to be hospitalized because of my depression.... psychotic episodes. I had days without sleep because I could not make myself go to sleep, and I started hallucinating. When I went to the hospital, I remember thinking I was never going to see Chris (not the child’s real name) and Tyrone again—that that was it. And [Tyrone] came waltzing in.... I really thought he would take Chris and run.... I wasn’t in control of it....

*Tyrone:* That didn’t cross my mind. I mean... that whole day... it was just surreal.... I mean, just looking back, do you see the warning signs? Yes, but when you are in the midst of it all, you don’t see it, you know. I just remember, when... we finally got her to the hospital, and they are like “Okay, you going to have to go now.” And watching the door shut and the lady is there with a key to open the elevator, I was just like, “Okay, what am I supposed to do next?”

During her interviews, Dharma essentially spoke of three qualities she desired in a spouse. Listening performance and the ability to father children with her were two of those, but the one that had manifested itself most saliently was patience. In the couples’ interview, she made a point to connect her bi-polarity to her gratefulness that Tyrone had

been patient and resilient:

He is just incredibly patient with me. He says he's not patient with [our son], it's because he spends it all on me. (Laughing).... I have been amazed that he has just been so strong as he's been through it all.

Dharma elaborated somewhat in the individual interview:

[Tyrone is] incredibly patient... very laid back and able to maintain, most of the time, sense of self, regardless of what direction I'm going. I think that's really important, because I have taken us on lots of rides. You know he just, emotionally, can stay back sometimes. I don't like that, you know, I want to pull him really in, you know, but I think it's a good thing. We balance each other.

An additional benefit to Tyrone's patience is that it appears to limit the degree to which he allows himself to engage in conflict with Dharma. She described a day recently when a computer store employee made the mistake of making a snide remark directed at Tyrone, and Tyrone verbally retaliated.

[The kid] just did it in a wrong way. [Tyrone] just never got that way with me, I mean he just never react that way with me. It's always sweet, gentle. He barked at [our son]; he never barks at me. Never. I mean, I really have to tried hard to get him even... nothing. I can't get him to fight with me.... I mean obviously if he would blow up on me, it probably won't be great. It won't be good thing. You know, it's not what I really want, but you know when I think about how [our son] can whine.... I can whine all the long. He just says 'It's okay, babe.' you know.... [And] it is sincere it's not placating. It's sincere. He just doesn't get ruffled by it, and believe me I can ruffle a lot of feathers.

And so, the sensitizing experience of her hospitalization appears to have prompted her to strongly desire in her partner the quality of patience, which is one that Tyrone has overwhelmingly met.

*“Partner as rescuer” mindset (PARM) predicated upon cumulative adverse history*

Sensitizing experiences commonly promote an enhanced relational congruence between the person desiring a given quality in their partner and the partner who is perceived to have that quality. Essentially, the person's desired qualities are established, and later, perceived qualities within a satisfactory range are discovered within the partner.

An enhanced relational congruence is also evident in couples when one spouse or both indicate that they have reflected on their life and embraced a perception of their partner as having the qualities of a *rescuer* or *emancipator*—that, had it not been for their partner, they have concluded their life would have been substantially different in a negative way. More precisely, it could be said that the person has recognized the substantial improvements in their life that are due to the interaction between their partner's qualities and their own qualities. In seven of the ten marriages examined in the current study, at least one partner spoke of perceiving their spouse as being their rescuer.

Duke, a person who said he had experienced symptoms of depression, who dealt with physical and psychological consequences of his obesity, and who had carried the profound disappointment of a failed first marriage, contributed to the conception of this synergist. He had been asked to express the quality that Daisy had brought to their marriage that he considered most important to its success. He answered almost immediately, and corroborated that answer with a short recent story from his work as a minister.

First and foremost, [the quality Daisy brought to the marriage] has to be this absolutely huge heart she has. It's the same heart that sees strays or hears or sees an animal and she absolutely has such a love....

The other day, somebody came by. I had seen this guy before.... He just needed [groceries] for a couple of meals. Well, I'm thinking, "We haven't been to the grocery store. We don't have anything.".... He came in the house... [and] I was showing him some of the stuff. We didn't have much of anything. He was like, "Oh, that's good... Oh, I can eat that... That could fill my stomach." You can tell he's got... a slight mental issue but he is a sweetheart, he really is. So, I ended up giving him a bag of food.

Well, Daisy comes home, and she is like [looking for something in the kitchen, and asked], "Where is this?" It was a can of peaches. And I was like, "I gave it to somebody." And she is like "Who did you give it to?" I was like, "Well, this guy came through [and] he was hungry." [She replied,] "Oh. Well, that's okay." You know if I had given it to one of [our] boys or eaten them myself, she would have been upset, but she has this big heart.

Sometimes I can imagine that her love for me has to do with, you know, picking up a stray. Not that she doesn't value me or [lacks] appreciation [for] me, but I thank God that she picks up strays.

Needless to say, practically any person has accumulated a history of adverse situations over their life course. This synergist, "*partner as rescuer*" *mindset predicated upon cumulative adverse history* (to be referred to as PARM from now on), goes beyond that. It specifies the subset of individuals who have reflected upon that adverse history and, as a result, have acquired a persistent image of their partner as someone who has rescued them from what their life otherwise would have become. PARM is similar to the sensitizing experiences aspect, in that, the person's desired qualities may arise ahead of perceiving those qualities in another person; among the descriptions that follow, Roy and Marie fit that category. Both actively sought a partner who would rescue them from their plight, a life seemingly bound for misery. Growing up in an area where coal was king, and thus, where the boom-bust cycles of that industry and discord between coal companies and the United Mine Workers Association were constant stressors for his family, financial hardship was the norm in Roy's experience. "It was a poor community, but it was a happy community," Roy said. "Nobody got spoiled because nobody had anything to start with." He explained that life was, in other ways, rich: Family lived very close by, neighborhood children were always outside playing with each other, and neighbors routinely shared provisions with each other, whether a cup of flour or a few tomatoes that had just been picked from the garden.

Indeed, the misery from which Marie would eventually rescue Roy had less to do with financial status, and more to do with the requisite lifestyle he would eventually adopt as a hard working and well-paid employee. As early as fifth grade, Roy's work ethic seemed evident. From that time until his junior year of high school, he helped his

family make ends meet as the neighborhood's newspaper carrier, and furthermore, sold garden seeds door-to-door to his newspaper customers for a small additional income. As the oldest sibling, Roy also was the family babysitter as necessary. Not long after high school and after a brief stint as a motorcycle mechanic, he began a financially lucrative (relatively speaking) but time consuming and physically corrosive career as an electrician for a local coal mine. It was a decision that Roy said disappointed his dad, who was also a coal miner until his own health declined.

At that time... you had an attitude you were going to be what was painted on the wall—and that was a coal miner.... People like my momma's kinfolk from Louisville, Kentucky [would come to visit], and they just seemed to be more educated than you automatically, and you just figured that there was no sense in pursuing anything else.... It really bothered [my dad] deep. He said he'd rather see me working at a gas station than to go to work in the mines.... I can see why [now], because of... the physical damage it puts on your body.... you're underneath a roof all day long, hundreds of tons of rock where the coal has to be extracted... most of the time [the roof supports] was only about 30 inches.

Roy enjoyed the money in the early years, buying almost anything he fancied—he mentioned guns, motorcycles, nice clothes, and just prior to his decision to ask Marie to marry him, a new truck. While he looked back on that as "wasteful," he saw it as a reaction to the fact that in his childhood, he "never had nothing," and for that reason "your money goes quick." He was a single man making about \$35,000 a year in the mid-1980s, which, adjusted for inflation, is the equivalent of just over \$70,000 in 2008 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). Yet, Roy said his life was seriously incomplete.

Only thing—I was real lonely. I mean, you always had in the back of your mind, because you'd see other people with families and kids—that that's where you needed to be. I don't know. It was just a real lonely life. You just ate, worked, and slept. That's all you done. There was nobody there. You just couldn't enjoy yourself.

Marie was similar to Roy. She recalled, "I wanted to get married long before I ever did. Before I ever met him.... I was thinking, 'O Lord, you know, am I ever going

to find somebody?”” And later, in her individual interview, when asked what really changed for her when she went from being single to being married, she said, “Just not having to worry, ‘Am I ever going to meet anybody?’ Because I really never did get that many dates. Nobody really ever asked me out.”

When they finally married, their relief was immense. “It was like you were on a vacation or something,” Roy said. “You were away from your parents and out from underneath all that scrutiny... you was making your own decisions... and you felt responsible, and you know, it really felt good.” While certainly there were additional reasons they cited for their good marital health, both Marie and Roy indicated that they felt rescued by the other from the prospect of being alone.

While Roy and Marie desired a rescuer before their relationship, a novel feature of PARM is that sometimes the person perceives rescuer qualities in their partner *before* the person *consciously* desires them. Duke had exhibited this. He was not actively seeking a rescuer, but now in hindsight, thanked God that it had been Daisy’s nature to “pick up strays.” Most others for whom PARM applied—Dominic and JoAnne, Fred, Mike, and Claire—were like Duke; that is, they had reflected on their spouse’s qualities that influenced them positively over the course of their relationship, and had recognized in hindsight how their own developmental trajectory may have headed without their spouse’s influence.

Consider PARM in Fred’s story. Five couples in the study had dealt with a pregnancy prior to saying their marriage vows. Fred and Ethel conceived very shortly after the beginning of their relationship, a fact that became known only after Fred had left to begin the commitment he had made to the Navy. Ethel said that when she discovered

her condition, her first reaction was to disappear from Fred's life and deal with the situation on her own. Fred remembered it that was as well:

Had my mother not been there to tell her, 'Hey, you need to tell him,' [Ethel] would have packed up and I would have never seen her again.... She'd have had her children in another country or another city, another state, another realm and I would have never found her.

He said that his life could have been very different if not for his mother's persistence and persuasive abilities with Ethel, and if not for the influence of the qualities of his wife that have resulted in what he calls "a good life," regardless of financial limitations or any other challenge.

I had multiple opportunities for...another life.... And probably no way near what this is--this is a good life. I am really happy with Ethel.... I look back and a lot of people say "What if?," and I say, "Good God, what if!" And I'm not looking at it with fantasy, I'm looking at it with "Thank you, Jesus, things worked out well." Because I know how I was. I was plowin' a hard row, and would have gladly gone anywhere, done anything, because I really didn't care about anything much, at the time. As a matter of fact, if I had met her [at any other time], I'm not sure if I'd made it.

So, Fred made the case that there is a sense in which he was fortunate that the pregnancy occurred as it did, since it put him in a position to have to make a decision to change his life by committing to marriage and fatherhood—and in hindsight, a change overwhelmingly for the better. His marriage to Ethel, he believed, rescued him.

It is common that, when young couples encounter that circumstance, outsiders sometimes wonder if they feel pressured into their marriage; thus, in Bill and Claire's individual interviews, they were asked to recall their feelings. They had known each other for two years, but had only dated briefly when Claire became pregnant. Bill's individual interview occurred first, and he, very matter-of-factly, dismissed the notion of pressure. "It wasn't like the pregnancy was the only reason we got married. It wasn't. We loved each other beforehand." Later, Claire was asked to comment on that assertion, and

agreed with him. "I met him at 14, and took one look at him and said, "This is the guy I want to marry." We were always sure of that, and the pregnancy was a *surprise*, not a *reason*." As evidence of that, Claire told a story about her oldest daughter that simultaneously offers evidence of Claire's perception of Bill as her rescuer.

[My oldest daughter's middle school class] did these digital stories in learning how to work with media... and her story, to this day, is still used [by the school teacher] to teach other people.... [it] is about how [my daughter] always thought [my] being pregnant with her disabled me from being all I wanted to be. And then [as a result of her work on this project], she discovered that, in reality, it was a *gift*—that [the pregnancy and subsequent marriage to Bill] *saved me*. And she's right. Her bit of wisdom from the 6th or 7th grade was really quite amazing to me.

Later in her individual interview, Claire elaborated on the significance of what her marriage to Bill had meant to her life.

[My sister] is eight years older than I am. Currently, she is not addicted to anything, but that's a recent thing.... She married an alcoholic. [Pauses briefly.] Actually, they aren't married.... She didn't break the cycle [of her family's problematic lives].... She quit school probably in 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade.... I am afraid if I had never married [Bill], then I'm afraid I would have ended up just like my sister. Because, prior to him, my pick of boyfriends, although they were few, were not really top of the line. I mean, I never dated anyone as bad as my dad, but I never dated anyone that really.... most of them have never amounted to much of anything. So, I would have... probably continued the cycle.

As mentioned previously, JoAnne, like Claire, experienced abuse as a child. Both JoAnne and her husband Dominic spoke of being rescued by the other. At one point, Dominic was asked in his individual interview to give some insight into how he and JoAnne were able to weather a financial storm about two to three years prior to their interviews, wherein they lost practically all of their material possessions. What allowed them to turn toward each other rather than turn away from each other in that stressful environment?

Man, all we got left is each other. They took the house, the car, the truck, and the [motorcycle], but they can't take my wife and kids.... I will never get rid of this

one [referring to his wife]. I've never thought about it since, never had any doubts or second doubts or what-ifs, you know, "Let's go check out our old [girlfriend]"—none of that. She completed me.

Dominic continued with that thought toward the end of the conversation, saying that he is convinced that JoAnne is the reason he is not either a criminal or a dead man: "You know, I was young and dumb, and she came into my life, and that's what I needed. If she hadn't come into my life, I would probably be six feet under or in prison." Dominic explained that, as a younger man, he had "stupid friends" who sometimes persuaded him to "do some stupid things." He also admits to abusing alcohol, and only stopped after having children and telling himself that it was time to grow up.

JoAnne said that her greatest aspiration for her life as she grew up was "honestly, [to] have somebody who really loved me." Dominic became that somebody. "I just love her, man. I would do anything for her." Thus, for JoAnne, he represents the fulfillment of her childhood dream. Dominic intimated that JoAnne has told him that she considers him to be "her knight in shining armor," and said, "*I saved her* from a life of misery." Dominic is JoAnne's rescuer and JoAnne is Dominic's rescuer. The inherent appreciation for the other person's intervention in their lives appears to be an emotionally and rationally solidifying agent to their marital relationship.

In a way similar to how Dominic spoke of JoAnne, Mike recognized that his spouse Carol also saved him from his own nature. However, whereas Dominic told of his adolescence and young adulthood as being fraught with risky behaviors and the beginnings of his alcoholism, Mike recalled having "always had.... periods of melancholy and downright depression... not manic depressive, not traumatic changes, but just little seasons here and there." His senior year of high school stood vividly as one of those seasons. Mike, a self-described "extrovert" and "communal person," said he was

always part of a small-to-moderate-sized group of friends. “I was never a loner. I was friends with loners, but I was never the one who was a loner.... I needed people around me.” Quite often, those people around him were his peers in the marching band with whom he shared a love for jazz and the renowned Maynard Ferguson. So, it had been particularly traumatizing to Mike at 17 years old when his parents’ decided to begin the process of moving from the bayous of Louisiana to western Tennessee in order to start their own small business. The change in location would mean leaving friendships that were hard to give up. (Mike said he even remains in contact with several of them today.) Beyond the anticipated change in location, there also was a substantial change in family dynamics, as a result of his father’s work and travel to prepare for such a move, and also as a result of Mike’s older sister’s exit for college. With those factors looming large as a backdrop, tragedy struck his extended family when one of Mike’s cousins died in a car accident. It heralded a difficult period for Mike.

I just shut down. Totally shut down for about a month and a half of school, church, everything. I wouldn’t let myself to drive alone, because I had visions of me crashing into a tree and dying like my cousin. If I had somebody else in the car with me, I wouldn’t do that—I may have the thoughts, but I couldn’t do that. So I would not drive, and I preferred just to ride. And that went on for several months. And then it came back, immediately [after I finished] high school. Just a few months after that, we got to move to Tennessee. I was starting my whole new life over again and started a whole life over in college. And I was very depressed, feeling lonely, feeling isolated. It took its physical toll on me. I spent some time at the infirmary. I was throwing up all the time, unable to eat. But I didn’t realize... I didn’t understand... that that’s depression.

Mike also explained that he wrestles with obsessions and compulsions that he believes to be consistent with an “addictive personality.”

I mean, part of the thing that kept me away from alcohol and drugs is that none of my immediate family [including not any of] my parents’ immediate brothers and sisters [experienced] alcoholism. And I have seen it in my friends, and I know that when I get attracted to something, whether it’s The Beatles, whether it’s a TV program, whatever it is, I am addicted. I am obsessed with it until it runs its

course or something else takes its place. And I know that's true for me in terms of, you know, when I am studying for tests and stressed out, I over-consume massive quantities of Dr. Pepper and pizza. So I recognize these things, and I think that if I ever... if I'd ever had a few drinks here and there and I thought "I'll allow myself to do this," I know what I'll do, and I don't want to do that—because I can't do it in moderation. I can't.

Mike said that it is the structure of his relationship with Carol that has kept his psychological challenges in check, saying that she has provided

stability around me that allows me to be who I am, and be creative and free and expressive, but within a structured environment. She gives me... some boundaries so that I don't do something destructive—to me, to her, to family, and someone else... because I could do that easily.

While Mike considered Carol to have saved him from a life of deeper lows and unrestrained urges, Carol spoke of Mike's rescuing qualities in a couple of ways. First, as was mentioned previously, she indicated her fondness for her brother as her protector earlier in life: "...my hero, my rescuer, my savior, my best friend. He was my safety net." While Carol uttered those words explicitly about her brother, it was clear in her individual interview that she always had looked to the closest males in her life for emotional shelter—first, her brother, then her father (following his return from military service), and finally, Mike, who was the first person, male or female, to whom she had ever confided the secret of her sexual abuse.

There is another way in which Carol considered Mike to have saved her, and not only her, but her children as well. Being brought up in a home where money was tight, she confessed that she believed Mike's influence had kept her from a life of "rigidity," a life of only following rules, almost never being spontaneous, and almost never having any fun.

It's kind of how I was raised. It was like, if there is [any money] left at the end of the month, then we *might* do something fun. But [now I've come to think that]... life's too short. [Mike] really brought me out of [the rigid mindset]. It's

impossible to be totally out of debt before you do anything fun. Our kids are going to grow up and be gone out of the house, and they won't have had any fun. We wouldn't have done anything with them.... We would have never gone anywhere... [Mike is] a lot more spontaneous... I just don't know any better, and I wasn't raised that way.

Carol summarized the symbiotic nature of the situation—how he has rescued her, and how she's rescued him—when she poetically said, “So, we balance each other that way... I keep him grounded, and he keeps my head in the clouds.”

#### *Acute parental influences*

Spouses sometimes spoke with a level of passion in crediting the strength of their marriage to instructional influences transmitted either by word or example, sometimes positive and sometimes negative, from parents. The term “acute” is used here to denote that these were influences that somehow rose above the everyday mundane parental conversation and chatter, and stuck with the study participant. Dominic spoke concisely of his parents’ positive example and the impact it has had on his determination:

If my parents can do it, I’m gonna do it. They taught me it can be done.... My mom loves my dad and my dad loves my mom, and I mean they really love each other. They have been together for 45 years. I’m going to try it.

Acute parental influences are salient in every way to the person’s assessment of the health of their marriage—that is, to the developmental factors that have surrounded them through their lifespan, to the actual qualities they have developed, and also to the assessment overlays indicative of the qualities they have desired and perceived, and the range of acceptable variance between those two. Some of these influences are, simultaneously, sensitizing experiences; one example is Marlene’s desire for a child-centered husband, actively involved with her children in contrast to her own father’s lack of involvement. However, others are different from sensitizing experiences in that (a) emotional sensitivity may or may not be particularly evident in the influence, (b) they

never arise from a short-term event but rather, the influence always occurs over an extended period of time, and (c) by definition, they always arise from relationships with family, whether positive or negative. Sensitizing experiences, on the other hand, always have an emotional component, may be short-term or long-term in nature, and are not confined to family relationships.

Both Jose and Sarah credited the health of their marriage to acute parental influences. By Jose's account, the qualities he has taken from his mom and dad's marriage figured prominently in how he had assessed Sarah as a marriage partner from the beginning until then, and also how Jose developed himself into a person capable of participating in a good marriage. He asserted, and Sarah later confirmed, that acute parental influences also were a guiding force in her actual, desired, and perceived qualities as well.

I think one of the things that's helped us in our marriage is that we both had good examples to look at. I mean, neither of our parents are without flaw, and at times, flaws seems to be magnified on both sides. But they were both very committed to each other, and long term marriages. And, I know on my side, most of my family has been like that.

In Jose's individual interview, he said that acute parental influences had been a conscious, premeditated effort, at least on his mother's part:

I think I know quite a bit about my parents' marriage, particularly from my mom.... I think I have always been pretty mature for my age, so even as a high-schooler, my mom would often share with me like an adult.

Jose went on to explain that it was the nature of his father's job as a pastor that he would build many friendships, but not deep ones, which had some implications for his parents' relationship.

My mom was pretty much [my dad's] only confidante.... So that was stressful for both of them at times, and my mom always wanted to have closer friends, but always felt the pressure to keep some distance, too. But the flip side of it is my

parents have always gone out of their way to love each other in so many different ways, just little things. I think one of the examples that my parents set for me that was so special was two-day trips. They did a lot of those [while I was] growing up. Never far, you know, cost would never allow it. They would go find some cute little town, 30 miles away, and we would stay with grandparents and they would just go away, two days together. That's it. Never cruises, they never went on a cruise, never went on a vacation overseas, anything like that, but just little things to do that.

Neither Jose nor Sarah ever suggested that they specifically had implemented these quick romantic getaways. However, the context of this part seemed to be that this communicated to him and his siblings that his parents deeply valued their relationship, and so much so, that they did whatever they feasibly could do to nurture it. He admired that. Then, his mind somewhat abruptly turned to another quality he admired:

I think other thing that I always appreciated was their willingness to apologize. I think that really set a great example.... They would apologize in front of me. Not for everything, I mean, [but] I saw how they would say sorry, and I also saw, they didn't hide their anger away from me either, and I never saw extreme anger but maybe once or twice.

Jose and Sarah both spoke of a courtship that was grounded in their Christian beliefs, which had been consistent with both sets of parents' influence. They made a practice of having small devotionals together, with Jose leading and Sarah participating. In spite of some denominational differences (Jose's family had brought him up as a Methodist, while Sarah's family was fully rooted in Catholicism), Jose perceived qualities in Sarah that would ensure approval from his parents, particularly his father's.

One of the things that my father also said that he appreciated about his marriage was their ability to just be able to talk about things and enjoy each other's conversation. Because, you know, that's something that you can share for a lifetime of a marriage. And I was always able to do that with Sarah. We were always able to, whatever topic we were talking about we could share with each other, and have opinions and discuss things and enjoy common interests.

So, the qualities Jose perceived in Sarah had to agree with the qualities that Jose had come to develop from exposure to his parents' marriage. Still, it is sobering to note

that her perceived qualities could have agreed perfectly with all of Jose's desired qualities, yet the quality given foremost priority was the degree to which Sarah had obtained his father's approval. When he said, "I don't think we would have married if [my dad] had put up a red flag," and "[My parents] opinion was too important," Jose made it clear that failure to meet the range of acceptable variance in this respect would have been rendered the rest of the assessment overlay as moot. Of course, as it turned out, that was never a serious concern. In fact, Jose's father performed the wedding ceremony, which eradicated any doubt whatsoever for Jose that he had his dad's complete approval.

It was special to me to that my father was a part of the wedding. And, I know how many marriages my father's done over the years and he just seemed so supportive of us. And I felt like that was such an indicator, a good positive indicator of our marriage, that my father didn't come to me and say anything about it.

Sarah indicated that she, too, was particularly influenced in her mate selection process by the socialization her parents had provided, and that the family's religious beliefs directly established some of the desired qualities she embraced.

Even when I... didn't really know much about Christianity, I always felt like I wanted somebody who was [knowledgeable]...like, I dated and I wouldn't date for very long if I knew they weren't Christian.... Even in high school when I was... drinking and leaving the house in the middle of the night... I wouldn't have dated for long if he wasn't Christian and... really believed in God. So, it was something that I was pulling right from my parents, those ideals.

Similar to how Jose spoke of his parents' modeling how a good marriage actually functions, and how his mother would speak quite candidly with him, Sarah conveyed the same.

...I mean, my parents marriage was really so strong.... Their marriage was good and sometimes when my mom [even today] tells me their sex was so good and I am like, I didn't really need to hear that... I don't really know what the one would do without the other... They had a Marriage Encounter kind of thing where they would go and do talks and helping other couples.... So they led a lot of those and part of doing that, you know. They hardly used to have a lot of time, so they would take 30 minutes before bed, between like 8 and 9 where they would just,

they would write it out for us and then talk about it. And so their relationship seemed to be always good.

Fred also incurred an acute parental influence, but his story is much different from Jose's or Sarah's, and far from a conventional one. His parents, both previously married and with children from those marriages, divorced just about the same time that he was getting out of diapers. Though his father was intermittently in Fred's life on weekends and during the summer, Fred mainly spent his elementary school years in a home with his mother, his older sister, and his mother's "roommate," that is, someone he later would realize had had a lesbian relationship with his mom. As Fred grew older, evidently sometime around sixth or seventh grade, he said he began to ask questions that were more awkward for his mother to answer, and he suspected that that was partially the reason that his mother and her partner decided to separate. Fred fondly called Maureen (an alias Fred used in the interview) "the best dad I ever had," recalling that she was a positive influence on his mother's authoritarian parenting tendencies. Maureen stood in contrast to his biological dad who was physically abusive with some regularity, at least until Fred turned 16 and began defending himself. While his relationship with his father has long since healed, it is his relationship with his mother that arguably had the most substantial impact on the success of his marriage to Ethel.

[After my sister left] it was just me and mom. Things went pretty well after that .. but I took on an awful lot of responsibilities after that.... The day I got 16, I tested out for my drivers license and I began to run errands... go pay the phone bill and go pickup the groceries.... My mother and I were, we were companions. We never had the Oedipus thing or anything like that, but... I would say I was as much a man of the house, without living in her room, as possible. If she had a problem, she came and talked with me. If the bill collectors called and she didn't want to deal with them , I talked to them. I mean it was kinda silly, but it put a lot on me early.... It taught me how I should treat somebody.... She was still the boss, but yet she would ask my opinion on things and work with me on things.... So it really taught me a lot of how a woman wanted to be treated.... So actually I was able to take a lot of things my mother taught me into my relationship with my

wife.... by her telling me everything that she was upset about.

Fred, in fact, would later describe a similar dynamic in his household with Ethel—having a good sense for how to listen to his wife, and to take responsibility for things that she preferred to avoid, such as dealing with bill collectors. He also recalls important lessons from his mom’s experiences in his late high school years.

I also learned from her from her dating and from her trying. [Speaking here as if he were his mom] “This guy was a jerk cause he would do this and he would do that and I’d wish he would do that”.... If [my mom] was trying to do any kind of spiritual leadership or any kind of moral leadership [with me], it was not working out, but [nonetheless] she was teaching me some good lessons.... I mean we were having this very awkward, open relationship to where she would say, “At least in the bedroom he treats me right,” or, “At least when we’re alone, he touches me right. He’s gentle, he’s not mean”.... I learned everything from dating to dancing. My mother would take me dancing with her.... Neither one of us drank, but we would go to club and hang out. I would go with her, cause I’d hear about some idiot fellow she had met, and I’d just want to make sure he didn’t mess with her.... I’d look like I was in my 20s anyway, been buying alcohol since I was 16 passing for 25.... But I would go with her and everybody would think [that I was her date] and we would laugh and cut up and act like a couple, [that is] until we left, and [then] I would say ‘Yes, Ma’am.’ She taught me that I should open the door, and pull out a chair... and these were the things that would draw her. And, [I understood that] if she could ever find a man like that, that would be the one she would marry.

Fred regretted his mother’s unfortunate and often chaotic romantic journey—two divorces, a separation from a live-in lesbian relationship, and at least one other failed cohabiting relationship with another man.

The old saying goes, “Every boy wants a girl just like the girl that married dear old dad.” Well, I wanted to *be* “dear old dad” for mom.... I wanted to find the guy that was perfect for mom, to see mom happy. So, I learned to *be him* [by implication, for both his mom’s satisfaction and for his wife’s].

For Jose and Sarah, and for Fred, acute parental influences were overwhelmingly positive. There are occasions, though, when acute parental influences instill reasons for caution and fear rather than reasons for optimism. Such was the case for Ethel, Fred’s wife. She said she saw her mother’s negative encounters with, first, her father, and then

other men, and then she also took note of her father's relationship to her stepmother. To the surprise of no one, when she became old enough to date, her relationships emulated those modeled to her.

My parents divorced [when] I was probably 3 or 4 years old the first time. They got remarried to each other and lasted, may be a year. They got divorced by the time I was six.... We moved around a lot. My mom and dad did not get along at all. They had very difficult times trying to even live in the same city as each other. I went back and forth from my mom's and my dad's just about my entire growing up as a kid.... I guess from childhood, watching the relationships that my mom got involved in, some of the guys were not the best, you know, they didn't treat her real well. I remember one guy that she married after my dad who was crazy. He would watch her and have people follow her.... very, very jealous.... If and when she got child support money, she wanted to spend only on my sister and I. And he had a fit, you know, guess that just was not the thing to do, he wanted it. And then, my dad...watching his relationship with my stepmother and then the way he treated my mom, wasn't really thrilled with that either. My mom was no good for anything, and then my stepmom was pretty much his servant. She treated him like a child and did everything for him and I was like, that's not working. And so [I] guess that growing up, I was looking for... I didn't know it, but subconsciously somewhere I guess I was looking for... a male role model or a man that would love me, you know? So, I turned to boyfriends or whatever, and they pretty much treated me the way I let them treat me, which was not very good, because I didn't have very high self-esteem, I guess, either. So my experience with guys, in general, was, "They don't treat me very well." And I guess I have learned, through time and experience, that that was pretty much my fault, because I let them do that, you know. Not always, but usually, if you hold people to a certain standard they will live up to that or they will not be around you. And I didn't know that.

The distrust toward men that Ethel had accumulated in her heart was substantial when Fred first saw her apply for work at his aunt's Dairy Queen. Not long after she was hired, Fred hit on Ethel. She was intrigued by his unique personality, and flattered by the attention he lavished on her, and it was not very long before the relationship progressed from a largely flirtatious one to a sexual one. She became pregnant, but only discovered it after he had left for boot camp. By that time, Fred's mom was Ethel's neighbor and a person with whom Ethel had forged a degree of friendship. As stated previously, Fred and Ethel both acknowledge that the most critical event of their life together occurred

when Fred's mom persuaded Ethel that she should alert Fred to the situation. It was a time when Ethel's conscience begged her to acquiesce to the acute parental influences of her young life. It implored her to vanish from Fred's life so that she could avoid the hurt she was certain to experience if she allowed Fred to know about the child he had helped conceive. Instead, she acquiesced to a sense of what she felt was right, and time has proven to reward her for that decision. To be sure, the set of desired qualities that emerged from Ethel's acute parental influence turned out to be remarkably well matched, after all, to what she found in Fred—a man who had learned how a woman wanted to be treated from a woman, his mother, who herself also had experienced some particularly frustrating and even abusive relationships.

Furthermore, the timing of the genesis of their relationship is worth noting. Arguably, for a number of reasons, it could not have been more serendipitous. One is that Fred said he had tired of his single lifestyle and desired something long-term. Another is that by the time she discovered she was pregnant, they both had forged a modicum of trust, just enough to form a foundation upon which they could begin constructing something more resilient. Ethel said it meant something to her when he accepted that he was the father of their baby, and meant even more when, later, they found out, and he accepted, that he was the father of *twins*. (The quality of trust will be further illuminated by Fred and Ethel's comments later in this manuscript.) In retrospect, Fred is very aware of how his wife's acute parental influences impacted their relationship from its outset to its current state.

She has had issues in her past with her father—a lot like mine with my father, and the same type of issues [such as control]. Not so much, no physical abuse, [but] just looking at how her father treated her mother and things like that, and so she has reason to mistrust all men in general. And I fall into her father's category [as a

result of my gender], and that is position I hold in our house [even] now. From time to time, she'll go "I'm sorry, I am not ready for that because 20 years ago...." So, this is the baggage she brings.

Ethel said she loved and has always had great admiration for her mother. And, even though she had issues with her father, she also recognized that some of those issues were borne out of good motives on his part. That was the case shortly after Fred completed his Navy commitment, and returned home to his family to begin a civilian life. He did not have a job awaiting him, and Ethel recalled that her father tried to convince her to divorce Fred. Ethel said that that was the first time she truly knew she had the necessary trust and commitment to her marriage, because she summoned up the courage to vehemently refuse her dad's wishes. At that moment, she intimated that she graduated from a daughter inappropriately and acutely influenced by a parent to a young woman who could and did establish boundaries. From the perspective of her relationship to Fred, this episode marked a point in her life where she had finally concluded that Fred's trustworthiness was a long-term, enduring quality. He had met a high-priority assessment overlay that was vital to her ability to regard her marriage as healthy.

Like Ethel, Tyrone remembers little of his parents' marriage because he was so young (first grade) when they divorced. At first, he seemed a bit uncertain about how that has affected him.

It probably does, but I am not a very emotional type of person. I don't know how to bring my feelings out.... [On second thought,] it did. I know that I had some anger towards my mom, but I think [that] could be very normal [to say the divorce] was my mom's fault because the marriage did not work out, you know. And, being a guy, a boy, and there's my dad, you know, [I] was always looking up to him, I was saying, "No, it can't be dad."

Tyrone said he, his mother and his brother were only close in the sense that they lived in the same house. He recalled a disjointed, lower-middle class childhood, and even

as an adult, remains largely uninformed about why things occurred as they did. His mom moved him and his older brother to a new town when he was about 10 years old. Tyrone remembered, “I really had a hard time struggling with that move.” He refused to sleep in his bedroom, and he reasons now that perhaps that partially explains why his mother sent him and his brother to see a counselor.

I would say, probably looking back, probably it was more me [as the reason for seeing the counselor], but my mom was very protective. I guess there were a lot of things that she protected us from, through divorce and through things, that, throughout life, we kind of... things slip [out from your parent's mouth as you grow older] and you like, “Oh, that happened.” Like my father was shot, when shortly after the divorce, he kind of hooked up with a prostitute and was shot. [I] did not know that probably until my early twenties.... I just knew he had to go to the hospital, cause of a hernia.... [He] showed it to me, and I was like, “Wow,” and he actually got shot a little bit above the belly button area.

Asked about male role models, Tyrone declined to consider his father as one, even though at an earlier age, he had felt compelled to take his father’s side following the divorce. Neither did he name his older brother, who he described as quiet, unmotivated, and the “wild child” of the family. Rather, he suggested that the individuals who best met that term were two neighbors who lived together in his apartment complex while he was in high school. That they happened to be gay, he said, was never an issue; they were only kind and encouraging toward him. This circumstance begins to illustrate the acute parental influence of Tyrone’s development.

Further coloring the picture of the acute parental influence is an understanding of his social limitations. To hear Tyrone describe it, he was never the outcast or the troublemaker. Neither was he the best student nor the most popular. And while he was not immoral, he also definitely was not the most religious. He was generally somewhere in the middle. It was typical for him to have a few (one to three, by his count) good, though somewhat restrained, friendships. Tyrone said that his life became particularly

traumatic, both physically and socially, during the summer between eighth and ninth grade. He discovered that his testicles had swollen rapidly. Within just a few days, he was in an operating room undergoing surgery to remove what his physician suspected to be a cancerous testicle. Fortunately, instead of cancer, it was found to be “torsioned.” Yet, of course, the fact that Tyrone was left with only one testicle was a source of tremendous embarrassment in his teenage years, and burdened him with a highly-guarded secret that likely kept him more reserved socially than he otherwise might have been.

That should not be taken to suggest that Tyrone felt so awkward that he did not date. He did. However, he said he failed to find someone for whom he had a “love feeling.”

The different relationships I was in [as a teenager] really got me to know [what I wanted], I guess maybe the love feeling. I remember... dating a couple of girls and just, the feeling wasn't there. I mean, I can't explain... there's that love feeling and it just wasn't there.... The ones that I did not have any feelings for, I mean, just talking about it [even right now], I can just feel it, like, I was just cold. There was nothing there.

This lack of any strong emotional connections, whether with family members or beyond, is the outcome of the most acute parental influence of Tyrone's development—which is, that he experienced only a superficial form of parental warmth, at best. Arguably, Tyrone was the victim of a kind of developmental perfect storm: (a) his parents' early divorce left him without the constant male interaction he craved, and living with a mother who he blamed for imposing that upon him; (b) as will be demonstrated below, he eventually came to feel betrayed by what he interpreted as reasons to distrust his mother; (c) as suggested previously, he never developed an exceptional emotional bond with his father or his brother; and (d) as suggested previously, he never developed an exceptional emotional bond with anyone outside of the

family, either.

Tyrone considered it a critical moment in the timeline of his relationship with his mother when he broke the news that he was going to propose marriage to Dharma.

My mom was not very receptive at all.... Her biggest thing was, "How do you know what I'm going to be doing during that day?" Like, when I gave that date to be married, it was kinda like, "Well, you can't. You always have to talk to me first," kind of idea. It really did change the relationship between me and my mom. Through that whole time, I was like, "I don't get it. Why wouldn't you be happy?"

To the question, "Is this a relationship where you always felt you were getting support from her otherwise about other things?" Tyrone said, "No, we had a weird family." Dharma went on to explain, "He was rather like the man in the house—he did the dishes, he fixed everything. I always thought of [Tyrone's mom] as resisting, you know. She thought she was losing him as far as physical help." Later, Tyrone said that that incident continues to affect how he feels toward his mother. "I would say [I still feel the relationship is] strained.... It was... one of those things that I was taken aback by.... I still am very distant, so maybe I am still bitter about that."

Tyrone illustrated the strain in his relationship with his mom again, this time with an exchange just after he had decided to become a Christian, and previous to his dating relationship with Dharma.

I ended up putting my mom on the prayer list, you know, praying for my mom's salvation. And I came home, and the way the class was, they typed up all the prayer requests that they had, on a sheet and everything. And just that my mom got it, and she was like, "What is that?" I said, "Nothing," and next I know, she put it near the light and starts reading it, and she was like, "How dare you say 'Salvation for your mother.' I'm saved." And... I am thinking, "You don't [even] go to church." I mean, I hadn't been at this for very long, but you'd think church would be a main thing you go to, you know, and why wouldn't [she] raise me up with [the teaching that] God was there, and Jesus died at the cross and all that, you know—at least, say something about God, you know? But she never did, and I was like, it kind of floored me for a little bit, and as I said, after that, I was just kind of like... [my becoming a Christian] really put a strain on the relationship we

had. And maybe it was because I did something different and on my own. A lot of [my life previous to this at about age 21] had been just circled around her and everything.

Dharma corroborated Tyrone's sense that his parents were somewhat self-absorbed, and that they fail to engage her husband at an emotionally sensitive level.

I don't think his parents really listened to him. I mean they took care of him. But even now, when we go over there, his mom... says the same things over and over, but really she doesn't take time to listen to him. And his dad doesn't either.

So, it is no surprise that Tyrone spoke of feeling very inadequate to understand his wife's words that she wanted him to learn to listen to her "with his heart." Tyrone commented on his ability to be emotionally intimate with another person:

Honestly, I would say I don't think I have arrived on that one still. I am still trying to connect with Dharma in a way that she wants to be connected. It has been recently that we've been talking about, she says, "You don't listen to me with your heart. You hear with your head but not with your heart." You know, that one threw me back, and I was like, "Okay, so that means I need to really be attentive?" I still think I am still working towards that. I mean, you know, I grew up, we know our family loved each other, we can say that, but to really show it and model it, it's not there.

This capacity to listen effectively and react empathetically is, from Dharma's perspective, a desired quality that she perceives is not being met within her range of acceptable variance. Thus, relational congruence is lacking, and it appears to be largely due to this acute parental influence that left Tyrone ill-equipped to satisfy her. Paradoxically, that same acute parental influence has played a large role in forming what may be Tyrone's high-priority desired quality: that is, the need to feel warmth, to feel understood, and to feel, as he put it, "that love feeling." Because he was so starved of a deeper intimacy from his family of origin, that deeper intimacy became the very thing that he most desired, and serendipitously, the very thing that Dharma has provided so ably and successfully. She described herself as the emotional caregiver in her own family of origin when she was

younger, and regarding her marriage relationship, Tyrone gushed about how well she has fulfilled that desired quality.

I think the [most important quality she brings to this marriage] is just, probably her loving attitude. I think I have learned how to love through her.... I just think she loves you for who you are and, I always think that growing up in the relationship I have, my family, is like, they love me because of what I am doing. But she was just like, “I love you for who you are, you don’t have to do anything for me.” So, that’s kind of a shock from what I grew up with, and breaking free from all that.

Continuing with that thought, Tyrone was asked to elaborate on a previous comment he had made in the couples’ interview, saying that an important quality of a good wife is that they be understanding.

I need a lot of forgiveness. I can be very hard-headed. I just... want somebody to know, “Hey, [I’m just] having a tough time. Yeah, I might have said some things that I shouldn’t have,” but knowing [in] the back of her head [that she’s saying to herself] “That’s [okay, that’s just Tyrone being Tyrone], and I still love him. I know he is struggling,” you know.

Tyrone’s detachment vividly contrasts with both Archie and Edith’s enmeshment. The general significance of “family” to each of them was unmistakable. In their interviews, the two characteristically gravitated toward stories from both their nuclear and extended family relationships—family picnics when they were younger, cousins who lived close when they were newlyweds, uncles with whom Archie had went on hunting trips, illnesses that had befallen parents and how Edith had given care to them, and so forth.

*Archie:* [We came from] very close families. It made us, you know, real close right off the bat, I mean just...

*Edith:* Yeah, just right off the bat. Me and my mom was close and his mom, my mother in law, we did pretty good. We’re [still] doing pretty good now.... [Archie] told me his mom said one time, said, “Don’t you let her go now,” said, “You need her.” Said, “don’t let her go, she’s a pretty one.”

*Archie:* But, it’s just been, to this day we’re close, and you know. Her dad and I

are getting closer and closer now.

*Edith:* A year before my mom passed on I lost my aunt, that's my mom's sister. So, it had been a year a part...

*Archie:* You lost more than your aunt. You lost, in a few months time, you lost your mom's sister, two of your dad's sisters, and your dad's brother. Your dad's only living brother that he had.

*Edith:* I lost all of them, so...

Indeed, so constant was their inclination to speak about other members of the family, it seems likely that there were probably additional family influences worthy of examination if additional opportunity were granted to pursue it. The conversation above continued in a very similar vein for a few minutes before eventually reaching an epiphany with Archie's lament that, just two months prior to their wedding day, his father's life had been cut short due to Lou Gehrig's disease. A bit later Archie remembered his wedding day as one of the best days of his life. "I was bawling the whole time," he said. The tears were not exclusively a result of his immense happiness. Rather, he said his attention was divided between the exhilaration of the day and the person who was not there to share it with him. "I wanted my dad to see me get married and he wasn't, you know. I know he was watching from Heaven." It was an immense sorrow also felt by his mother, who, so soon after her husband's death, could not bring herself to attend the wedding, either. She would later apologize to them both, expressing to them that she supported their marriage, but was emotionally overwhelmed.

While specific ways that he influenced Archie's development and qualities did not surface in great detail from the interviews, based on what Archie did describe, the acute influence of his father seems difficult to underestimate. Like Edith's father, Archie's was a blue collar worker for a large factory. In addition, the family raised

livestock and crops on a small farm adjoining farms of his grandfather and uncles. Similar to Edith's father, Archie's also enjoyed a reputation as a tireless worker, who retired only after pushing his body as far as it could be pushed. Owed, at least in part, to their admiration for him, Archie's father was a person of inordinate influence on his son's decision-making. It was because of the father's aggressive protest that Archie had not married Edith much earlier, when she had become pregnant about two years into the relationship. He was staunchly convinced that Archie, then about 30 years old and holding a grocery store job, could not provide adequately for Edith, then 23 and working at a restaurant. The father evidenced such control over his son that, when he threatened Edith that she would never see his son anymore if she did not have an abortion performed, she believed it to be true, and eventually complied with his wishes as a result of that. "I didn't want to go through with that. I did not. It was just hard on me. It about killed me," she said. For years, Edith carried self-blame and emotional scars from the decision, and only recently had found comfort in the support of her church friends and counseling from the church's minister.

Archie did not choose to delve into the abortion, but the same episode potentially reflects strongly on Archie's allegiance to Edith. It is a theory that the investigator believes needed further testing, but there is evidence that Archie's positive assessment of Edith is compelled by a deep appreciation for the longsuffering Edith went through many years ago, in order to satisfy the ultimatum laid down by his father, and the emotional pain she indicated she still carried with her. While some spouses in the current study had little or nothing to say in critique of their spouse, the investigator took special note of Archie's reticence. When asked in what ways his wife had improved as a person over the

years, it was almost as if he was slightly irked, calling the inquiry a “loaded question,” ostensibly because of the insinuation that she had had imperfections earlier in their relationship. On the other side of the ledger, he later said that his wife had a “heart as big as this house,” and spoke of his admiration for her smiling disposition that continues to cloak the back pain she still endures from a car accident more than a decade ago. Additionally, Archie was incessant in his praise of her work as a mother and as a Christian. Perhaps Archie’s resistance to even remotely acknowledge a flaw in his wife is an unconscious response to assert that he feels responsibility for the sexual act that brought the abortion episode upon her. Going back to his father’s death, perhaps Archie so desired his father’s presence at his wedding in part because of his desire to see his father empirically validate his wife by validating their marriage. And finally, perhaps Archie perceives anyone’s negative assessment of his wife—including his father’s many years ago—to be so unjust in comparison to all that is right about her, that he simply refuses to give any credence to any other perspective.

In a different way, Edith’s father also had an acute influence on her. He had won her complete admiration, watching him hold down a physically-demanding machinist job for many, many years, and simultaneously watching him negotiate an emotionally-demanding marriage to her alcoholic mother. She described him as a “good provider... a *very* good provider.” When asked what kind of life her parents would have wanted for her, Edith responded “a good life, and I mean a *really* good life.” Asked, then, to define what they would have had in mind by “good life,” Edith’s reply was reminiscent of what her father-in-law believed to be foundational: “They meant, like, have a good husband who provided.” Later, Edith would corroborate the point.

My mom and dad they liked him real well..... My mother, she just loved him. But they asked him, right before we got married, that if you do [marry Edith], I want you to be a good provider and give her a life.

In his own individual interview, Archie ticked off a long list of places he had worked, most all of them in the retail or restaurant business, some full-time, others part-time, and often two jobs simultaneously. Returning to the present, Edith described Archie as “a *huge* provider for me.” Edith recognized the paradox practically as soon as the words came out of her mouth—in actuality, Archie was out of work for what may have been the first time in his life due to a back injury sustained in a recent car accident (separate from the one experienced years ago that resulted in her injury). Therefore, he was not able to provide very much more than benefits supplied by public assistance at that moment. But she reasoned that it was not for lack of desire. “I mean every night he prays and hopes he can get back to work but the doctor told him, ‘Not right now; you can’t because your back is worse than ever.’ And so, it’s really hard on us about that, but I mean, he *is* providing for us.” As much as actual “providing,” the quality Edith desired in Archie was almost certainly to be like her own father in the strength his *desire* to be a good provider.

Dale spoke of his marriage to Marlene, and about his children in similar ways to how Archie and Edith spoke of their family. Both were highly conscious of being good providers and making time for their children.

That was a big goal for me—to be a good family man, you know, more so than to have a big career. Don’t get me wrong, I would love to be making 200k a year, but I have always provided for us and I have always found time for the family as well. That was probably my biggest goal.

Both Dale and Marlene connected that quality to the acute parental influences he has had. In his individual interview, Dale was asked to elaborate on his earlier comment

that there had been a “seriousness” with which he had approached his marriage, and replied

I think a lot of that has to do with the way my mom and dad [actually, stepfather, but Dale mostly considers him to be his “real” father] got divorced about the same time we were getting married. It was shortly a couple years after is when my mom and step dad divorced. I guess that has encouraged me to make my relationship work, too. I don’t know how hard it is to go through divorce. I have never been through one myself, but when you’re a kid of one, you have been through some of [the same feeling of separation].

Marlene said that she believed the most acute parental influence arose from Dale’s connection to his mother.

His mom was such a big part of his life, and I think that was huge for him. I think it was just as big... for me to be a good mom and for him to be a good dad because all he had was love for his mom growing up, and his mom was such a huge person in his life and still is today. I tease him all the time [that] he's momma's boy.... Of course, we [Marlene and her mother-in-law] have had our ups and downs over the years, but she is... more forgiving, and she is more understanding, and stuff than I could ever be.... His mom was who he had in his life that was constant. She played a huge part in his kids life... and her kids have always been number one priority.

And so, the evidence here rings true with several major social science theories—among them, family systems theory, systemic family development theory, ecological theory, and social learning theory—that support the concept of parents having influence with their children; and in this case, specifically that they have influence on both the actual qualities their children develop that are appealing or less so, as well as influence on the qualities their children eventually desire in a partner.

### *Religious influences*

Individuals consistently asserted that the beliefs and standards they had adopted as a function of their accepted religion (Christian in these cases) had played a prominent role in their own development. Those beliefs and standards had influence upon how they approached their marital relationships, and for some, their dating relationships as well.

For the three husbands that were currently employed as pastors (Mike, Duke, and Jose), this was no surprise, nor was it a surprise to learn that their wives echoed those assertions. The same could be said of the additional husband (Fred, married to Ethel) and one wife (Claire, married to Bill) who were currently enrolled in seminary. Perhaps more persuasive is the fact that all ten of the other individuals, even two who did not attend worship services regularly (Dominic and JoAnne), adamantly attributed part of the success of their relationship to standards adopted as a consequence of their faith—and concurrently, qualities they had gained with respect to those standards.

Most typically, couples spoke of the synergist of religious influence in the context of what got them through their most difficult times. Dale intimated that when financial challenges had cast a dark cloud on his marriage, there had been a reliance on the belief that a higher, positive purpose orchestrated by God was at work. And that belief had resulted in, not optimism necessarily, but certainly a quality of hopefulness.

We have a lot of financial trouble. We are still striving on money. When we first got married, at the time, minimum wage was \$.4.25. So, between both of us, we weren't making [even] \$10 an hour, so we struggled a lot. I think a lot of that is what made us stronger as a couple—because we did make it through so much.... [Answering the follow-up question, "To what do you attribute that—to say, 'This is going to work out?' What gave you that confidence?"] I've always been a big believer in God. I'm a firm believer if you are where you should be, He is going to take care of you, and it's always been proven to be right. I guess a lot of that goes back to the way I was raised. My mom and dad never had no money either, and we always made it—always ate and had clothes to wear to school, always had a vehicle to take us to the doctor or whatever we needed to do.

Sometimes hopefulness arose in spite of the stress of limited financial resources. On other occasions, the hopefulness arose in spite of dire personal or family health circumstances. That was the case for Daisy when her toddler-aged son Caleb was undergoing tests for brain dysfunctions. Raised in a devoutly Catholic family, she said she especially found comfort in God through her husband's expressions of his Protestant

faith. Archie and Edith both experienced back injuries from car accidents, which impacted employment, and thus impacted their financial outlook as well. Both of them indicated their faith had been important to them in dealing with their difficulties. Carol claimed it was her lifelong adherence to her Christian beliefs that allowed her to maintain her mental health in spite of her early sexual abuse.

Religious influences also were associated with individuals' rationale for being committed to their marriage, and holding the position that "divorce is not an option." Dominic emphasized a connection between his belief in God, the commitment of marriage, and the consequences for those who do not take it as seriously as God intended for it to be taken:

I'm not real religious, [but weddings are typically held] in a big church, there's all these Jesus statues everywhere and things.... It's just something I, just as soon as I screw up, he's just going to strike me out with a lightning bolt... put that fear of God into them, and said, "'Til death do us part, and you better mean it." Like I said, you better make sure it's what you want because you're stuck with it for life, and there can be consequences. It's the best way I can put it. [Marriage] is like a tattoo. You better get the one you want and you better like it. You better love it. You better want to live with it forever because you're not going to get rid of it... there are consequences.

Dharma indicated that she was influenced by her religion to date with commitment in mind. That was the underlying principle when she named Tyrone's Christian conversion as the very first milestone of their relationship—she would not have dated him without that. It was a high-priority quality, one that Sarah and Carol indicated that they also had absolutely desired. Further, Dharma's religious beliefs encouraged her to be uncompromising in her evaluation of guys she would date.

I was raised with the belief that you don't continue dating somebody you wouldn't marry, so the moment I realized I was dating somebody I wouldn't spend my life with, I got rid of him.... It's not like I believe there is this one right person, but [Tyrone] definitely fit [all the criteria].

Religious influences gained earlier in their development sometimes prompted individuals to hold a retrospective belief that God either had been directly involved in bringing them together with their partner, and/or had had a direct hand in keeping them together. Spouses intimated that such a belief also contributed to an enhanced level of commitment to the marriage. Once again, Dharma was among those who spoke to that point.

I don't think it was dumb luck. I think it was God's [plan] that I got Tyrone. I mean, I look back in our wedding, preparing to get my new ring, there was one particular guy had he begged me and pleaded with me not to get married, and to come date him.... Standing from where I am now, he had three marriages, doesn't have a job, and is a wreck.... [Being just out of high school, I wasn't mature enough] to make that decision, and you know it's God. It was God.... I had a lot of conviction, things that really, really pressed on me from my youth group, and I think it did help. But... yeah, I could not pick that well.

Jose and Sarah, Mike and Carol, Ethel, Edith and Duke all explicitly agreed with Dharma in the belief that their relationships with their spouses were the outcome of providential intervention. Duke said, "I call it a miracle. And even now, looking back, I just don't know how it happened except by the hand of God." Ethel said, "I really thought God meant for us to be together. There were too many things that were going on... to make us meet and be together, and so I just felt like it was a God thing." And, of all of the states to which Mike's parents could have chosen to relocate, and of all of the towns in that state to which they could have chosen to relocate, and of all of the churches that Mike could have chosen to begin attending, Carol was convinced that "that didn't just happen. He came to my church because God made it that way. That's what I believe." She was even firmer in that belief because, she said, had Mike's parents happened to have chosen not to move at all, she had strongly and unwittingly considered going out of state to attend a college that offered a degree in sign language—which happened to be

located near the Louisiana town where Mike had lived. “So, we were going to be together one way or the other,” Carol said. “It was just meant to be.”

While 65% of spouses were raised in families that regularly attended a church, Carol argued more explicitly than anyone else that her personal development, and thus many of her actual and desired qualities, was profoundly framed by the religious influences that surrounded her as she grew up. “I was so rooted in my faith... that’s who I was.” For others, there may have been no influence, or it is plausible that the influence may have been predicated on transmission from parents, and therefore perceived more readily as a parental influence.

As noted in the Data Collection section of the previous chapter, the principal investigator determined explicitly that he would not recruit volunteers for the current study from Christian churches. In view of his own religious beliefs, this was established in order to build into the research plan some counterbalance to the potential for selection bias (i.e., that the study would attract mainly, if not only, people of faith). In spite of that earnest attempt, however, it is important to note that friends and family aided the effort by distributing study information. In some cases, those friends and family members were Christians, and the investigator did not place any limitations on how they proceeded to help. Thus, two couples (Archie and Edith, and Dale and Marlene) joined the study as a direct result of a religious association with one of the investigator’s aides. Three other couples (Mike and Carol, Jose and Sarah, and Bill and Claire) said they gained interest in the study from an informational flier hung on a bulletin board at one of two area seminaries. The remaining five couples became aware of the study without regard to any religious means.

## *Summary*

The purpose of the current study is to enhance understanding of the evolution of low-income couples' self-reported strong marriages—essentially, how individuals evolved to be a person that their partner has assessed positively, and in turn, to be a person that has assessed their partner positively. For all spouses that participated in the current study, there is evidence that either (a) a sensitizing experience, (b) accumulated adverse history that led to a rescuer perspective, (c) an acute parental influence, (d) religious influences, or some combination of the four, account significantly for those assessments. Those are synergists that precipitated a number of high-priority qualities relevant to spouses' assessments that their marriage was healthy. The following section reveals the high-priority qualities that rose to the highest level of salience.

### *High-Priority Qualities Relevant to Individuals' Healthy Marriage Assessments*

Research question one asked, with respect to personal qualities of one or both, what thought processes, emotional states, and behaviors do they describe as most relevant in their marriages being "healthy?" Qualities relevant to the assessment of marital health in the current study were identified through what spouses said about themselves and from what they said about their partners. Sometimes they did so by merely making the assertion that a quality was evident (e.g., "He has always been very trustworthy."), but more often than not, they recalled a story that supported their assertion. Other times, a given quality was corroborated by the other spouse independently affirming its existence, either through their own comments or stories, or by reporting what someone else had said about their spouse.

As explained earlier, the term *qualities* as used in this study envelopes three types:

one, a characteristic of the person him or herself, called *actual*; and the other two reflective of the other person, specifically what is *desired* and what is *perceived* to be characteristic of the other person. Intrinsic to all of the qualities described below is that (a) they were universally tendered by couples, and universally or nearly universally tendered by the study's participants, (b) they surfaced in conversation with relatively high frequency, and (c) were ascribed a level of emphasis such that it was clear that the range of acceptable variance was narrow—that is to say that they are *high-priority* qualities. It seems safe to say that these high-priority qualities are requisite, and thus, are given the most thorough examination in this chapter. However, it would be a misnomer to presume that these are the *only* high-priority qualities one should expect to find for a given individual spouse. To the contrary, different spouses may have considered different qualities to be in their set of high-priority qualities. One spouse's set of high-priority qualities can be expected to be distinctive from others' sets, including that of their own spouse. In the 30-plus hours of interviews conducted, other qualities gained moderate-to-strong support and could be considered *high-priority* for many or most spouses. The chapter concludes with a summary of those which commanded a level of support judged to be significant but slightly less than the four high-priority qualities considered essential: love, commitment, appreciation, and child-centeredness.

The current study pursued a grounded theory as a basis for understanding low-income couples' assessment of their marriages as healthy. It posits qualities and posits an elementary structure for how qualities develop and interact to produce a healthy marriage assessment. To place all of this into some context, future studies building on this work could be particularly productive by designing research that helps to map these qualities

into (a) a hierarchy of actual qualities, and (b) a hierarchy of assessment overlays (desired and perceived qualities); both, in order to establish more exactly the salience of different qualities in comparison to one another, as well as to approximate the degrees to which qualities contribute to the intensity of each other.

### *Being loving*

Dominic said, “I love her man, I would do anything for her.” And, later in his individual interview, he explained

They say, you know, you get a marriage that last 3 years, and get another marriage and another... You know, this isn’t a house. This is another human being. This is someone you want to consider your equal. [This is] an extension of you, a part of you. If you lost her, it would be like losing your arm or your leg or your eye or something vital, a vital organ that you couldn’t live without, so it would be more than legs and arms.

JoAnne loved Dominic, too, and communicated it to him daily in more than just words. The term “love-making,” for Dominic and JoAnne, had a broader, less sexual connotation than is typical.

I mean just like her wedding vow: for richer or for poorer, sickness and health, ‘til death do us part. She’s always been there for me. When we first got married she would fix coffee in the morning for me, and tea in the afternoon. I don’t get tea anymore.... JoAnne will always wake me up with a cup coffee.... It’s just like some stranger slapping \$500 in your pocket every morning. It just wows you. After all these years, she is still fixing me coffee every morning.

Without exception, spouses said they loved their partner, and that their partner communicated love back to them. Of course, this is practically a given under the twentieth-century Western concept of marriage, and what many have come to refer to as *companionate* marriage. Practically all concepts of love contain the element of acting in another person’s best interest, however, concepts of love may vary in the degree to which warmth, romantic feelings or emotional connection is necessary. Seven spouses in the current study (Tyrone, Dharma, Duke, Daisy, JoAnne, Carol, and Sarah) spoke explicitly

of their desire for this emotional connection in their partner. Another ten spouses (Archie, Edith, Fred, Ethel, Mike, Dominic, Roy, Marie, Dale, and Jose) were less specific about the depth of emotional connection, but nonetheless, indicated that there is a degree of loving companionship that they expect in a partner. Four spouses (Dale, Marlene, Archie, and Duke) told about their spouses' "big heart," intimating a general compassion for people that strongly appealed to them. The balance of this section of the chapter explores qualities beyond the exchange of loving words and interactions between spouses.

#### *Being committed*

Marriage is sometimes defined in legal terms, as in the "marriage contract," and the concept that two people agree to enter into a permanent union together. Commitment, therefore, is intrinsically associated with marriage. Unlike love, commitment is associated with all marriages, including arranged ones. Furthermore, the qualities of loyalty and trust are strongly related to the quality of commitment; that is, it can be said that a person who desires someone who is committed to them is a person who desires someone they can *trust* to be *loyal* to them. This commitment borne out of trust in the other person's loyalty is arguably distinct from commitment borne out of sheer self-determination that refuses to give up no matter the obstacles that occur. Ethel and Fred are interesting as a couple because they demonstrate both of those sides of commitment—Ethel's commitment rooted in her perception of Fred's loyalty, and Fred's commitment rooted in his confidence in his own resolve to be loyal. Through the course of this section, some spouses under examination will demonstrate commitment rooted in trust, while others will demonstrate commitment rooted in the mission to maintain an enduring relationship.

Fred and Ethel also are interesting, in that, they demonstrate commitment as a quality desired prior to beginning their relationship together, as well as commitment as a perceived and actual quality a few years into their marriage. Prior to the beginning of his relationship with Ethel, Fred said he had tired of the dating game, and that he was looking for someone who would take a relationship as serious as he was willing to take a relationship. He said

I was just kind of thinking along the lines of, “Is this one worth wasting my time on, cause I’m sick and tired of playing girl games. I don’t need a date, I don’t need a girlfriend, I don’t need anything else.” So, I’m looking for a happy life and to enjoy myself from here out, and I don’t mind committing to someone and having someone commit to me. I wasn’t looking for a wife either, I could care less about that, but when I ran into her I re-evaluated, and said, “Hey, is she wife material? Is she marriage material? Because I’m not gonna waste my time.” And within a day, I decided... she’s worth finding out [about], and I committed to her... whole-heartedly [and decided] that I would give it everything I had, just see if it was worth working out. And uh, we dug through each other’s laundry.... We laid our own [dirty] laundry out in front of each other.

He added later in his individual interview, “Our [early] relationship was very awkward because we were both trying to see if we could trust anybody.... I could tell that she... didn’t trust anybody and I wanted her to know that she would be fine with me.”

Ethel, on the other hand, had tired of men in general, having become jaded by dates who apparently exploited her for whatever they could gain, and then pushed her aside; and also by vicariously observing how men had come into and exited out of her mother’s life. She would say in her individual interview

I did [lay out my dirty laundry for Fred], but I didn’t put *everything* out there. And that was because I, my experience was, that I just didn’t trust him [because he was a male]. And [the message I did not say aloud to him was] “I will give you a little bit, if that’s what you want. You can take it for what you will.” But it wasn’t everything.

She desired commitment, but was so wary of being deceived by what only appeared to be commitment that she found it difficult to accept Fred as being genuine. He

thought he scored a major victory on that front when she became pregnant. "She was expecting me to say, 'It's not mine. It's got to be someone else's.' And I think that made her realize she could trust me a little." Moreover, he soon proposed to her, and he believed that cemented her trust in his commitment toward her; but, she said that that was not the case.

A lot of it was just waiting for his reaction to see how he responds [over the course of my entire pregnancy]. We didn't get married till after the twins were born. They were about 5 or 6 weeks old before we got married, and part of the reason for waiting was to make sure that we were making the right decision. I didn't want to marry this guy if he wasn't really going to stick around, you know. I didn't see putting myself through that, I could just go on with life, make a way somehow, and not have to deal with him, if that's what it's going to be.

From Fred's perspective, though, there was no wavering. "I was in the Navy, but I considered [Ethel] a wife at the time.... I was in South America. I wasn't looking for a girlfriend there. I had my lifelong girlfriend or wife at home." Ethel confessed that she continued to doubt her perception of his commitment, and correspondingly, her own commitment to Fred until about "three or four years into the marriage when my dad tried to get me to divorce him." In retrospect, she surprised herself by standing up against her dad, who was sincerely concerned that after Fred's U.S. Navy enlistment was complete, his son-in-law would be something less than a good provider to his daughter and granddaughters. "And I was like, 'No.' I think maybe that was when I consciously realized that we're together and that's just the way it's gonna be." Long after being married and having Fred's children, Ethel finally allowed herself to be convinced that her perceptions of Fred's commitment were correct.

For most, though not for Ethel, commitment was an actual quality that existed sometime before their engagement, as well as one that was desired and perceived by their partner sometime before their engagement. Individuals described and, through the stories

they told, demonstrated, the real-time high priority that they placed on their wedding day vows. Fred's commitment, for instance, was tested later in his marriage to Ethel when she had occasion to have a flirtatious episode with a high school boyfriend. Ellen said when Fred found out, "I thought, 'Okay, I really did it now. He's definitely leaving this time. He's not gonna hang around.'" As it turned out, "He was very forgiving, and very quick to say 'Okay. Let's get things back on the right track.'" Ethel said that she was slower to forgive herself. "The guilt part of it was, for me, here I am doing what I expect him to do to me. How ironic. So we got through that, [but] it took awhile." Fred took the perspective that he had been away from home so much with his work that he had to share some of the fault for what occurred. "All of the problems we ever had in our relationship [have happened] when she felt she wasn't getting a lot of my attention." His commitment was not shaken. At another point in his individual interview, Fred explained

There are so many different levels of cheating. Quite frankly, I am torn as to which is worse: I can't decide that if [it is] committing the fleshly act of sex or [if it is] committing your love and trust and [then] taking it away from your spouse—because sometimes I think I would feel more betrayed with the [latter]. But, now, my wife thinks... if you actually commit the adulterous act of sex, you have committed the ultimate thing. And I am kind of a little bit on the other side. I could actually forget [the sex] a whole lot easier than if you quit loving me and love someone else instead.

Both acknowledged that they emerged from this incident as better spouses, more inclined to talk candidly about an issue before it became a threat. For his part, Fred soon quit the job that was taking him away from Ethel, and adopted a philosophy that eventually led him back to school in order to complete a seminary degree. While being interviewed in the church building where he was employed part-time, he said this:

[This interview has now] hit on a key element [to our marital success]... a very key element. [That is,] I have re-evaluated my schedule, and have found that I can be very busy in the 'home,' and 'home' doesn't have to be in the house.... My wife is up here and my kids are up here. When I'm home, I very rarely get a lot of

work done.... She is very demanding of time, as are my four children.... So, [Ethel] requires a lot of attention; my whole family requires a lot of attention. I can't really go anywhere without them. And it's not... that I necessarily want to lose the baggage, the old lady and kids or whatever....

But as opposed to fighting with the very people I'm trying to love on and lead, and help and take care of, I work with them. I can't imagine any better outlet for my time than being there for them right now....

I can be very busy and productive away from home. As a matter of fact, when gainfully employed, I make very good money, I really do. I make more money than most people I know.... but I can't be away from home.

I actually went and got a CDL to see if wanted to learn how to be a truck driver so I could possibly see if I wanted to buy a trucking company because I thought that would be a good way to make money.... I wanted to see if it is something I would want to do, how it works—I would never want to tell someone to do something I don't know how to do; I want to lead. So, I went out and found out that I don't like this, and not only do I not like this, my wife does not like this, and [therefore] I can't ask anyone else to do this.... I could not tell someone to stay away from their family that long.

And I don't stay at home to keep her interest, or because I expect her to do bad things. I don't expect that out of her.... I [have learned to] look for businesses or jobs that she can do.... Ministry is one place she has always been able to help me. We have been in the ministry together [mostly as volunteers] for over 10 years.... Whatever I've done, she has been able to help me.... So, as far as being busy, it's really kind of fun being busy together.

With additional analysis, Fred's treatise gave foundation to a theme that says that husbands demonstrate their commitment to their wives in how they prioritize their wives' needs over their desire to excel at their job. Like Fred, Dale insisted

I wouldn't keep doing this job knowing that it was putting my marriage in jeopardy if she would say, "I don't think this is going to work. I think we are going end up divorced if you keep this job like this," I would put my notice in tomorrow.

Dale's hypothetical situation had been Tyrone's reality just a few years ago; in fact, not once but twice over. On the first occasion, he had secured a job with a large agricultural company that paid him about what his and Dharma's two incomes added together had previously brought home. In a sense, the timing was excellent since their son was born about that same time, and Dharma so dearly wanted to stay at home to care for him. In another sense, the schedule of the new job—12 straight days on, followed by only

2 days off before the cycle started again—almost served to suffocate their marriage.

*Tyrone:* That put a lot of stress in our marriage....

*Dharma:* There really wasn't any less than 12-hour days....

*Tyrone:* Yeah... and then, the baby cried, all the time, and cried and cried....

*Dharma:* It was pretty bad... it was stressful... It was the only time, the only time in my entire marriage, that I seriously considered divorce....

*Tyrone:* And I would come home and... basically I'm wore out... and wait for her to get home [from a waitressing job she eventually took in order to pay some bills] so we could go to bed together, kind of thing... cause she only, you only worked on the weekends didn't you like on Friday and Saturday?

*Dharma:* Yeah, it wasn't every day.

*Tyrone:* Yeah, so it was just a Friday-Saturday thing, but yeah....

*Dharma:* And I baby-sat during the day.... We couldn't have been any tighter [financially].

Tyrone indicated later in his individual interview that the situation seriously impacted their time and desire for romance. “It was kind of a rush job,’ he said. “It was like, ‘Oh, let’s have sex, and get it over real quick, and then go back to bed.’ It was just... it was really bad.” The situation became even direr when Dharma’s father lost his job, and her parents temporarily moved to live with them.

Having concluded that the size of Tyrone’s paycheck was not adequate to the sacrifices they had to make, and that their commitment to each other required a paradigm change, Tyrone and Dharma began looking for something different. They wanted something that would restore their time together, yet also would offer a compensation package sufficient to meet their basic needs. The couple could not believe their fortune when a Christian boarding school surfaced, and eventually offered both of them positions. As rehearsed earlier, Tyrone took a job as the school’s maintenance person, while Dharma took a job as an after-school tutor. The new situation was practically the

polar opposite of the previous one—their former frantic pace became a leisurely one, scrounging to be able to put food on the table changed to having free meals prepared by a cafeteria staff three times daily, and most importantly, barely seeing each other during their awake hours turned into intermittently seeing each other throughout their day. Of course, as the story has already been told, that job situation ultimately did not work out well, either. The remoteness of the school's campus (employees were required to live there) wore on Dharma. While food and basic necessities were provided, the location was more than an hour from a town of any size. Even watching television was an unattainable luxury since that would have required a cable subscription that they could not afford. Dharma's mental health deteriorated to a grim state soon after her mother's relatively sudden death, and a psychologist urged them to leave the boarding school in order to remove her from the rural and almost commune-like environment there.

Again, the commitment to the marriage won out. The first time, it was Dharma who ultimately refused to give-in to the impulse to leave her spouse; this time, Dharma feared that Tyrone would give-in to the same kind of impulse, but he said it never entered his mind. Because their commitment to the survival of their marriage had highest priority, they chose to pursue paradigm changes together rather than taking a demolition ball to their relationship and starting over as co-parenting individuals. As Dharma commented in her individual interview, "I never allow divorce to truly enter into the picture, you know. Just total commitment." And, as Tyrone said in his, "I think what makes a good marriage for me would be just my loyalty. You know, no matter what, I will stick by her, whatever decision she makes, I have always stood by her." This most recent time, the paradigm change they chose was to move to a college down where Tyrone could work toward a

bachelor's degree. He completed a safety engineering degree and gained a position with a local manufacturer at about the same time that the couple volunteered for the current study (—which, ostensibly, made a statement about the couple's assessment of their marriage's stronger health).

Returning to Dale's commitment to his wife Marlene, he called divorce his "biggest fear," and said that the split between his mother and the man he always considered to be his dad (though, technically, his stepfather) "encouraged me to make my relationship work." Similar to her husband, Marlene also emphasized the role of her mother's and also grandmother's influence in shaping how deeply she holds her commitment to Dale. She added that there was a religious influence and standard that also took precedence.

That thing I automatically drift to is 'death do you part.' You don't leave them when it gets hard just because you hit a bump in the road. The journey doesn't stop, and that has always been drilled into my head my whole life. And it's funny [in an ironic way] now, because mom and dad divorced [relatively recently].... But the biggest preacher of this whole thing was my grandparents. The one grandma... she definitely stayed when I would not have stayed what she stayed with, and that's a big thing for me....

I truly honestly loved Dale with all my heart.... It was just simply, divorce wasn't an option. It really truly wasn't, and we both feel this way. And going into our marriage... we had said that to one another.... We [had] come from two different reasons why we felt the same way. I felt it because it's just what you do. He felt it from personal experience of losing his [biological] dad at a young age [due to divorce], and to [his biological father] choosing not to be around.... I always say people are stupid and so ignorant and don't take marriage nowhere near as serious as they should.... You stand before God and your family and your friends, and next week he doesn't do what you want and you get mad and you walk out the door.... Divorce is not an option, not in my mind and not in his, and that was something I made very clear before the wedding. I said "Look, when we 'I do,' that's it."

[My grandmother] was verbal about it and even before I married she would sit me down, "Now Marlene, you know when you do this before God, and it's right in the Bible 'til death do you part,' and you don't just pack up and leave because you get mad or he gets mad".... It was definitely said, flat out, no beating around the bush about it, you get in this, you are going to stay. In the eyes of God,

that is what it supposed to be like and that's what it's going to be. And so, yeah, it definitely was not just by example or things said here and there. It was just flat out said to me, "This is how it is. You stay or else." [That isn't to suggest that my parents or grandparents expected] you to stay during things like abuse, [but] just everyday spats and troubles and financial things that every marriage has, you don't just get up and leave because you don't want to deal with it.

Marlene obviously opined at some length about the sacredness of the promise she had made to Dale, and how she acquired her standard as a result of parental and religious influences during her development. Her words "divorce is not an option" were repeated verbatim by Bill in his couples interview with Claire, and by Jose and Sarah, independently of one another in their separate interviews. Several others intimated the same sentiment, such as when Carol said, "I planned for it to be forever," or when Dominic said, "When you get in front of the Lord and say your 'I do's,' that's it. 'Until death do us part.' There is no divorce clause." This anti-divorce mantra is endemic of the kind of commitment that is rooted in self-determination.

Interestingly, however, Marlene was one of only three spouses to have become so frustrated, specifically with a spouse's behavior, that they contemplated dissolving the marriage. (One other was Ethel, who once became upset over Fred's allegiance to a close friend and business partner over his allegiance to her. And the other was Claire, whose exasperation with Bill's lack of trust was recollected in the section on sensitizing experiences). Prior to the marriage, Marlene had specifically sat down with Dale and said that if he had anything he needed to reveal to her that she wanted to know so that she could go into the marriage with total confidence that they had been completely honest and forthcoming with one another. He asserted that there wasn't anything to tell her. So, about a month into the marriage, when Marlene got a call from a friend while she and Dale were visiting one of her relatives, she became very upset. As to not call attention to

herself, she told Dale she wasn't feeling well and that she needed to go home. When they got into the car, she immediately blurted out the name of the girl that her friend had told her had been with Dale sometime between the day he had proposed to Marlene and their wedding day. Marlene said she only had to see the look in Dale's eyes to know that what her friend had told her was the truth. When they got home, she told Dale she was going to seek an annulment, reasoning that when they exchanged wedding vows, he had already breached their marriage contract. However, since they did not have a phone, and the only way she could actually pursue it would be for her to drive to see an attorney, Dale took the only action he knew to take to buy some time for her to cool down: he got under the hood of the car and disconnected the battery cables, leaving Marlene no immediate option. The next day, Dale reconnected the cables so that she could visit her mom, and fortunately for Dale, her mom persuaded her to slow down and think more carefully about the situation. While it was not specified, there was an inference that Marlene's mom prompted her daughter to reflect on the assessment overlays—the general qualities in a man that she desired, the qualities in Dale that she perceived, and the degree to which Dale met all of those within her range of acceptable variance—and to decide whether all the information Marlene had collected over their four years of dating was accurate, or whether it was all rendered invalid by his misdeed. Today, Marlene said she is glad for her mom's intervention and support in favor of keeping the marriage solvent, even though she regularly cried herself to sleep thinking about the situation for the next few months. And, by Dale's account, he estimated that he spent the next eight years of his life rebuilding the trust he had mutilated with his end-of-bachelorhood indiscretion. Ultimately, however, Marlene chose to remain committed to Dale, permitting him time to

repair her damaged perception of his commitment level. Both attested that he accomplished that some time ago; and now, the depth of Dale's commitment to Marlene and to their family is beyond question.

Another superb illustration of the quality of commitment represented by the spouses in this study was recited by Carol, when she recalled that Mike had gotten them into some financial trouble a few years earlier.

I was in my own little world, just assuming that everything was going fine. And not knowing how he doesn't manage money well, and I didn't know that, and it was like, "Let's go do whatever, Let's go to a movie." [To which I would reply] "Do we have the money for that?" [And he would say] "Oh sure." [And I would think] "Okay, I believe you." We didn't, but I didn't know that. He handled the money, he owned the check book, I never owned a check book before I met him, so I just assumed he knew what he was doing.

[When I found out about his initial mismanagement]... it came to pretty big blows but... it was not a matter to me of, "Well I am out of here." It's like "No, that's not the way it works. It's now *our* problem because I finally know what's going on, and we will find a way out of this.".... Once the initial shock [was over and it had been acknowledged that "Oh, we have got to work on this,"... I thought, "Well, now he's going to handle things, and things are going to go well again."]

Should have known better, because he went right back to his old ways.... So we are now in debt again, because of his mismanagement. And he actually thought... that I might leave him over money, and because he hadn't been up front with me that evening. It hurts me that he could even think that I would think about leaving, because it didn't even cross my mind, you know? [As-if recalling her words to him then,] "No, that would not be my solution to this. My solution is, let's get help and let's work together on it." So we had hours of crying over it and looking at stuff and calling our pastor friend to say, "Here's where we are. Help us. We need help." And when [Mike] told me, he said, "I was afraid you'd leave. I was even prepared for it.... Here's [what I had rehearsed to say to you, Carol]: I am turning in my resignation [and so on], and you can go back with your parents and live."

And I'm like "What? You're going to do what? No way. That's certainly not where we are going. It can't be what you want, and it's certainly not what I want. And that wouldn't be good for anybody." And also, knowing his personality the way that I do now, that he had to deal with depression so much, that, in my head, "We are the reason you are stable right now, and if I were to up and leave and take the kids, you might to kill yourself.... Why would I do that to you? I love you, and that's certainly not who I am, I hope I am not that selfish. So no, we are working through this."

So, it's been two years and we are still digging our way out, but *we* are digging our way out. And now we do everything [budget-related] together.... Yesterday, we were paying bills together and we were getting all the check books and I was like, [“Oh wow, I see that you put some money into our savings account.”] And he was like, “Aren’t you proud of me?” So, it’s just that, we are still working on it and we will be until we die, and... he knows now that that’s not going to be something that I am going to run away from. I hope he does, I think I made that clear, and that would never be a reason for me to leave him.

So, in summary, Ethel desired commitment, and in spite of the fact that it took years for her to be convinced of it, she eventually perceived Fred’s trustworthiness, and reciprocated with her commitment to him. Fred desired commitment, and remained steadfast that his perception of Ethel’s commitment was correct even in the face of “chemistry” with an old boyfriend. Fred exercised a commitment of fortitude that would have made it very difficult for him to regard Ethel’s indiscretion as a “deal breaker.” Dharma and Tyrone remained committed in spite of difficult circumstances, as did Marlene to Dale, and as did Carol to Mike. And there are other descriptions and stories that affirm commitment between other couples: Archie and Edith remained committed to each other in spite of the abortion episode that could have torn them apart; Roy and Marie could have turned against each other and each other’s parents when accusations were being made prior to their daughter’s diagnosis of autism. The quality of commitment was extant in the spouses of this study, and the assessment overlays between desire and perception were found to be within the range of each spouse’s acceptable variance.

#### *Being appreciative*

Participants in the current study were anything but indifferent to, or in denial of, their spouses’ positive qualities. Instead, they exhibited clear and often effusive appreciation, both in the adjectives they used to describe their spouses and in the stories they told about them. Consequently, appreciation or “being appreciative” was found to be

one of the most consistently observed qualities revealed by this research. A spirit of appreciation characterized statements and observations, as opposed to a critical nature, or one of “Well, that’s how (he or she) is supposed to be anyway.” Recall, for instance, that Carol spoke of her life-altering discovery that there was someone with whom she could share her most closely-held secrets, someone with whom she could feel complete freedom to divulge even the darkest, most sensitizing experiences of her childhood. Whether consciously or unconsciously, she desired a husband who would listen actively, without judgment, and someone whose presence would make her feel secure. She gained the perception that Mike possessed those qualities well within her range of acceptable variance. And, importantly, Carol’s nature was to appreciate what Mike contributed to her life. She did not move on to focus on other areas where he was vulnerable to disparagement, and she did not become apathetic toward the high-priority qualities in which he excelled.

The quality of being appreciative is a lever that affects other actual, desired, and perceived qualities. A person’s actual appreciation understandably gives rise to other positively-conceived qualities within him or herself, such as kindness and sensitivity. When a person is appreciative of a quality they perceive in another person, there often is a reciprocal effect, in that others tend to become more attentive of the appreciative person’s best qualities as well. The recipient of appreciation also benefits because the appreciating person validates their qualities, and in a marital context, particularly validates those qualities that are the ones they most desire and perceive in their spouse. These are some of the very principles that Ethel outlined in speaking of how she actively attempts to communicate her appreciation, and even admiration, to her husband Fred.

I do know that the more we hear something the more we tend to believe it, you know—a kid that grows up hearing “You are worthless and will never amount to anything” usually grows up to be worthless and doesn’t amount to anything. So, I’ve just kind of taken that and what I have read, and kind of put that all together, and if I tell him that he’s really good at something then he wants to do that, because he’s really good at it. And then, every time he does it, I tell him how good he is, and, so... I am his biggest fan. I look at some of the things he does and I go, “Wow, nobody else I know could do that!” He is very, very intelligent. I mean, he is mechanically inclined. He can really do anything. I have seen him, too many times, go to do something that he’s never done before and do it really well. So well [in fact] that people don’t know he’s never done it before. So I tell him all the time how great he is, and he really is. And that builds him up. That rubs his ego and it builds him up in my mind too, because I am telling myself how great he is and he really is good. He’s the best.... The more I say things like that, the more he’s going to believe it, the more he is going to respond in a positive manner, to continue to do that. The more I say it, the more I am going to hear it, the more I’m going to believe it. So it works both ways.

Inherently, those who presented with a rescuer perspective demonstrated an actual quality of appreciation. The fact that Dominic would look back on his life and see that JoAnne’s influence is what had kept him from either becoming a criminal or dying “doing something stupid” is an indication of his actual quality of being appreciative. Sensitizing experiences, such as Carol’s, routinely brought to light spouses’ own actual quality of being appreciative toward their spouse. For example, Dharma’s sensitizing experience (an unspecified mental health crisis, though evidently related to her bi-polar disorder) anchored her appreciation for Tyrone’s patience, and Daisy’s sensitizing experience (abuse by a high school boyfriend) contributed to her appreciation for the ways that Duke affirmed her worth as a substantive, autonomous person. Acute parental influences, to the degree that they mirrored a sensitizing experience, also evidenced the actual quality of appreciation. For instance, the emotional frigidity of Tyrone’s parents toward him had an influence upon him that prompted his appreciation for Dharma’s emotional warmth.

For some spouses, specifically husbands, their level of appreciation elicited a

palpable, if not strong, resistance to being critical of their wives, even as certain interview questions may have allowed space for them to take that tack. As suggested previously, Archie seemed notably resistant to answer a question about improvements in Edith's qualities over their 20 years together (dating and marriage), due to the implication that her character was something less when she was younger. He did eventually decide to cite the level of her faith in God, and made certain to clarify that even though he believed her faith is stronger now, he wanted it understood that her faith was strong, not weak, at the beginning.

Similarly, Jose was effusive in his praise of Sarah in both interviews; and, even when discussing conflicts they had had, he did not dwell on anything negative about her. The question posed to him was virtually the same that Archie was reluctant to answer. His answer was quicker than Archie's, but less straightforward—in a way that one might expect a political campaigner might bend a question to fit a message they wanted to express. Within the space of just a couple of minutes, Jose spoke articulately of his wife's authentic quality, her excellent maternal quality, and her financially-responsible quality. Perhaps recognizing the absence of any deficit regarding her in Jose's response, (that is, from which she could have conceivably grown,) Sarah felt compelled a few minutes later to backtrack and add her hypothesis for his apparent blindness to any of her imperfections.

I think his picture of me is, that's [sincerely] how he pictures me. He doesn't see my flaws most of the time.... He's like, "You're hard enough on yourself, I don't need to pick them out.".... I don't know how skewed [that makes his perception of me], [or do I know] how much of the negative that [would be good for him to show], but I think that *is* how he sees me. He kind of keeps the negative to the side.

While Jose and Archie illustrated the point particularly well, the investigator took

note that *all* of the husbands were slow to offer criticism of their wives, even during the confidentially-held individual interview. Wives tended to be less reserved, and perhaps more pragmatic. And yet, any criticism that any of the wives put forward was couched in a context of understanding, not condescension. Sticking with the same segment of conversation above, Sarah provided a good example of this when it came her turn to answer the question of Jose's improved qualities from the beginning of the relationship until now.

I feel like, well, when we were dating, I had this hugely inflated idea of him, and that he was just this... you know, I called him the dreamer.... [He was] the perfect person. And not that any of that has gone down, but I mean he was human. You know, he had this anger. He had these things that I was like, "Oh, I didn't know that about you."

At this precise moment in the interview, Sarah appeared to come face to face with the very authenticity that Jose had just celebrated. She was invited to speak about qualities about Jose that had improved. Instead, her honest answer was that her perceptions at the beginning had made him out to be more than he actually was, so no quality improvements leaped to mind. She could only think of the discovery of a negative, undesired quality—his unbecoming occasional fits of anger—that she had not surmised previous to their marriage. In one way, it was less than complimentary; however Sarah couched the criticism so that it almost assigned as much fault to her lack of good judgment as it did to his lack of self-control. It was not condescending in tone, but rather, relatively gracious given the genuineness of the explanation she gave.

Still, one could reasonably wonder if this may have disappointed Jose, given the fact that these statements were being recorded for posterity. One might guess that he naturally felt inclined to defend himself, or even to lash back at Sarah in some way. It was, after all, a somewhat awkward moment in the interview because of the contrast

between how Jose had just handled the same question. Recognizing the awkwardness, Sarah tried to recover, but found herself unable to piece together a complete sentence or thought; so she finally gave up:

But I still feel like that people person and the leader side of him...and his strength to carry us through, and his beliefs... and you know, he's learning things, and he shares it with me. And I feel like he's a lot better putting it into words than I am, so I'm like stumbling right now...

Jose was undaunted, seemingly without any impulse to neutralize her comments in front of the visitor/investigator posing the questions, suggesting that he may joke about it later and affirming that his wife had nothing to prove to him.

Well, I might have to rag her just a little bit after this—just a little bit that she couldn't come up with anything positive. [Laughter] But, I think she's accurate. I think I have recognized in our marriage.... that's one of the gifts of marriage, is that you discover things about yourselves that you can't [otherwise] discover about yourselves—things that you need to grow in. And, so I think that's been a gift in our marriage that we've done that, and...I mean, I'm not dependent on Sarah being able to articulate what her favorite qualities of me to know that she loves me. She shows it all the time, in the way that we do things for each other and work together.

To say that so many spouses had the quality of being appreciative and that they were disinclined to speak condescendingly about their spouse is *not* the same thing as to say that these couples had no conflict. None appeared to have excessive conflict, and some appeared to even have minimal conflict. However, the point is that they all were candid enough to acknowledge the presence of conflict, and that they often indicated specific areas where they had experienced differences of opinion. Sometimes, individuals volunteered a difficulty over which they or their partner had some control, such as procurement of income and management of expenses. Indeed, conflict from financial hardship had overwhelmed each of the ten couples, at times even to the point of divorce ideation. Claire, for instance, lamented that she was in her mid-30s, and yet did not own

her own house. Additionally, to her surprise but not Bill's, she reported that the family's car had been recently repossessed, an incident that had caused her tears and embarrassment, and had certainly been a source of discord and tension between her and her husband.

There also were times when individuals would be candid enough to complain about some recurring situation that they disliked. Dale, for instance, spoke of feeling disappointed when he called home to chat with his wife during downtime on the road (he drove a gasoline truck for 12 hours, four nights a week), only to be told by Marlene that she was too busy either doing something with the kids or that she was entertaining family or friends visiting their house.

So while conflict, and sometimes considerable conflict, was present in these couples' marriages, what the investigator found remarkable and worthy of additional study is that participants did not feel chronically underappreciated by their partners. Claire's frustration with Bill and with their financial status did not overshadow that she appreciated Bill's hard work to build his plumbing business and to provide for the family. She attributed their lack of financial stability mainly to the impact of the major health problems for Bill, for her, and for two of their daughters. She advocated that, more than anything she had done, it was his strength of character that had made the difference in their marriage. Bill, on the other hand, did not find Claire's disappointment in his decision-making to be unfair, nor did he speak as if she was focusing exclusively on his lesser qualities instead of his best ones. Rather, his only comment acknowledged his unfortunate spending practices, and need for improvement. As for Dale, he did not consider Marlene's lack of availability to talk on the phone to represent a chronic lack of

appreciation on her part. Instead, he explained it as only an occasional frustration with the family and friends who seemed so much more interested to come to visit while he was at work. To the contrary, he praised his wife's care for their children on multiple occasions, stating that to be the best possible kindness she could give to him.

Being appreciative was an actual quality demonstrated in the words and actions of all twenty spouses. That is not to suggest that every conversation was idyllic and every conflict was eliminated; but it does suggest that, as a result of this appreciation factor, there were underlying assumptions embedded within the social context the couples shared that may have enhanced the likelihood of productive conversations and reduced the likelihood of devastating conflict. While it was not necessarily an explicitly designated quality that individuals desired prior to their marriages, there is copious evidence that it emerged as a high-priority desired quality. Furthermore, spouses did not complain that their partners habitually failed to appreciate them, and so it is accurate to say that appreciation was perceived within spouses' range of acceptable variance.

#### *Being child-centered*

A fourth quality that permeated the interviews with study participants is child-centeredness. As a matter of inclusion in the current study, couples were parents to at least one child who was enrolled in school, and all spoke consistently and with conviction regarding the high priority they share with regard to their children's well-being and advancement. Dale highlighted an overlap between this quality and his and Marlene's commitment to one another.

Our daughter came to us a few months ago. We actually had a little spat, but she heard us arguing. She came in there bawling. She said, "Mom and dad, I don't want you to get a divorce. Sean's mom and dad just got a divorce." It's moments like that make you cherish it. I said, "Baby, we aren't going to get a divorce. You

don't have to worry about that." And she said that two or three times. I think that they keep us going a lot of times because our kids are a real big influence to us. We strive for our kids to not [have to grow up with the doubts and insecurities that we did]. We want to try and give them more, and provide better for them than what our parents could. Our kids are a big positive.

Dale considered children central to the real meaning of the marriage relationship, and asserted that if outsiders were to assess his marriage's health, he believed an accurate measurement could be obtained by observing his and Marlene's two girls.

I don't think married couples—this is my opinion—I don't think they even know what marriage is until they have kids. That's just the way I feel about it.... When you have kids, it turns your whole life around for both of you....

[Going back to a previous question,] to convince the jury we are in a healthy marriage, I think one thing [Marlene] would bring up is look at our kids. Look at how they are. There is nothing like mom or dad to our kids. When I come home, if they are awake, they want a hug. They are straight-A students. They are good kids. I think that is one thing she would bring up. You can look at someone's kids and tell if they have a healthy marriage.

Dale continued, and again found some overlap in support of two high-priority qualities posited here; this time, child-centeredness and appreciation via a sensitizing experience.

I see a good wife if she can take care of the little kids, and be good to them and not scream at them or whatever, then she can do anything, because that is a *big job*. I tried when [Marlene] had surgery and after a week I was pulling my hair out.... It's like, when I came home, and the house would be dirty, and then I would upset and [say] "Why's the house so dirty?" She would always say, "Well, I have a job here, too, and it's a lot harder than yours." When she had surgery and I had to watch them for a week or two, I [came to] respect it. Now I have never said anything else since then.

I think that's how you become a husband and wife is to have kids.... Once you have kids and you can make it through the young stages of the kids, you can make it through anything. It brings a lot of stress on the man and woman, and it brings a lot of fights. It cuts into your privacy. You just can't go and do anything you want because you have kids now. When your friends come over and say, "Let's go skating" or "drinking" or whatever, you can't do it because you have got kids to think about.

I think if the woman can work through the difficulty of having young children she would be an excellent wife—any woman.... Marlene when we had kids she just took the mother instinct instantly. I mean just the day we had Andrea (not her real name), [Marlene's] life was changed and that was her priority; and

you know, I wasn't her number one priority anymore. It was the kids.

It is conceivable that, for some husbands, not being the number one priority in his wife's life would be irritating, even if replaced by children. However, Dale's words were full of pride for his wife.

I know a lot of people, actually [some of them being] my friends, that the dad in the relationship is not close to his kids at all. They call him "Dad," and I'm sure he loves his kids, and it's just not like I am. Marlene made the kids her number one priority, and she still has enough for me, too. I have always been a hands-on dad.... When I was home [and] we had a little baby, I wanted to be holding the baby. I was never too good to change the diaper.

Dale's words, especially that "I think that's how you become a husband and wife is to have kids," reflect the collaboration that is inherent with both the work of being parents, and the desire to do the job well. The couples in the current study were able to work together in establishing efficient systems (roles, rules, rituals, standards for managing crises, scheduling, etc.) in their home that they found to be productive and satisfying. Often, this collaboration was extant in how parents participated in activities together. Archie and Edith, both on disability incomes at the time of the interviews, said that they build their daily priorities around their 13 year-old daughter, including volunteering at her school regularly.

Probably, I'd say out of 24 hours in a day, we're probably with her, unless she goes somewhere, we're probably with her no less than 20 of it. I mean, not as much this year, cause, I mean, we signed up to volunteer, but it works differently [at her new school].

Edith added, "We'll go shopping, sometimes. Oh, she loves to shop. I usually go to the park, and walk around sometimes." Archie continued

She's involved with sports all year round. I coach her softball team, she cheers for basketball and football. And, I help coach a couple of basketball teams. So...she enjoys her sports.... She has scout meetings once, she has a scout meeting once a week. I mean, we spend quite a bit of home time, too.... We like to have our family night, you know. We'll have a little sit down to a dinner, and she'll pick

out movies to watch, if she's got homework, I'll help her with her homework. We're a close knit family.... We always made time somehow, I mean, even when we were working.

Other couples similarly demonstrated how their children were at the center of their lives. For instance, Marie explained

Because of Brittany's (not her real name) autism, we've had to plan everything around her. You know, just like last week: We needed the extra money to work on the car and... do a few things in the house. But she is so set on certain things that she is wanting to buy that we just had to go ahead and let her, to keep everything at an even pace for her. When, she's torn up, it tears all of us up. So, we've had to adjust our lives to her.

Roy and Marie talked about how hard they have had to fight for their daughter, who has autism, to receive the social services to which she is entitled. They had moved from the rural area where they grew up to live in a town of about 50,000, and they expected to remain there largely due to the relationships their daughter has formed with people at her school and at their church. However, there was a chance that they would have to move back in order to take care of Marie's mother.

*Marie:* I reckon my biggest fear is putting [Brittany] through an upset, because I don't want to see her regress....

*Roy:* I think that's a big fear. We'd have to think about that. I don't want to go through that, and I definitely don't want her to have to relive it. You know what I mean?...

*Marie:* Well, she's got friends, friends we don't even know about. She'll see them out in the park and she'll holler at them. Where she goes to school...

*Roy:* Yeah, teachers and people, I don't even know who they are.

*Marie:* And people at church, she knows people I don't know.... and then we've even had people come to us and say, 'Well, why don't you go to a church that don't have so many people? Our church has like three hundred people. There's like fifty in our Sunday School class, and they think she don't need that much input. But oh, if we went somewhere else, it would break her heart.

*Roy:* It would break her heart. I think that's our biggest fear, worrying about changes....

Because when she's upset, we're upset. It's worse two-fold. It's like, if it hinders her, it definitely is going to hinder us.

*Marie:* At the time [that there is a change], it's the worst thing that could ever happen [from Brittany's perspective]. Whatever, you know, however minute or whatever it might be at that time, it's just devastating [for her]. You know, if it upsets Christy, you know her whole worlds turned upside down until we get it fixed.

The couple was asked, "But you don't turn on each other in those situations?" To which Marie answered, "No. We have to lean on each other. We're all we have."

Dale and Marlene, Archie and Edith, and Roy and Marie exemplified the degree to which all ten couples took seriously their role as parents. Authoritative styles of parenting, high in both emotional connection and in monitoring and control seemed to be the norm, with the possible exception of Dale who appeared to lean toward a permissive style in light of the fact that he did not like to be the one to have to discipline his two daughters.

#### *Other high-priority qualities*

A variety of other high-priority qualities were conveyed by study participants, many of which have been unpacked in the course of explaining the four primary synergists. The following list reports qualities explicitly desired and perceived in a partner, and begins with those most often observed. They included (a) craves "together" time (not necessarily conversational), overtly desired by seven husbands and five wives (Tyrone and Dharma, Mike and Carol, Archie and Edith, Roy and Marie, Dominic and JoAnne, Jose, and Dale), (b).being a good communicator, overtly desired by four husbands and five wives (Jose and Sarah, Duke and Daisy, Roy and Marie, Mike and Carol, and Ethel); (c) being responsible and mature, overtly desired by five husbands and three wives (Dale and Marlene, Mike, Dominic, Tyrone, Bill, Sarah, and Ethel); (d) being

a good listener, overtly desired by six wives (Carol, Daisy, JoAnne, Sarah, Claire, and Dharma); (e) candor and honesty, overtly desired by three husbands and two wives (Dominic and JoAnne, and Duke and Daisy, and Jose); (f) strength in Christian beliefs, overtly desired by one husband and four wives (Jose and Sarah, Carol, Daisy, Dharma); (g) parental approval, overtly desired by two husbands and two wives (Jose and Sarah, and Archie and Edith); (h) purposely non-controlling, overtly desired by two husbands and two wives (Roy and Marie, and Duke and Daisy); (i) respect, overtly desired by one husband and three wives (Duke and Daisy, Marlene, and Claire,); (j) physical beauty, overtly desired by three husbands (Fred, Duke, and Jose); (k) behavioral similarities with own parents, overtly desired by one husband and two wives (Jose and Sarah, and Edith); (l) ego-satisfaction, overtly desired by two husbands (Fred and Duke); (m) patience, overtly desired by two wives (Dharma and Daisy); and (n) emotional stability, overtly desired by one husband and one wife (Mike and Carol).

The remaining desired qualities were explicitly observed in only one spouse: (a) courage to conquer low self-esteem, overtly desired by Claire; (b) deserving of love and respect, overtly desired by Claire; (e) someone who welcomes physical affection, overtly desired by Duke; (f) someone who provides sense of physical safety, overtly desired by Carol; (g) biological capacity to reproduce, overtly desired by Dharma; (h) willingness to apologize, overtly desired by Jose; and (i) financial security, overtly desired by Edith.

While there is some presumption that, for each of the partners of the spouses named above, the perceived qualities were representative of actual qualities in their partners, several actual qualities of spouses also were extant independently of the quality being desired by their spouse. Those that were affirmed by the individual's own

description or recall of some example of that quality included: (a) Dale, Daisy, Carol, Archie, and Edith's hopefulness; (b) Duke, Bill, and Ethel's earlier lack of self-esteem in their young adulthood; (c) Mike and Claire's extroversion; (d) Duke's self-respect and easy-going nature; and (e), Edith's positive disposition.

(As stated earlier, it is recommended that future studies feature a different, and perhaps a larger sample, in order to make it clearer which, if any, of these actual or desired qualities deserve greater or lesser focus as a priority in low-income couples' healthy marriages.)

#### *Summary of the Results*

Karney and Bradbury's 2005 article, regarding how socioeconomic status may influence the dynamics of a couple's marriage, largely prompted the motivation for this study. That same year, the U.S. government appropriated funding for nationwide healthy marriage initiatives, with a large portion of that funding directed to aid low-income couples. While that article acknowledged the benefits conveyed to children when their biological parents maintain a marriage not characterized by high conflict, Karney and Bradbury suggested that relationship education programs used in many of the federally-funded initiatives may be ill-advised because of a lack of research-based programming sensitive to the barriers that low-income couples face.

The current study sought to address that concern by generating empirical foundation for a grounded theory asserting how good marriages develop in the midst of a low-income context. In view of that, these research questions guided the conception of the study:

1. As low-income couples describe their marital and life histories, what conditions

(backgrounds and antecedents) do they describe as most relevant in helping them create and maintain a healthy marriage?

2. With respect to personal qualities of one or both, what thought processes, emotional states, and behaviors do they describe as most relevant in their marriages being “healthy?”

3. Taking all of the data emanating from questions 1 and 2, what key concepts arise from that data, and how do those key concepts relate to one another in a grounded theory?

The design of the current study prescribed an accumulation of data through semi-structured interviews with the individuals best qualified to inform the concern—low-income married parents who, independently of one another, assessed their marriage to be healthy. Participants sat for one interview together that was guided by a set of questions intended to identify milestones in their relationship together; and later, a second interview individually (and confidentially) intended to identify milestones of the individual’s life and to probe deeper into the marriage relationship. The second interview was guided by the information gained from the transcription of their couple interview, plus transcriptions of all couple and individual interviews that preceded it. Each of the 20 spouses donated two-to-five total hours of their time to describe their own development and the development of their relationship; and additionally, in their own words, they explained how they and their spouse evolved to become partners in a marriage they both perceived to be healthy. The analysis of those contributions, then, is the basis that established the grounded theory proffered here that simultaneously begins to fill the knowledge gap cited by Karney and Bradbury, and forms a body of work upon which

other research on low-income healthy marriages can be built.

Briefly, the theory that emerged posits that there are four kinds of developmental factors, called synergists, which contribute to the formation of a number of high-priority actual qualities contained in a person, as well as a number of high-priority qualities the person desires and perceives in an intimate partner. As desired qualities and perceived qualities fall within a person's acceptable range of variance, their assessment of their marriage achieves a level they feel can be termed "healthy." While the data revealed dozens of qualities among the spouses studied, fewer of those met the criteria as high-priority, and four stood out as high-priority qualities that were common to every person in every marriage: being loving, being committed, being appreciative, and being child-centered. Accordingly, the study supports the proposition that each of those qualities is requisite to a healthy marriage. In retrospect, the synergist of those qualities for any given individual materialized from either a sensitizing experience, a partner-as-rescuer mindset (PARM) developed as a result of previous adversities in their life, influences from parents and grandparents that were particularly acute, influences from Christianity that had bestowed value on certain qualities, or in many cases, a combination of two or more of those.

## CHAPTER 5

### Discussion

While current literature provides insight into low-income marriage, and also into healthy marriages, the present study represents a novel attempt designed to explore low-income marriages that both spouses consider to be healthy. Scholars have questioned the degree to which marriages rooted in a low-income context are similar to others. Ooms (Fein & Ooms, 2006) commented that it would be particularly useful to advance the state of knowledge regarding marriage in disadvantaged populations if research were to explore the question, “What do we know about successful marriages in low-income populations?” (p. 26). The present study has supplied some initial answers to that question through the words and descriptions of the twenty low-income spouses, primarily residing in counties designated as Appalachian, who responded to publicity for the study. Each person participated in two interviews, accounting for two to five hours of data. Analysis using grounded theory methods revealed four abstract sets of developmental factors (called synergists) which were: (a) sensitizing experiences, (b) partner-as-rescuer mindset predicated upon cumulative adverse history, (c) acute parental influences, and (d) religious influences. Those synergists hastened four fundamental high-priority qualities that were found among each of the spouses: that they were (a) loving, (b) committed, (c) appreciative, and (d) child-centered.

This chapter considers the outcomes of the study against the backdrop of other relevant literature. The first section explores its salience with regard to other family social science theory and research. The second considers how the findings inform practitioners in the field of relationship education. The final section magnifies those areas of the study

where limitations prevented stronger and more highly generalized conclusions, and areas where additional research would be prudent.

#### *Salience of the Study to Family Social Science Theory and Research*

The current study adds to family social science literature primarily in the fact that, as was proposed in Chapter 2, it fills a void in two ways. First, while research that addresses healthy marriages has been fairly prolific, particularly over the last decade, precious little research exists that provides specific information about the healthy marriages experienced among low-income couples. In a similar way, research looking at low-income marriages has been a constant staple in the field, yet very little has been produced that considers them from an assets-based approach rather than a pathological one.

Additionally, the current study does more than attempt to describe these marriages, as would be the case with studies employing most types of qualitative design. Instead, by virtue of the decision to use grounded theory methods, this research aspired to be, using LaRossa's (2005) phrase, "purposefully explanatory," and appears to be among the first to attempt to identify the key elements and processes that allow individuals to develop the capacity over their lifespan to become partners in healthy marriages.

The following paragraphs elaborate upon cogent aspects of this research, and simultaneously provides insight into how the current research integrates with that which was cited in the earlier literature review.

#### *Participant characteristics*

*Cultural and ethnic characteristics.* Participating couples were exclusively White/Non-Hispanic adults. Seven of the ten couples lived in U.S. counties designated by

the federal government as Appalachian counties, and two others lived in counties that border Appalachian counties. However, a slight minority (nine of the twenty individuals) were raised in Appalachia. While the intention of the study as originally designed was to attract participants from multiple races, efforts to recruit African American and Hispanic couples proved unsuccessful.

Over the two years that data collection was conducted, a total of 24 couples considered joining the study, of which eleven sat for the couple interview, and ten completed both the couple and individual interviews. Couples' average duration of marriage was about 14 years prior to the first interview, with the shortest duration being seven years and the longest being 22 years. (See Appendix E for additional demographic information specific to each couple.) The eleventh couple did not respond to attempts to contact them for individual interviews, and the decision was made to exclude their data from analysis. On the other hand, only four minority couples became prospects for participation. Two African American couples became acquainted with the study through friends of theirs who had seen a promotional flyer, but in both cases, they declined interest within days of the preliminary contact. One other African American couple independently contacted the principal investigator in the interest of becoming involved. The couple met the study criteria that said couples must have a school-age child together, however they were not to be married for another two months. That date eventually fell through, as did a second one, and contact was eventually lost. Only one Hispanic couple made an initial contact with the principal investigator, and their candidacy was at once invalidated by the wife's admission over the phone that she was only seeking inclusion in the study in order to impress a judge who was hearing her husband's domestic violence

case.

Certainly, there was disappointment in having failed to gain heterogeneity with regard to ethnicity. Nonetheless, the data collected provided a robust pool for an understanding of low-income Caucasian parents who enjoy good marriages. As mentioned in Chapter 2, those couples make up slightly more than half of all low-income couples in the U.S. (Fein, 2004). With reference to 2007 U.S. Census estimates, all couples who participated in the study resided in or near very small towns with a population of less than 50,000. Three of the ten lived in towns numbering less than 5,000. The implication is that the results of the current study are congruent with Fein's data with regard to low-income non-Hispanic Whites who are married, and with other studies of marriage cited in the review of literature, insofar as the participants in those studies were Caucasian.

*Cohabitation and pre-marital conception of children.* Caucasians who cohabit are more likely to do so with an intent to eventually marry (Fein, 2004), and that premise held for the current study. Each of the four couples who established a household together prior to becoming legally married did so under the pretense that a wedding would occur eventually. In one situation, she moved in with him two weeks before the wedding due to a dispute with her family. Two other situations evolved after children had been conceived prior to the wedding, and while both partners were still teenagers. Neither of the females in those relationships had any post-secondary education at the time they began living with their partner, which contrasts somewhat with the norms that Fein and his colleagues found (2003). The fourth female had had a child and spent two years as a single mother prior to meeting her husband. She had dropped out of high school earlier,

but eventually completed her GED and went on to finish a two-year degree.

*Work, income, and financial distress.* By requirement, all couples who participated in the study had incomes less than 200% of the federal poverty threshold for the year previous to their couple interview. While all of the couples met that requirement, it should be noted that none of the couples would have fallen below the federal poverty guideline for the year prior to which they agreed to participate in the current study. Thus, it is accurate to portray the couples as “low-income,” but not accurate to portray them as “in poverty.” Additionally, of the ten couples, five of them considered themselves to be “at-risk” financially at the time of their interviews. The other five responded that they were “stable.” None of the couples felt that their circumstance was “very secure,” nor did any feel that they were presently “in crisis.” Some couples had experienced a higher standard of living for some part of their marriage, but in two of those (Dominic & JoAnne and Roy & Marie), health problems developed that prevented them from working as before; the third couple (Fred & Ethel) made a decision that he would go back to school in order to enter a profession that provided him more time for their family. Tyrone and Dharma made a similar decision, though it did not appear that they crested the low-income threshold even at the time he worked at the flour mill while she waitressed on weekends. In addition to those two, the threat of long hours at work and limited marriage and family time for household breadwinners was mentioned by five other couples (Archie & Edith, Bill & Claire, Dale & Marlene, Jose & Sarah, and Mike & Carol). So, a total of seven couples had experienced a level of concern about working hours’ infringement on their marriage and/or family’s well-being; and in every case, couples both recognized and took actions to address the infringement. Sometimes, that translated as simply being

intentional to give the spouse and children time when at home, but in other cases such as Fred's and Tyrone's, it meant returning to school to make a career change.

Consistent with the findings in the literature review, eight of the wives had chosen to stay at home to care for their sons and daughters for all or a large part of their childhood. Only JoAnne and Marie were definitive breadwinners in their households at the time of their interviews, and in both of those cases, their husbands suffered from back injuries that forced them to draw disability income instead of being employed. By trade, Marie's husband Roy was an electrician, and barring the injury, likely would have been the household breadwinner. On the other hand, it appeared that JoAnne and her husband Dominic had contributed to their household income almost equivalently through their 22 years of marriage. They were the only couple in the study for whom that could be said, though there was reason to anticipate that, upon her graduation from seminary, Claire's would rival Bill's income.

The financial stress experienced within all ten families was palpable, and hope for the future was brighter for some than others. That is, some spouses (Tyrone, Mike, Fred, and Claire) were poised to finish a degree which gave their families reason to believe that they would soon see some increase in income and would obtain health insurance as well as other benefits. Other couples, though, appeared to be mired in their socioeconomic status for months, if not years, to come. Roy and Marie, in particular, agonized about their future. Neither of their medical conditions was favorable, and the telemarketing position that Marie had obtained just prior to the couple interview did not provide the hours she had hoped. With her income stream and the government support for which they qualified, they supported their teenage daughter, and likely would continue to do so for

the rest of her life due to her autism. It was a surprise, but not a total shock, when the principal investigator learned in mid-2008 that Roy suffered a fatal heart attack, which surely turned his wife and daughter's world upside down. His obesity, together with his and Marie's financial burdens, the difficulties of raising a child with autism, and occasional extended family conflicts would figure to have contributed in some way to his demise.

Education level is often considered a covariate to household income, however that is not as clearly the case with regard to the participants of the present study. In eight of the ten couples, at least one spouse had attained at least a two-year college degree, and four of the ten could boast that both spouses had accomplished that. In six of the ten couples, at least one spouse had earned their bachelor's degree, and in one of the ten, both spouses had done so. Three spouses, all from different marriages either had a graduate degree or were pursuing a graduate degree at the time of the interviews. In each of those cases, they were pursuing careers in Christian ministry.

*Mental health.* Mental health was a prevalent topic that surfaced during interviews, and is one that begs for more extensive inquiry. In nine of the ten marriages under study, one or both partners openly acknowledged and dealt with a mental health condition. Edith had anxiety attacks. Jose confessed to having anger management issues with his children. Bill and Mike fought depression, and while Duke's case was not clinically diagnosed, he spoke as if he was certain it would be if he ever saw a mental health professional. Roy spoke with the same confidence about depressive symptoms he had witnessed in Marie, and said that his lack of employment had "really depressed me." Dale told of emotional problems that Marlene had experienced as a result of adversity in

her family of origin. JoAnne, Sarah, and Dharma all have seen professionals regarding difficulties they did not specify, except that it related back to the abuse of their childhood. From age 13, when the memories of her sexual abuse were surfacing anew after years of suppression, Carol had dysphasia, which is a psychological problem with the physical act of swallowing; and while it is not as severe as her teenage years, she continues to carry that burden practically every time she sits down to a meal. The lone couple that did not reveal any individual mental health issue was Fred and Ethel; however, there is nothing concrete that would eliminate the possibility that they may also have dealt with some psychological hardship at some point.

While the data collected for this study can only attest to the pattern, one highly preliminary explanation for the pattern is that a spouse's acknowledged reliance upon their partner may have impact on the intensity of the quality of their commitment. Buttressing this possibility is that Carol indicated that she would not permit Mike to leave her following his financial improprieties because, she said, "We are the reason you are stable right now, and if I were to up-and-leave and take the kids, you might kill yourself.... So, no, we are working through this."

*Religious faith.* The results of the study suggest that, aside from the aforementioned religious influence that served as a synergist to the development of certain qualities, there also is a relationship between positive assessment of one's marriage and the acknowledgement of an on-going religious involvement. Nineteen of the 20 participants divulged that their religious faith was an important element in their lives currently, and all 20 indicated their belief in God. While not explicitly asked, there were indications that nine of the ten couples attended religious worship services

regularly, including the five spouses who were employed in or preparing for ministry work.

*Revised standards and purpose for marriage.* As mentioned in Chapter 2, the term *institutional marriage* (Amato, 2007; Cherlin, 2004) has been used to refer to a societal conception of marriage based in functionality and obligation to society—which encompasses the expectation that marriage should be the exclusive acceptable context for child-rearing, an absolute precondition to sexual activity, and also, encompasses the idea of marriage as the primary mechanism to ensure economic support for women,. There is evidence in the data from the current study that low-income healthy marriages still retain some symptoms of institutional marriage. Bill and Claire, Duke and Daisy, and Fred and Ethel all married sooner than they otherwise would have due to her pregnancy, so there was a tacit implication that a child needed to be raised within the context of a marriage. Marlene was committed to no sex before her marriage to Dale, as was Dharma before her marriage to Tyrone, submitting to the societal more that sexual relations should be limited to marital relationships only. The courtship of Archie and Edith lasted about twice as long as they said they had hoped (four years), partially in submission to his family's statute that they should wait until Archie had adequate income to support a wife. Indisputably, the marriages examined in the current study suggest that the boundaries and constraints of the institution of marriage still matter to some degree. Thus, qualities that pertain to functionality are actual, desired, and perceived, and remain part of the individuals' assessment of their marriage.

Ernest Burgess, co-author of the 1963 book *The Family: From Institution to Companionship*, often is credited with being the first to posit the idea of *companionate*

*marriage*. He and his colleagues asserted then that marriage was moving away from its emphasis on functionality and role conformity for the sake of the community toward, instead, an emphasis on an emotionally-rewarding relationship for the benefit of the two individuals involved. More recently, Amato (2007) asserted that the progression may be better characterized today as *individualistic marriage*, almost entirely premised upon the concept that marriage should be a vehicle for personal satisfaction. Of all of the spouses interviewed for the current study, the study's lone divorcee, Duke, particularly had much to say in this vein of personal satisfaction, and thusly, individualistic marriage. Ironically enough, the reader may recall from Chapter 4 that Duke had approached his first marriage with some trepidation mixed with defiance. That is, he spoke of the lack of emotional bonding and physical affection in that relationship, and his simultaneous conviction that he should concern himself only with what he could give to her in the marriage. Contemplation of his own desires and pursuits designed to gain his own satisfaction was reasoned to be unproductive to the nature of a truly fulfilling marriage.

I can remember thinking on the night of... the wedding rehearsal that, you know, I don't know if I should do this or not. And yet, part of me [was saying to myself] "I don't want to be embarrassed. My money has been spent. As much you're not getting what you need from this relationship you still have a lot that she needs from this relationship." You know, I can remember just wanting to make it selfless.

Over time, Duke found himself less able to defend this sacrificial conviction in the face of what he was experiencing daily, or maybe better said, *not* experiencing.

I began to understand, first of all, that marriage just had to be a balance of what I want and what she wants.... There has to be a little bit more compatibility. I was just hoping that my own God-love inside of me... would help me to change what I wanted. But I still had my wants, I still had my hopes and aspirations. Plus, I was looking for a fundamental basic respect and a sharing [that I had not received in either of my two serious] previous relationships.

Duke and others interviewed were asked in their individual interviews both what

their spouse brought to the relationship that had allowed the marriage to flourish, and what they had, themselves, brought to it with that result. The majority of the time, respondents cited qualities that reflected a companionate, as opposed to an institutional or individualistic conception of marriage. In Duke's case, he spoke of the quality of patience he brought to the relationship that benefited his wife, and alternatively, spoke of her compassion (or as he put it "her big heart") and how that had been a benefit to him. Daisy's responses to the same question were congruent with his—that she had brought a "loving" quality, and that he had brought "trust, communication." She went on to say, "being able to be yourself and be okay with that, honest about your beliefs... Non-judgmental. Thinks, you know, it's okay to be different." These are qualities that pertain to the successful collaboration within the relationship, as opposed to qualities such as those mentioned previously that pertain to ecological and economic functioning of the family.

Discussions of companionate marriage tend to flow naturally into discussions of "soul-mate" marriages, wherein spouses assess the health of their marriage according to the degree to which they feel it is accurate to define their partner as their "soul-mate." Whitehead and Popenoe (2001) spoke of the desire for a soul-mate as a "SuperRelationship" (p. 13) phenomenon, wherein the person expects "an intensely private spiritualized union, combining sexual fidelity, romantic love, emotional intimacy and togetherness." Scholars such as Fowers (2000) have decried this evolution in the culture's view of marriage because of the intensely emotional gratification that is expected to occur, to the distortion of

the depth and breadth of real love. In real life, love is much more than a feeling. It is a long series of decisions to be together and give to one another, a commitment

to work together to build a shared life, a day-to-day involvement that changes who we are as people. Love involves your entire being; your love for someone is part of you because it involves your feelings, your thoughts and your actions.... What I am suggesting in this book is the dominant story of marriage places too much emphasis on the emotional aspects of marriage, particularly on whether the marriage is satisfying. (p. 10)

Springing from this, some of the later interviews included a question that asked individuals to contemplate whether their marriage was most similar to a soul-mate relationship—one in which partners are intensely close to each other, highly homogenous in their likes and dislikes, temperaments, hobbies and recreational choices, and even have developed a keen ability to know what the other is going to say before they say it. Or, alternatively, it was suggested that their relationship may lean more toward a “ying-yang” marriage, one in which the partners’ bond does not so much exhibit the intensely romantic and spiritual bond of soul-mates. Rather, the partners seem to be opposites in most ways; and yet, that it works for them anyway, buoyed by the confidence that one partner’s weaknesses are supplemented by the other partner’s strengths. They learn to tolerate their differences, and possibly even gain a sense of accomplishment in doing that. Participants readily connected with this ideal through mention of the famous line that Tom Cruise uttered as the movie character Jerry McGuire, “You complete me” (Johnson & Crowe, 1996).

Ying-yang relationships appear to be more closely aligned with efficiency and functionality, and thus, with the institutional purpose of marriage; whereas soul-mate relationships appear to be more closely aligned with the companionate conception of marriage. While the number who received this question is too small to draw any conclusions (only posed to the last six of the 20 participants, or 30%), it is interesting nonetheless to note that three of the six responded that their marriage was decidedly

“ying-yang.” One additional person said his marriage leaned toward ying-yang though he felt more comfortable saying that it was somewhere in the middle of the two polarities. Another person also said she thought hers was in the middle. Only one of the six spouses said he considered his marriage to be best characterized as a soul-mate marriage. Within couples, none duplicated their spouse’s answer, and at least one spouse in every marriage considered theirs to be decidedly ying-yang in nature.

Certainly, it would be interesting in a follow-up study to explore this area further. For now, it is not a purpose of the current study to tease out delineations between institutional, companionate, and individualistic paradigms of marriage based on the information conveyed by Duke, Daisy, and others. However, it bears mention that two of the three (institutional and companionate) paradigms are supported in the words of the 20 spouses in this study.

#### *Integration of the Current Study with Scholarship Regarding Development of Healthy Marriages*

The model of healthy marriage posited by researchers affiliated with Child Trends (Moore et al., 2004) inspired interest for pursuit of the current study. Therefore, it is reasonable to think about how it integrates with the one posited by the current study, which is presented in Figure I of Chapter 4, and called the Process Map of Spouses’ Assessment of Marital Health. (For the sake of brevity, hereafter, it will be referred to more simply as the Process Map, or PM.) The current model materialized from qualitative interviews with 20 low-income married parents. By comparison, the Child Trends model, developed by Moore et al. (2004), materialized from 52 different studies of married Americans, with and without children, using a variety of primarily-

quantitative research designs, and without regard to a specific demographic population. Yet, that model, and the report explaining it, was a significant contributor to the motivation and design of the current study.

There is some amount of overlap between the models because there is some amount of parallel intent between the two studies, though not perfectly so. The current study sought to *conceptualize a cogent process*, grounded in the descriptions of study participants, that provides a framework for thinking about how low-income parents in healthy marriages developed over their lifespan to become people who, now, make such an assessment. The Child Trends effort sought to *conceptualize a definition of the concept* of healthy marriage for the eventual purpose of designing a single measurement tool that would standardize how federal healthy marriage initiatives would be assessed. In so doing, the research team recognized a need to distinguish between characteristics of healthy marriages and antecedents to healthy marriages, as well as distinguish characteristics from the outcomes or consequences of healthy marriages. In so doing, Moore and her colleagues developed a model strongly suggestive of development processes that pre-date the formation of a couple's current healthy marriage. Their model, and the report explaining it, was a significant contributor to the motivation for the current study.

Further, the Child Trends study sought to define healthy marriage by identifying explicit identifiers that the consensus of research appears to affirm as fundamental to labeling a given marriage as "healthy." The current study, on the other hand, did not emphasize pursuit of a common definition, but rather, accepted spouses' own testimony that they considered their marriage to be "good" or "very good." And instead, it focused

on the indicators over husbands' and wives' lifespan that appeared to direct them toward that mutual assessment of their relationship. Essentially, the current study granted the assumption that a self-described "good or very good marriage" was the equivalent of a healthy marriage, under the line of reasoning that said that, barring some indication of abuse, the couples themselves are the most salient judges of the health of their marriage.

Another contrast between the two models is that the latter part of the Child Trends model considers two categories of outputs of the marriage, adult well-being and child well-being. Juxtaposed to that, the Process Map only considers well-being insofar as spouses' perceive those as "qualities," and more specifically, qualities that fall within their range of acceptable variance. It is fair to say that the current model attempts to focus more intensely upon intricacies of individuals' lifespan development and the mechanisms that contributed to their current positive assessment of marital health.

The Child Trends model distilled a person's background down to two levels of ecological strata, which are society and family. And indeed, it likely would have been a complicated and, quite possibly, an unrewarding task to have attempted to reconcile and make some order of the varieties of societal and family backgrounds that 52 different studies encountered. An elaborate listing of antecedents was compiled, including (a) employment and income, (b) education, (c) physical health, (d) mental health, (e) stress, (f) social support, (g) social skills, (h) use of controlled substances, (i) incarceration, (j) the presence of children from prior relationships, (k) community context, (l) religiosity, and (m) attitudes and values. These all are said to have a bearing on couples' prospects for exhibiting characteristics of a healthy marriage.

The strength of this part of the Child Trends model is that it points researchers

and practitioners to areas that may be addressed which might improve those prospects.

For instance, efforts to alter conditions so that there is an increase in employment and an improvement in couples' economic circumstances, plausibly, are concurrently efforts that could enhance couples' capacity to improve their marriages.

For its part, the current study observes broadly that there are four fundamental categories of developmental factors that shape, over time, the identity of the person to become who he or she is presently: biological conditions, environmental contexts, intrapersonal operations, and the person's own self-determination. Whereas the Child Trends model recognizes that a person's background and a number of antecedents contribute to the degree to which characteristics of marital health are present in the marriage, the Process Map emphasizes patterns in how developmental factors come together to contribute to the development of specific personal qualities that appear to have high priority in successful marriages. In the Process Map, sensitizing experiences, partner-as-rescuer mindset, acute parental influences, and religious influences are posited as synergists that played substantial roles in forming the low-income participants' qualities.

The very approach of the two models is somewhat different. By way of illustration, the Child Trends model would approach an antecedent such as educational attainment much like any other independent variable—i.e., something that can be empirically measured for its effect upon a dependent variable, likely one of the characteristics such as fidelity. The approach of the Process Map to educational attainment is to treat it as a quality: to assess the learning that one gained from the experience of education (contributing toward an *actual quality* of being knowledgeable)

and the social status gained as a result (contributing toward a *perceived quality* that may be a highly *desired* by a partner or potential partner).

A strength of the Process Map, then, is that a given quality is not only considered at a surface level, but that the quality is analyzed according to its relevance to both parties in the relationship—actual for the one, desired and perceived for the other. Yet another strength is that qualities have been analyzed for patterns in how they developed—looking at the quality in light of sets of developmental factors that appear to have enhanced its growth. These, again, are termed synergists, and there is value in identifying those, especially for practitioners in relationship education who may gain effectiveness by a stronger understanding of the channels through which high-priority qualities often develop.

#### *Integration of the Current Study with Scholarship Regarding Qualities*

The current study concludes that there are a variety of significant qualities that are extant in the lives of low-income parents who mutually assess their marriage as healthy, and that the ones that appear to be universal and, likely, requisite are that a spouse be (a) loving, (b) committed, (c) appreciative, and (d) child-centered. These findings compare favorably with the research of social scientists, such as Blaine Fowers, Alan Hawkins, Scott Stanley, Terry Hargrave and Kristin Anderson Moore, who have begun over the last decade to consider linkages between character strengths and good marriages. This section gives context to the current study in light of their work, as well as the work of Peterson and Seligman (2004) which attempts to give some order to how scholars think in general about character strengths and virtues.

*Marital virtues and corroborative scholarship.* Fowers' 2000 book *Beyond the*

*Myth of Marital Happiness* asserted that the common use of marital happiness or satisfaction measurements to wholly determine the health of a marriage is an inaccurate, at best, strategy. Congruent with the title of the book, he effectively argued that there is an implicit selfishness in that rationale, and that measurements that illuminate that singular expression of a given marriage's quality are incomplete.

Instead of revolutionizing marriage, I suggest that we begin to reinterpret it by broadening and deepening our thinking about what a good marriage is. In our understanding of a good marriage, we can make room for happiness, but also for far richer and more enduring aspects of our lives. (p. 16)

He recommended that couples, first, do the mental labor necessary to shift the mindset of their marriage from one that is focused on the self's emotional gratification to one that is focused on a partnership in identifying and working toward shared goals, and then work on developing qualities about themselves that increase their ability to achieve those goals. Fowers referred to this as character friendship. As they were asked, the couples in the present study clearly were more inclined to assess their relationship on the basis of these ideals of character friendship than on the basis of an intense emotional satisfaction, and regularly cited issues and events related to their parenting as evidence of shared goals teamwork, and admiration of parenting qualities they saw in each other. Thus, there is an association between character friendship and what the current study interprets as spouses' high-priority qualities of appreciation and child-centeredness, which is one further substantiated by other literature connecting marital and parental quality (Hawkins, Fowers, Carroll & Yang, 2006).

Beyond character friendship, Fowers also highlighted three other central virtues to the pursuit of a good marriage, which are loyalty, generosity, and justice. As stated in Chapter 2, Fowers later collaborated with Alan Hawkins and other colleagues in the

development of a construct and measurement tool to assess marital virtues (2006). That project culminated in testing an instrument they named the Marital Virtues Profile (MVP), and considered additional virtues beyond those four (essentially equivalent to the current study's use of the term "qualities"). Essentially, though some marital virtues clustered together in somewhat different ways, their work affirmed the virtues that Fowers originally had put forward in his 2000 book were valid and fundamental to the assessment of a good marriage. According to confirmatory factor analysis that was conducted to evaluate the MVP, the quality of other-centeredness (constructed as a combination of fairness, understanding, and sacrifice) arose, and appeared to most closely mirror the quality of being loving in the current study. The quality of generosity (constructed as a combination of forgiveness, acceptance, and appreciation) largely affirmed Fowers' original conceptualization of the quality, with the exception that the quality of admiration emerged as a self-standing dimension. In the current study, being appreciative resonates most closely with both generosity and admiration. Finally, Fowers posited loyalty as a foundational marital virtue evident through both the feeling of attachment to a spouse and actions, such as prioritizing ones' time for their spouse, taking the spouse's side in disputes, and certainly in regard to maintaining boundaries (including but not exclusively sexual) with others so that what is confidential to the couple is not violated (such as confiding something particularly personal to a colleague, friend, or family member).

Fowers' view of loyalty matches up well with the current study's finding that the spouses consistently provided evidence that the quality of being committed was actual, as well as desired and perceived. Commitment is an area of study in which Scott Stanley

(Markman, Stanley & Blumberg, 2001) has provided particular study and insight. He suggested that there are two dimensions of commitment, both of which are present in a good marriage: personal dedication, which is seen in the person's resolve not only to remain in the relationship, but to work and sacrifice for its improvement; and constraint commitment, which is a function of ecological pressures (psychological, economic, social, etc.) that persuade the person to resist exiting the relationship. Of the two, personal dedication generally is more reflective of the type of commitment heard in the words of the current study's participants. Implicit in their habit of putting aside time every day to talk with one another, Dominic and JoAnne demonstrated this personal dedication. At the same time, Dominic, in particular, demonstrated the reality of constraint commitment plainly when he spoke of a fear of God and a desire to not disappoint his parents, and that those factors kept him from having any legitimate thought of ever leaving JoAnne. What is interesting at a theoretical level about constraint commitment is that it can be rooted in other qualities specified by the current study, and that it exemplifies so clearly how qualities are quite often interrelated and predicated upon one another. In this case, what Stanley has called constraint commitment can be attributable to a person's level of appreciation (e.g., he or she feels intensely appreciative to others, and as a result, could not leave the relationship), level of loving the other person (which is reminiscent of how Carol spoke of how her love for Mike would not allow her to ever leave him, even after he had mangled their financial circumstance a second time), or level of child-centeredness (i.e., being concerned more for the child's welfare than personal satisfaction with the marriage, commonly discussed as the proposition of whether couples should "stay together for the kids").

Hargrave (2006) concurred with Fowers when he stated that marriage is not about two people merely being happy, but about two people attaining increasingly higher levels of maturity. Like Fowers, Hargrave also is a therapist, and from his years in that profession, he has theorized that there are three stages of growth toward a good marriage that are summed up in these questions: At the first stage, can the couple be stable and live together without harming one another? In order to navigate beyond this question, Hargrave said that the couple must focus on establishing their commitment to the relationship (routinely referred to as “we-ness” or “us-ness”), and also on the qualities of humility and respect. At the second, can they live together in a trustworthy fashion? Qualities that a couple must develop at this stage are responsibility and reliability, which often are exhibited in how they deal with housework, parenting, finances, and potential distractions or temptations to the relationship. And in the third, which is particularly reminiscent of Fowers, can we grow individually as a result of the relationship? He said that sacrifice and teachability are vital to conquering this last stage.

Recounting the three most requisite qualities that Hargrave illuminated (i.e., those at the first stage) in relation to the four essential high-priority qualities of the present study, humility readily projects as one that deserves greater inquiry in future studies. Fowers likely would tend to use the word “generous” interchangeably with how Hargrave has used “humility”—that one (a) recognizes qualities in the partner that are admirable (which, as cited earlier, is the essence of the current study’s finding that being appreciative is a high-priority quality), (b) extends forgiveness appropriately, and sometimes even lavishly, and (c) gives sacrificially of themselves. All of those appear to be consistent with commonly-held definitions of humility. In retrospect, the quality of

humility was never verbally asserted by a spouse as being one that they personally cultivated within him or herself or one upon which they placed a high-priority desire in assessing a partner. Because it was not a quality that interviewees cited in any explicit way, it was not appropriate to include within the results of the study. Still, it was a quality that the principal investigator perceived as an active, consequential quality within many, if not all of the couples' relationships. Of course, humility would seem to correlate well with how the current study presents the high-priority quality of being appreciative, since appreciation often appears to predict the quality of being and acting humble. Hargrave spoke of humility from a perspective of accountability—that healthy couples attain stability as a result of their tendency to assign blame to themselves before assigning it to their partner, and concurrently that they possess a “baseline human respect” for their partner.

Hargrave connected personal humility with respect toward others. Respect also would appear to correlate well with the present study's quality of being appreciative, and in terms of the work of Hawkins and his colleagues, potentially it may track most precisely with admiration. When inquiring about respect, power and control issues often are considered to be empirical symptoms of whether a couple is experiencing difficulties in this way. Duke and Daisy indisputably provided the most elaborate material in their couple and individual interviews on the necessity of respect. Daisy spoke with regularity and passion about the narrow range of acceptable variance she felt she could allow with regard to a partner's inclination to attempt to control her. Fortunately, Duke had recognized that fact early in their relationship, and she perceived Duke to have met that high-priority desired quality. That is, except for a recent occasion when he had witnessed

his wife being approached in front of their house by a man that Duke thought represented a threat to her. Daisy said that Duke had ordered her to go inside the house, with a tone and words that she strongly resented. Cognitively, Daisy confessed that she could look back on that situation and understand it was Duke's love and concern for her that prompted that reaction, however she also confessed she felt so disrespected by the event, as if she were not strong enough to take care of herself, that she still was working toward "getting over it." While Duke was not so consumed by control issues, both he and Daisy spoke with what seemed to be a special warmth in their voice during the parts of their interviews when they described how the other had made them feel so respected in their conversations. As far as the principal investigator could perceive, neither Duke and Daisy nor any of the other couples presently dealt with chronic control issues, though this was not a circumstance readily observable from the data due largely to the fact that questions mostly sought an understanding of what qualities participants perceived rather than what qualities the participants did not perceive.

Finally, Hargrave speaks of a basic need for couples to establish a commitment to the relationship that is evident in a concern for "we" instead of a concern for self; and this plainly echoes Fowers' assertion that a fundamental part of loyalty is that couples establish an identity together. Glimpses of selfishness were seemingly rare in the current study, and even when an interview stumbled upon a story or commentary that reflected selfishness, the underlying motivation was the sake of the marriage relationship's development. Within the first year of their wedding, Sarah began lobbying Jose that she wanted to have their first child together. Jose, on the other hand, recalled that he strongly took exception to her desire because he wanted to have more time to experience life with

Sarah only, and without the constraints that come with parenthood. One could argue thusly that Jose was acting selfishly, but yet, his motive would not have been considered shameful necessarily—he wanted more time to continue to develop the “we-ness” and a better-established identity as a couple.

Separate, but interesting nonetheless, this aspect of their relationship actually competed with another quality, which was child-centeredness. It is fair to say that Jose had had to grow into his acceptance of his fatherhood (though not into his role of doing fatherly tasks), and actually experienced some anger management issues earlier in their marriage—not toward Sarah, but toward his first child. They both attributed those difficulties mostly to the amount of stress that Jose was experiencing with work and school, and which was amplified by the baby’s lack of a reliable and sustained eating and sleeping pattern.

Early in the course of data analysis, the principal investigator recognized that frequently couples would speak of qualities that were specific to their relationship, though not necessarily specific to one or both individually—which is congruent with Fowers’ and Hargrave’s use of the terms we-ness or us-ness. This was more prevalent in the couples’ interviews than in the individual spouses’ interviews. For example, it was fairly common for one of the spouses eventually to refer to the “strength of our relationship,” as opposed to attributing strength to either or both partners. This created a conundrum for the principal investigator as to whether to treat these interview splices as qualities of the relationship, and to distribute those splices into a category separated from individuals’ qualities. Ultimately, the investigator made the decision that, since the grounded theory intended by this study should help explain individuals’ development to

becoming people who are capable of participating in a healthy marriage, it thus would be somewhat tangential to that intention to think of the relationship as, what Hargrave (2006) described as “the third person in the relationship.” Nonetheless, it is notable that spouses did describe qualities of the relationship, and that it could be a productive pursuit for future research to consider what combinations of individual qualities tend to result in certain qualities that couples recognize as intrinsic to their success.

*Characteristics of healthy marriage.* A somewhat different approach is taken in the work of Moore et al. (2004) than Fowers, Hawkins et al., or Hargrave, but not completely so. The ten characteristics proposed by the Child Trends model are not strictly marital virtues or character strengths, but rather expand beyond that, encompassing both virtuous thought and behavior as well as, simply, states of being. For instance, commitment to the couple is one characteristic that almost exactly duplicates how Hargrave spoke of “us-ness,” and how Fowers spoke of the necessity of a couple identity in producing loyalty. Commitment to the children is mainly equivalent to child-centeredness. Interaction and time together, as observed previously, is symptomatic of commitment, and specifically the personal dedication variety of the term. Also in the same constellation as interaction are the characteristics of communication, intimacy/emotional support, and conflict resolution. Those are especially inherent in Fowers’ ideals of friendship, generosity, and others-centeredness, all of which have been demonstrated as correspondent to the requisite high-priority qualities reported by the present study. Other characteristics are states of being that are not, in themselves, virtues, but still are indicators of certain virtues. Fidelity is a state, yet clearly is indicative of being committed. Legal marital status and the duration of that status also is indicative of

being committed. Since the presence of domestic violence in a marriage is antithetical to practically any marital virtue cited, the absence of such behavior is naturally consistent with practically any marital virtue.

This is a good place to remind the reader that the choice of the word “quality” was purposeful, because it attends each of these facets for assessing marriages—marital virtues and characteristics of healthy marriages—with equal ease.

Further examination of these characteristics in view of actual conversations from the present study reveals continuity between the two endeavors. Couples did not describe any domestic violence in their marriages. For nine of the ten couples who participated in the study, initial contact was made with the principal investigator by the wife. While this would not categorically eliminate the probability that no domestic violence was taking place, it seems plausible that it supports that probability if one is willing to assume that (a) the women were not, themselves, perpetrators of abuse against their husbands, and (b) that women suffering from intimate partner violence would not ordinarily be inclined to pursue participation in a study examining their marriage’s health. The principal investigator affirms that he did not observe any behavior that hinted at any discrepancy in that way. However, expanding the discussion to domestic abuse—which includes verbal abuse, as well as occasions when a spouse purposely restricts their mate’s access to transportation and communication—there were revelations that affirmed some occurrences. When they were first married, both Bill and Dale said that they had controlled their wives’ access to other people outside of their marriage for at least some period of time. Bill did so out of a fear that his young wife would be unfaithful to him. In Dale’s case, it was less clear whether the circumstance was purposeful or just a necessity

borne out of a lack of income to pay for a phone and an extra car, though he intentionally kept her from contact on the night when Marlene had discovered his infidelity (i.e., during their engagement). Dominic hinted that he had been verbally abusive toward JoAnne on occasion. He stated that, on his worst days, their process for resolving conflict essentially amounts to his shouting her down (“I think I yell at her and she shuts the hell up, and leaves it at that”). However, far more commonly, the couples in the study spoke of managing their conflict in a controlled way. Sometimes, they asserted in their individual interviews (i.e., without their partner present) that they rarely have an argument at all. Dharma insisted that, “[Tyrone is] always sweet, gentle. He barked at [our son]. He never barks at me, never. I mean I really have to try hard to get him [to fight], even. Nothing. I can’t get him to fight with me.”

*Assimilation of findings into a theoretical classification of character strengths and virtues. To this point, the four requisite high-priority qualities posited by the current study have been compared and contrasted with other healthy marriage literature in an effort to integrate these findings. As this section concludes, it would be of some value to integrate the four qualities into the larger context of an “aspirational classification” (p. 6) of character strengths and virtues as put forward by Peterson and Seligman (2004).*

*That text begins by saying*

The classification of strengths presented in this book is intended to reclaim the study of character and virtue as legitimate topics of psychological inquiry and informed societal discourse. By providing ways of talking about character strengths and measuring them across the life span, this classification will start to make possible a science of human strengths that goes beyond armchair philosophy and political rhetoric. (p. 3)

In essence, the authors assembled an evaluative process that they applied to terms commonly used in multiple cultures and throughout history to delineate traits that are

generally considered to be correlated with good character and supportive of what is good in human life—constructs as diverse as creativity, bravery, love, citizenship, mercy, fairness, hope, humor, and more. Their purpose was to invent a coherent order of character strengths and virtues, and to publish a coherent manual that could be used for standardizing how social scientists regard and assess these traits, much as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders does for mental illness, and as the International Classification of Diseases does for physical illness.

The text asserts three levels of abstraction from most abstract to least. Certain *core virtues* distilled from their analysis, which were (a) courage, (b) justice, (c) humanity, (d) temperance, (e) transcendence, and (f) wisdom. Within each of those, the authors' study produced three to five *character strengths* that are distinct dimensions of the core values. It is said theoretically that, in order for a person to have good character, they must rate above the mean of the aggregate of each of the core virtues, though they may fall short in one or more individual character strengths. Interestingly, for some character strengths, the authors found it necessary to further subdivide the dimension into smaller segments. For example, authenticity and honesty are subsumed under integrity. Other character strengths require the conjunction “and” in order to convey the essence of the character strength being proposed—forgiveness and mercy is one, as is humility and modesty. The least abstract level is the level at which this study was conducted, one which Peterson and Seligman call *situational themes*. Situational themes are context-specific instances of the exhibition of a given character strength; in this case, the situational themes arose from how the person thinks, feels, and behaves in the context of their marriage. It was not an intention of the current study to corroborate actual qualities

of the spouses in their workplace, in their interactions with extended family, or any other context.

*Integration of the high-priority quality of being loving within the theoretical classification.* Peterson and Seligman conceptualize love as taking any of three basic forms, and further, allow that different relationships may exhibit two of the three. Only one type of relationship, however, exhibits all three forms, which is the same relationship as found in healthy marriages (though the authors do not specify marriage *per se*). They first describe a child-to-parent type of love wherein a person relies on the other person as their primary source “of affection, protection, and care. We rely on them to make our welfare a priority and to be available to us when needed” (p. 304). The second is a parent-to-child type of love wherein a person desires to fill the other person’s needs and wants, even at the cost of self-sacrifice. And the third type is consistent with romantic love—characterized by emotional, physical, and sexual closeness. The necessity of this quality in the healthy marriages examined in this study is an intrinsic reality:

Humans have theorized about love and relationships for as long as they have theorized about anything. Surprisingly, it has only been in the last 30 years or so that the methods of empirical science have been applied to the task of understanding and explaining love. And for much of this time, research proceeded along two separate pathways, with developmental psychologists studying parent-child bonds and social psychologists studying adult romantic relationships. Recently, these two areas of inquiry began to merge, and the integration has, thus far, proved fruitful. The capacity to love and be loved is now viewed as an innate, species-typical tendency that has powerful effects on psychological and physical health from infancy through old age. It has also been established that this capacity can be affected to deep and lasting ways by early relationship experience. (p. 305)

The text continues to speak of the development of love in terms of its correlation with infant and childhood attachments, which is plausible; however there appears to be an opportunity to build on the Peterson and Seligman investigation by pursuing grounded theories that might help explain more exactly the development of each of the three types

of love described. Among the synergists that emerged from the current study, parental and religious influences seem to offer the most reasonable channels through which spouses developed their motivations and capacities for being loving, though a more intensive analysis conceivably could produce other equally or more reasonable theories. Before leaving this point, it should be noted, too, that Hargrave (2006) would not wholly agree with Peterson and Seligman in their assessment that the best of intimate partner relationships are duplicitous in a way with parent-to-child love. Contrary to the occasional claim that sometimes may be uttered by a partner, he asserted that unconditional love is unique to parents toward their children. Therefore, there are limits to the self-sacrifice that one should expect to see in even the strongest intimate partner love in comparison to what the partners ordinarily hold for their children.

*Integration of the high-priority quality of being committed within the theoretical classification.* Peterson and Seligman do not distinctly contemplate either “commitment,” nor “dedication” in this handbook. Somewhat remarkably, the terms do not even appear in the index. The term “loyalty” is used, but exclusively in the political sense of citizenship, along with “social responsibility” and “teamwork.” While that is somewhat disappointing, it is nonetheless an intriguing thought when one considers how Fowers asserted couple identity as a correlate of loyalty, which is similar to how identifying oneself as a citizen of a nation is a correlate of being loyal to that nation. There is one other character strength in the text which initially appeared to potentially provide some rich and direct insight into the quality of being committed. Beneath the core virtue of courage, the authors have listed persistence as a character strength, which they consider to be interchangeable with perseverance. It is defined more precisely as “voluntary

continuation of a goal-directed action in spite of obstacles, difficulties, or discouragement" (p. 229). High perseverance is associated with high self-esteem and self-confidence. It is also positively correlated with self-control and maintaining positive emotions. People who excel at perseverance are people who are persuaded, either by external influences or intrapersonal operations, that their perseverance will be rewarded, and they will gain the outcome they seek.

The benefits of persistence are well and widely recognized. First and foremost, persistence increases one's chances of attaining difficult goals.... A second benefit is that persistence may enhance the person's enjoyment of subsequent success.... A third benefit of persistence is that it may improve the person's skills and resourcefulness. People who overcome obstacles to reach their goals must sometimes develop new approaches and techniques or new ways to solve problems.... The fourth and final benefit of persistence is that it can enhance the person's sense of self-efficacy, provided that success is ultimately reached. (p. 238)

Certain couples' persistence serves as evidence of some of these benefits. For example, Claire suggested that she was grateful she had endured Bill's jealousy and previously-undiagnosed depression, and now enjoyed the fruit of that success. Mike and Carol persevered through financial disasters that challenged their relationship, and as a result, developed new routines that created greater accountability and a sense of teamwork between them.

*Integration of the high-priority quality of being appreciative within the theoretical classification.* The core value of transcendence "allows individuals to forge connections to the larger universe and thereby provide meaning to their lives" (p. 519). The quality of being appreciative is the essence of gratitude, which is one of the character strengths considered by Peterson and Seligman. This is "a sense of thankfulness and joy in response to receiving a gift, whether the gift be a tangible benefit from a specific other or a moment of peaceful bliss evoked by natural beauty" (p. 554). They continued that the

word *gratitude* is derived from the Latin *gratia*, and cite a Latin scholar who observed that all derivatives of the term are associated with being kind, being generous, giving gifts, the beauty of giving and receiving, or getting something for nothing. Virtually all major religions—Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu—aspire in some important ways to the character strength of gratitude. Cicero would have disputed Peterson and Seligman's claim of six core virtues in deference to the prospect that gratitude is the mother of all virtues. The authors engaged in some indignation themselves in their observation that “it is remarkable that psychologists specializing in the study of emotion have, by and large, failed to explore its contours” (p. 557).

They assert four dimensions comprise the character strength of gratitude, the first two of which are mainly self-explanatory: *intensity* is an expression of the depth of emotion felt, and *frequency* is an expression of how often one feels grateful. Beyond those two, *span* refers to the number of areas of life and instances in life for which a person feels grateful, and *density* refers to the number of people toward whom a person is grateful for a specific instance. This observation is highly relevant to the current study's conception of being appreciative, as well as informative to the synergists referred to as sensitizing experiences and partner-as-rescuer-mindset (PARM). Generally, the principal investigator arrived at the conclusion that being appreciative ascended to the level of a requisite high-priority quality based on gratitude intensity, and to a somewhat lesser extent, gratitude frequency. On the other hand, in exploring sets of developmental factors (synergists) that helped evoke the quality of being appreciative, the analysis included consideration of *gratitude span* and *gratitude density*, even though the investigator did not recognize at the time that these labels applied.

Peterson and Seligman reported that the degree to which participants were actively engaged in their religious beliefs and pursuits is correlated with gratitude, which is consistent with the findings here, and further, indicates that religious influences may have a specific bearing on synergizing this quality. Grateful people are more likely to reach out in emotional support toward another person. They report higher levels of satisfaction and optimism. Grateful people appear to heal from bitterness and resentment. Perhaps most telling in light of the information contained in this present study, they remark that “Data on the interpersonal consequences of gratefulness are scarce. All in all, however, it is reasonable to hypothesize that expressions of gratitude and appreciation are vital to successful, thriving, long-term relationships” (p. 562).

*Integration of the high-priority quality of being child-centered within the aspirational classification.* Probably to no one’s surprise, there is no virtue or character strength which singularly addresses the conceptualization of being child-centered. The construct is routinely described as an opposite position of being adult-centered, with the central idea being that the needs and wants of the child take priority over those of the adults’. Implicit in that description is the character strength of fairness, since children are less able to acquire their needs and wants on their own. Also implicit is the character strength of leadership, since one of the two major necessities of parenting is for children to receive guidance. Both fairness and leadership cluster beneath the core virtue of justice. These areas bring to the forefront the desire to provide for children, both in example (fairness) and direct instruction and discipline (leadership), which are the elementary vehicles for transmitting moral reasoning, i.e., conveying right from wrong. Both fairness and leadership can require prioritization of the child over the adult in that

parents often find it necessary to sacrifice for their children, whether in regard to time (e.g., helping with homework), in regard to physical needs (e.g., a parent giving their child the last serving of breakfast cereal before both set off for work and school), or in regard to emotional peace (e.g., allowing the child to make a mistake from which they will learn rather than protecting the child primarily for the purpose of satiating the parent's emotional state). The parents in the current study mostly exemplified these character strengths in how they interacted with their children. Claire, for example, described the degree of time, effort and self-sacrifice that she and Bill had had to expend in raising three very different daughters. The only seeming deficiency among the group was that a few deferred to their partners exclusively to invoke discipline as it was compulsory.

The other major necessity of parenting besides guidance is nuturance, which is indicative of two character strengths. The first is love, which was already described above. The second is kindness. Other words that Peterson and Seligman associate with this character strength are generosity, care, compassion, altruistic love, and niceness. They state

Kindness and altruistic love require the assertion of a common humanity in which others are worthy of attention and affirmation for no utilitarian reasons but for their own sake.... Such affective states are expected to give rise to helping behaviors that are not based on an assurance of reciprocity, reputational gain, or any other benefits to self, although such benefits may emerge and need not be resisted. (p. 326)

It is also referred to as the practice of “other-regarding” (p. 326), which certainly fits well with both the quality of child-centeredness, as well as the concept of “others-centeredness” (Hawkins, et al., 2006, p. 21), characterized by qualities of fairness, understanding, and sacrifice. Extending kindness to another generally holds the potential

for being a transforming event, depending upon the extent to which the recipient of the kindness is capable of experiencing gratitude.

The kindness aspect of child-centeredness spills over to the aspect of self-sacrifice already mentioned in this section, and also prioritizes the emotional warmth required by the child over emotional needs of a parent. This may be most readily observed in the difficulty that some new fathers experience particularly upon the arrival of their first child and when mothers choose to breastfeed the infant (Spock, 2004). Dale recalled “The day we had [our first daughter], Marlene’s life was changed and that was her priority, and you know, I wasn’t her number one priority anymore. It was the kids.” He also said, “It cuts into your privacy. You just can’t go and do anything you want—because you have kids now. When your friends come over and say, ‘Let’s go skating or drinking or whatever, you can’t do it.’” However, Marlene spoke enthusiastically of her husband’s love of fatherhood:

He is one of the most considerate people I have ever met in my life.... A typical man works 12 hours a day and gets a couple of days off, they are not going to sit at home and [say]... “Let’s plan something for the kids.” It’s going to be more about him.... [But as for Dale, if] we are going to take the kids to the pool, 90% of the time, he is the only guy there.... He is there for his wife and kids, and I think that is one of the major things with him that I love so much about him is the fact that... we are who he is.

So, with regard to the fathers in the current study, including those with children age three and younger, their wives spoke fondly of their warmth and kindness toward their children. Similarly, dads expressed satisfaction that their wives were excellent mothers.

#### *Salience of the Study to Marriage and Relationship Education Practice*

Generated from a low-income population, the results of the current study inform the question posited by Karney and Bradbury in 2005 when they stated, “It remains an open question whether [relationship education] programs developed within middle-class

populations can be effective for improving the marriages of low-income couples" (p. 172). These results suggest that such programs can be relevant and beneficial to the degree that those programs emphasize and achieve improvements in a person's propensity to be a (a) loving, (b) committed, (c) appreciative, and (d) child-centered individual, and a person's propensity to desire and perceive those same high-priority qualities in a partner.

Yet, there still remains an open question of the longitudinal effectiveness of relationship education. The question exists because the mediating forces, or synergists, that appeared to facilitate the growth of these high-priority qualities are difficult, if not impossible, to replicate within an educational context. For instance, it is absurd to propose that programs impose upon participants to endure sensitizing experiences—such as the neglect that Dale and Marlene felt they experienced as children—with the intent of inspiring the kind of child-centeredness that was overt in their marriage. Further, it is unclear whether one could create a positive sensitizing experience so extreme as to have the same effect as the negative ones identified by the current study's participants. Similarly, to invent an adverse history that is conducive to a participant gaining a partner-as-rescuer mindset would first require the invention of a time machine. And finally, just as we cannot rationally go back in time to produce an adverse history, we also cannot go back to produce the childhood parental and religious influences that promoted the most requisite high-priority qualities.

It would be presumptuous to say, however, that there is no evidence that relationship education had any enduring effectiveness whatsoever with the marriages of this study. That is because, while none of the couples in the current study indicated that

they had participated in a marriage or relationship education program before or during their marriage, some wives such as Sarah, Ethel, and Dharma spoke of being avid readers of religious authors who have written self-help books about intimate relationships—which qualifies as a type of relationship education, of course. Sarah and Ethel, in particular, suggested that the instruction they had gleaned from these books had been beneficial to their marriage, though additional inquiry would be needed to ascertain what qualities had been improved by their readings. Also, two couples (Jose and Sarah, Mike and Carol) said they had derived some temporary benefit from premarital guidance provided by their church, described essentially as one-on-one counseling sessions with their pastor.

Ooms and Wilson (2004) believed that relationship education for low-income individuals and couples is a potentially productive pursuit, but that several special considerations must be addressed in order for it to be effective. For example, due to low literacy levels and unhappy memories of school, they said that participants often do not relate well to the typical lectures, workbooks, and other written materials found in many existing curricula. Instead, “programs should keep participants fully engaged and active in every session, with many opportunities for honest dialogue, skill-building, and enjoyment” (p. 446). They also recommended that programs incorporate some follow-up component such as involving trained mentor couples as on-going support. And finally, in everything—from the composition of content, to the establishment of a time, date and place, to the ways it is marketed, to the actual day-of-program staging and execution—the program must be cultural sensitivity and relevant. Several obstacles complicate low-income individuals’ and couples’ life circumstances such as substance abuse, criminal

behaviors (both past and present), unemployment, employment that requires long hours, children from previous relationships, the lack of child support, heightened expectations of marriage that result in lesser aspiration of being married, and finally, skepticism regarding the long-term prospects of their current relationship based on the current partner's deficiency in one or more high-priority qualities. Program choices must be made with factors in mind such as these.

#### *Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research*

##### *Limitations of the study*

As a consequence of the study's sampling design which called for the distribution of promotional fliers and cards to persuade potential subjects to volunteer for the study, non-response and selection effects must be acknowledged as a potential issue clouding the results of the current study. That is to say, there is a potential that there is a significant number of low-income parents in healthy marriages who chose not to participate in the study because of, perhaps, a shy temperament or a belief that anything regarding their marriage relationship should be kept private; and, if so, that those who did not respond could have possibly contributed information that would have shaped the grounded theory differently somehow.

Also, while these findings have been presented very explicitly as only a representation of a set of low-income Caucasian parents, and thus, cannot be generalized to other ethnicities, it also must be highlighted that almost half of the participants hailed from Appalachia, and a large majority of them lived in Appalachia at the time of their interviews. Accordingly, until a similar study is undertaken in a different region, it is unclear whether there are certain environmental conditions which may skew the data in

some way toward different results. In the same vein, since all of the spouses lived in or near towns with a population of less than 50,000, it would be interesting to replicate the same study with exclusively urban participants.

Finally, it is recognized that there were limits to which the interviews conducted for this study could adequately probe intimate sexual information. Participants were told in the Informed Consent statement that they could be asked to speak in a broad way about, for instance, the importance of sex to their relationship, but that they would not be constrained to speak about details of their sex lives. And indeed, that is what occurred. Jose and Sarah, for example, openly spoke of the desire to consummate their love prior to being married. Fred mentioned that he and Ethel sometimes engaged in sexual role playing. Still, there remains the potential that greater investigation of this particular aspect may have been obscured, particularly because the principal investigator is a male, and that wives and some husbands conceivably may have been less willing to explore that topic at the risk of embarrassment.

#### *Recommendations for future research*

While grounded theory methodology served a purpose with the current study, the next generation of study seemingly should evolve from the discussion of qualities in this chapter, and perhaps take greater root from the work of Peterson and Seligman so as to build on the foundation they have laid. In particular, while the four requisite high-priority qualities appear to be on solid footing, it would be intriguing to understand the degree to which other qualities are salient. A study design that somehow incorporates observations by personnel trained to recognize character strengths and marital virtues also would be advisable in order to better illuminate qualities that may more naturally avoid

participants' attention, such as humility. Ultimately, the principal investigator perceives with this study that there is foundation for constructing a model of greater detail that more precisely accounts for the components of low-income parents' assessment of healthy marriage: actual qualities, desired qualities, perceived qualities, and ranges of acceptable variance; and further, that associates those qualities more or less strongly with different sets of developmental factors, or synergists. Such an elaborate model also might be able to better explain how individuals' qualities mesh together to result in certain qualities of the relationship that couples consider to be important.

Among the other areas that appear to be useful is an examination of how low-income parents in healthy marriages regard the concept of being "soul-mates" to one another, and in essence, to explore the concepts of institutional, companionate, and individualistic marriage. Also, whereas the current study examined couples whose incomes ranged between 100-200% of the federal poverty guideline, it would be valuable to gain a similar understanding of couples in self-reported healthy marriages who live in poverty, and whose educational attainment is substantially less.

Finally, in retrospect, while the standard couples' interview script did ask subjects to speak about their physical and mental health, it would have been valuable if the scripts for interviews with individual spouses had been composed to gain larger pieces of insight with regard to mental health. Occasionally, participants volunteered information anyhow, but the scope of the questioning was not sufficiently directed to those issues to formulate a hypothesis to explain the extent of mental illnesses among these couples. Therefore, a recommendation for future research is that a study be designed to consider the nature of the relationship that might exist between those two variables, if any. In fact, studies that

examine the Process Map in light of all biological conditions, including different types of intelligences, would appear to be highly efficacious.

## Appendix A

### Consent Form

#### Consent to Participate in a Research Study

##### Promises We Have Kept: Using Grounded Theory Methodology to Understand the Backgrounds, Antecedents, Characteristics and Outcomes of Low-Income Parents' Healthy Marriage

#### **WHY ARE YOU BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?**

You are being invited to take part in a research study about low-income parents' healthy marriages. You are being invited to take part in this research study because (a) when asked previously, you and your spouse stated that you consider your marriage to be either "good," or "very good," (b) you and your spouse have at least one child together who is enrolled in elementary, middle, or high school, and (c) you qualify under federal standards that define low-income households. If you volunteer to take part in this study, you and your spouse will be one of about 15-20 couples to do so.

#### **WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?**

The person in charge of this study is Greg Thompson, who is both the Principal Investigator (PI) for this study and a graduate student pursuing his Ph.D. from the University of Kentucky Department of Family Studies. He is being guided in this research by Dr. Jason Whiting, Assistant Professor in the same department. Others on the dissertation committee are: Dr. Donna Smith (Committee Chair, and Assistant Professor, Family Studies), Dr. Gladys Hildreth (Professor, Family Studies), and Dr. Terry Birdwhistell (Associate Dean, Special Collections Library).

#### **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?**

By doing this study, we hope to learn what factors are present when good marriages occur in low-income households, as well as other factors that pre-date the marriage that contribute to marital strength.

#### **WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL THE INTERVIEWS LAST?**

The research procedures will be conducted preferably in your home, though another location

may be arranged if the parties agree that that is more desirable. The first interview should take about 60-90 minutes. Usually about a week later, we will conduct individual interviews involving you and your spouse, separately and in complete seclusion from one another. These should take about 45-60 minutes each. All interviews will be recorded. It will not be necessary to do anything more to participate in this study.

#### **ARE THERE REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?**

You should not take part in this study if either you or your spouse feel you do not have a "good" or "healthy" marriage, if you do not have at least one school-age child together, or if your household income is too large to be considered low-income according to the 2006 federal standards.

#### **WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?**

To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life. You will be recorded, and while your identity will remain confidential, you should be aware that because the nature of this study is to explore relationships, there may be questions asked with which you are uncomfortable. It is your choice whether or not to answer any such questions, and there will be no penalty to you for not answering.

#### **WILL YOU BENEFIT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

As an incentive to participation, all couples in the study will be included in a drawing at the conclusion of the study for a \$50 Wal-Mart gift certificate. Also, based on interviews already conducted, it is likely that the interviews will be enjoyable for both you and your spouse.

## **DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?**

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering.

## **WHAT WILL IT COST YOU TO PARTICIPATE OR WILL YOU RECEIVE ANY REWARDS FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

There are no costs associated with taking part in this study, nor will you receive any rewards or payment.

## **WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT YOU GIVE?**

The Principal Investigator, the four UK Family Studies faculty members who compose his dissertation committee, and possibly others from the University will see the information you give. Beyond those, the information on tape is expected to be transcribed to paper, and further, will be available upon request by researchers interested to further investigate the nature of good marriages in low-income households. Tapes and transcripts will be the exclusive property of the Principal Investigator. No one

except the Principal Investigator will be able to connect your names with the data you provide.

## **CAN YOUR TAKING PART IN THE STUDY END EARLY?**

If you decide to take part in the study you still have the right to decide at any time that you no longer want to continue. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study. The Principal Investigator also may choose to cut short the interviews. If it occurs, it is most likely to result from a determination that enough information has been gathered to satisfy the purpose of the study.

## **WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, SUGGESTIONS, CONCERNS, OR COMPLAINTS?**

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator Greg Thompson at (859) 215-2814, or his primary faculty advisor, Dr. Jason Whiting at (859) 257-1220. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the staff in the Office of Research Integrity at the University of Kentucky at 859-257-9428 or toll free at 1-866-400-9428. We will give you a signed copy of this consent form to take with you.

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### **Spouse #1:**

*Signature of first person agreeing to take part in the study*

*Date*

*Printed name*

### **Spouse #2:**

*Signature of second person agreeing to take part in the study*

*Date*

*Printed name*

### **Principal Investigator:**

*S. Greg Thompson*

*Date*

## Appendix B

### Demographic Questionnaire

**Name**

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#### **A. About You and/or Your Spouse**

1. Dates of birth: *Yours* \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ *Your Spouse's* \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_
  
2. How many **total** years have you been married to your current spouse? \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. How long before your marriage were you engaged? \_\_\_\_\_
  
4. How long did you know each other socially before marriage? \_\_\_\_\_
  
5. To the best of your knowledge, list the years in which you or your spouse had children with another person outside of your current marriage, if any:  
*(Use back of paper if you need more room)*  
*Yours:* \_\_\_\_\_  
  
*Your Spouse's:* \_\_\_\_\_
  
6. How many of the children you listed in #5, and who are under the age of 18, still live with you? *Yours:* \_\_\_\_\_ *Your Spouse's:* \_\_\_\_\_
  
7. How many of your own children (age 17 or younger) **do not** live with you? \_\_\_\_\_
  
8. List (a) the specific years in which you have gotten married, followed by (b) the specific years in which any marriage ended in divorce, and (c) the specific years that children were born or adopted during the marriage, and (d) the specific years that children were born or adopted outside of the marriage:  
*(Use back of paper if you need more room)*  

(a) YEAR OF MARRIAGE	(b) YEAR OF DIVORCE	(c) YEAR(S) THAT CHILDREN WERE BORN WITHIN YOUR MARRIAGE	(d) THE
Marriage #1			
Marriage #2			
Marriage #3			
Marriage #4			
(d) YEARS THAT CHILDREN WERE BORN OUTSIDE OF ANY OF YOUR MARRIAGES:			

9. Have you and your current spouse ever separated or strongly considered divorce?

Yes  No

10. Did your or your spouse's parents divorce? You  Yes  No

Spouse  Yes  No

11. Racial or ethnic heritage: (check one for both spouses)

***Yours Spouse's***

- European American
- Hispanic /Latino
- African-American
- Middle Eastern
- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Native American
- Other or Combination (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- Other or Combination (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

12. Highest educational level: (check one for both spouses)

***Yours Spouse's***

- No formal schooling
- 8<sup>th</sup> grade or less
- Some high school
- High school graduate or GED
- 2-Year college or technical degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Graduate degree

13. How religious do you and your spouse consider yourselves to be (whether affiliated with an organized religion or not)?

***You:***

- Very religious
- Moderately religious
- Not very religious
- Not religious at all

***Your Spouse:***

- Very religious
- Moderately religious
- Not very religious
- Not religious at all

14. If you have a religious preference, what is it?

<input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	<input type="checkbox"/> Christian – Latter-Day Saints
<input type="checkbox"/> Christian – Catholic	<input type="checkbox"/> Jewish
<input type="checkbox"/> Christian – Protestant (Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/> Muslim
<input type="checkbox"/> Christian – Non- Denominational	<input type="checkbox"/> Buddhist
	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify) _____

15. Does your spouse share your religious preference?  Yes  No

16. Current work status: (check all that apply for each spouse)

***Yours Spouse's***

<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Full-time job (35 hours or more per week)
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Part-time job (1-34 hours per week)
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Full-time student
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Part-time student
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Full-time caregiver at home
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Part-time caregiver at home
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Not currently working, going to school or providing care

17. Number of years with current or most recent employer: Him: \_\_\_\_\_ Her: \_\_\_\_\_

18. Total number of years in current or most recent line of work: Him: \_\_\_\_\_ Her: \_\_\_\_\_

19. How frequently do you use the following?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
Alcohol					
Drugs for non-medical use					

20. How frequently does your spouse use the following?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
Alcohol					
Drugs for non-medical use					

**B. About Your Household**

1. What is the main language spoken in your home?

English       Other \_\_\_\_\_  
 Spanish

2. Not including yourself, what is the relationship to you of the other adults

who live in your household in a typical week? (*Check all that apply*)

Spouse       Grandparent/Great Grandparent  
 Mother       Other Relative  
 Father       Non-Relative  
 Adult Child (i.e., age 18 or  
older)

3. Which of these best describe the type of housing you currently live in?

Apartment, duplex, or other multiple-family structure  
 Single family house  
 Manufactured home  
 Temporary housing (e.g., hotel or shelter)

4.. Last year, what was your total household income from all sources before taxes?

\$33,199 or less       \$53,600 - \$60,399  
 \$33,200 - \$39,999       \$60,400 - \$67,199  
 \$40,000 - \$46,799       \$67,200 - \$73,999  
 \$46,800 - \$53,599       \$74,000 or more

5. Which, if any, of the following benefits have you received in the last year?

(*Check all*

*that apply*)

K-TAP (welfare)       Unemployment  
 Food Stamps       Workers' Compensation  
 WIC       Subsidized housing  
 Medicaid       Subsidized child care  
 EITC (Earned Income Tax Credit)  
 SSI, SSDI or other disability

6. Thinking about your needs and the needs of your household, which of these describe best your overall financial situation? Would you say that you are: (*Check one*)

Thriving       Stable       In Crisis  
 Very Secure       At-Risk

7. Check any members of your household that have a disability: (*Check all that apply*)

Self

Adult relative

Other:

Spouse

Child(ren)

---

8. If it applies, indicate any currently unmet needs for any and all disabled individuals in your household: (*Check all that apply*)

## • Education

## Childcare

## □ Recreation

## • Friendships

Group Involvement (sports, religious, etc.)

9. If it applies, rate the degree to which dealing with the disability of this member(s) of your household causes marital stress in the household, from 1 (no stress) to 5 (extremely high stress): \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### General Script for Couple Interview

#### **Pre-Interview Coaching**

“I just want you to anticipate that this first interview likely will take about 90 minutes, so I’d like to plan for us to take a 10-15 minute break at some point, if only to give our brains some time to have some downtime. The answers you give to the questions I have for you are intended to help other couples who want to achieve a quality relationship, so the more honestly you can answer, the more they will benefit. As we go through the interview, it is really helpful if you can give your thoughts or opinion, and then give an example of what you’re talking about... from time to time, I may even ask you to tell me about an example so that we are clearer on what you are attempting to tell us about. Before we begin, we’ll briefly review the Informed Consent statement together, and I’ll ask you to sign it for our records.”

#### *General History of the Marriage: Probing for milestones*

##### **How did you first meet?**

##### **Take me through the timeline of your relationship with each other, beginning with the first day you met...**

###### Prior to Wedding

- How did you spend your time with each other when you were dating? Tell me about the really important milestones in your lives that led up to your wedding day, good or bad.
- Would you say you felt any pressure to get married, either pressure from other people, or pressure from one another, or a pressure that you brought upon yourself even?
- Once you made the decision, how did you imagine it would be to be married to each other?

###### The Wedding

- Do you look back on your wedding day now mostly with good thoughts, bad thoughts, funny thoughts or indifferent thoughts?

###### First Weeks and Months

- What were those first weeks or months like? Tell me about the changes that happened and the adjustments that you had to make, if any.

###### Milestones through the Marriage

- Tell me about the really important milestones that have happened since your wedding day, whether good or bad, and especially those that you think have had some particular impact on what your marriage is like today... can be very obvious things like a job change or a new child, or can be very subtle things like a pivotal argument you had, or an important decision you made.
- Have there been any significant personal challenges that had to be overcome in order for you to achieve some level of success in this marriage – maybe some special stresses you have had to deal with, or a mental illness, or a physical impairment, or an addiction, or a financial problem, or some family difficulty? If so, is that (or all of those) now behind you or on-going? How have you dealt with that/those?

#### *How the Couple Conceptualizes Healthy Marriage Characteristics*

- **What kind of marriage do you want for your child to have?**
- **What distinguishes an okay marriage from a bad one?**
- **To the wife:** what makes for a good husband?
- **To the husband:** what makes for a good wife?
- **To both:** To what degree did you agree with your spouse’s assessment of what makes for a good wife or husband?
- **To both:** Thinking back, did you see some of those qualities in other adults growing up? Who and which qualities?
- **To both:** Tell me what makes for good parents.

### *Development during the Course of the Marriage*

**To the husband:** compare your wife now to the person she was when you were first married – in what ways has she become a better person since then?

**To the wife:** compare your husband now to the person he was when you were first married – in what ways has he become a better person since then?

**To both:** Would you agree with your spouse's evaluation? Are there any character strengths that you've developed that you think they might have overlooked?

**To both:** Talk about the conflict that you experience that concerns the kids – how to raise them, how to discipline them, who's taking care of them and so on. (If little or none, to what do you attribute that you've been able to be so much in agreement?)

**To both:** in what ways have you become better parents to your children?

#### *Children's Well-Being*

Let's talk about the kids that you're parenting. What are their ages? Are all of them a result of your relationship together?

In a typical week, how many hours do each of you get to spend with your kids? What kinds of things do you ordinarily do together?

What are your dreams for your children?

In what ways have your children benefited from this marriage?

How is their physical health?... their mental or emotional health?... how are they developing socially?... how are they doing in school?... what general concerns do you have about any of them right now?

\*\*\*Middle and High Schoolers' Parents ONLY  
In terms of dating and relationship skills, in what ways do you think your child(ren) is/are typical of other children their age, or is/are different? What are their attitudes and values regarding having kids before marriage? What kinds of attitudes and values do you think they hold for their own marriage someday?

#### *Couples' Well-Being*

Now let's switch gears one last time, and talk about you both again...

Putting aside the dreams you have for your children, what are your dreams for your future together? Do you want to have more children? Where do you see this relationship in 10 years? What do you worry about for the future?

How's your own health... have either of you had to fight with any addictions or bad habits during the course of your marriage?

Let's talk about your work situation... what kind of work did either of you do when you got married, and what are either of you doing now? ... Can you give me a sense for whether your income has grown or decreased or remained about the same?... What would you say has led to the increase OR what would you say has kept you from getting ahead?

Have either of you had any encounters with law enforcement? Like what?

Thus far you have/haven't spoken a lot about the degree that religion plays a role in your family life... why is that?

## Appendix D

### Specimen of a Guide for an Individual Spouses' Interview (Tyrone)

#### Backgrounds

- First, before I forget and so I have it recorded correctly, how do you spell Oneeda, or the Baptist ministry where you and Dharma worked?*
- Talk about yourself – how your parents raised you, where did you grow up, where you went to school, your siblings and your peer groups, the ethnic and socio-economic environment that surrounded you, etc.*
- In our first conversation, you referred to your family as “weird.” Your mom was characterized as being somewhat self-absorbed, and certainly reliant upon your assistance as you became older. Elaborate, to the degree that you are comfortable, on her, on your dad, and on their relationship through your childhood until now.*

#### Antecedents

- At what stage in life would you say that you became... a trusting person? ...an independent person? ... a person who would take initiative?... a person who would work hard toward a goal? ...a person who had a good sense of their own identity and core values? ...a person capable of being emotionally intimate with another person?*
- To the extent you're comfortable, tell me about how your health has been through your life*
- What would you say were your greatest aspirations for your life as you were growing up?*

- How did the relationships you had through adolescence and into young adulthood shape you into someone capable of participating in a strong marriage?*

#### Characteristics of Dharma

- What are the key virtues that she has brought to this marriage that have allowed it to be as healthy as it is?*
- In the prior interview, you indicated that what makes a good wife is that she be someone who is understanding. To your way of thinking, why does that stand out?*
- In the prior interview, Dharma indicated that what makes a good husband is that he be someone who lives in the moment. To your way of thinking, why does that stand out for her?*

#### Characteristics of Tyrone

- In your own estimation, what are the key virtues you've brought to this marriage that have allowed it to be as healthy as it is?*
- There was some discussion last time that indicated that the two of you are in a different place spiritually... talk about your spiritual journey—where you are now, and how you got where you are.*
- Even though we spent about an hour and a half talking last time, I recognize that I'm seeing a very incomplete picture of you and Dharma, and maybe reading too much or too little into different situations you described to me. I was struck by how you responded to*

*the most prominent stressful milestones—the years while you worked at ADM and then, her mental illness. What do you believe Dharma would say were the assets you had that enabled you to get through those times...*

- ...And then, to what experiences or circumstances or values or principles do you look back and credit with having given you those assets?*

#### Characteristics of the Relationship

- As I understand it, you are five years older than Dharma. According to her account when we last talked, she has some reservations about how long it has taken her to identify a professional pursuit. There was a point in our last conversation that you indicated that the area in which you believe she has seen the most growth as a person is in her assertiveness. All of that prompted me to wonder about the degree to which you may have felt like you were playing a father role instead of a husband role at times...?*
- You both described the 2 1/2 years you spent working for ADM as very stressful. You were making more money, but the work schedule, the new baby who cried a lot, and for some amount of time, her parents' presence all contributed to a situation that resulted in her giving her only real thoughts to divorce, and perhaps yours as well (?). What's more, you were making more money, but that hardly seemed to matter since money was so tight that she went to work on weekends to waitress. You talked about being worn out when you would get home from work, and then waiting for Dharma to return home so that the two of you could go to bed at the*

*same time... to the degree that you're comfortable talking about it, is it fair to say that the sexual part of your marriage may have had some difficulty during that time as well?*

- Looking back on it now, were there things that predisposed you to keeping the marriage together in spite of the hardships you had then?*
- You said that you ended up visiting Oneida while you were on vacation... someone might wonder if the perception that money was tight was greater than the reality since, it sounds as-if going on vacation might have been an expectation...?*
- To what degree is the budget an issue for the two of you? If you were talking with another couple who was in a similar circumstance to your own but having substantially more conflict than you, what would be some of the things you would be sure to tell them?*
- There are two ways that people often think of their marital relationships: one is the "soulmate" ideal, that we share the same interests, the same likes/dislikes, we think alike about things, and so on; the other is the "ying-yang" ideal, where we are complete opposites in so many areas, but the outcome is that I'm strong where she's weak, and she's strong where I'm weak, and as a result, we "complete" each other. Thinking of those at either end of an imaginary bridge, where on that bridge would you place the relationship that you and Dharma have?... Why do you say that?*
- You told me in the first interview that if you had to name the greatest source of conflict in your marriage, it would be spending time together.*

*Your time at ADM was characterized by a loss of time together. You also told me that your move away from Oneeda was encouraged by a mental health professional who was working with Dharma because it was perceived that she needed more social contact. And, most recently, it was evidently a huge relief to her to identify a friend who you said was her sister separated at birth. You, on the other hand, describe yourself as "having a hard time opening up," and voiced some concern that Stewart might follow in your footsteps in that way. Imagine that a young guy at church seeks out your advice about his relationship with a young girl, and that it doesn't take*

*long to learn that this same kind of social-emotional divide is what is keeping him from asking his girlfriend to marry him. What would you say to him?*

- How do the two of you tend to resolve conflict on your best days? On your worst days? Where conflict is concerned, how do you most typically manage it? Who is quicker to apologize, and who is quicker to forgive the other?*
- Is there anything you consider to be of great importance to the success of your marriage that we haven't really touched upon?*

## Appendix E

### Demographic Tables

Table I

*Demographic Information on Participants' Families and Relationships*

<i>Names (Ages)</i>	<i>Known Prior to Marriage</i>	<i>Years Cohabit?</i>	<i>Years Married</i>	<i>Previous Divorce?</i>	<i>Sex/Age of Children</i>
Archie (48) & Edith (39)	4 yrs.	No	16 yrs.	No	F/13
Bill (39) & Claire (36)	2 yrs.	Yes (3 mos)	20 yrs.	No	F/19, F/14 ,F/8
Dale (33) & Marlene (31)	10 yrs.	Yes (2 wks)	13 yrs.	No	F/10, F/7
Dominic (44) & JoAnne (44)	1 yr.	Yes (6 mos)	22 yrs.	No	F/25, M/18, F/15
Duke (32) & Daisy (30)	1 yr.	No	7 yrs.	Yes (Duke)	M/7, M/6, M/3
Fred (32) & Ethel (32)	1 yr.	<sup>a</sup> No	13 yrs.	No	F/13(2), F/9, F/4
Jose (30) & Sarah (30)	4 yrs.	No	8 yrs.	No	M/6, F/2, F/1
Mike (39) & Carol (42)	2 yrs.	No	18 yrs.	No	M/14, M/11
Roy (50) & Marie (40)	1 yr.	No	22 yrs.	No	F/17
Tyrone (37) & Dharma (32)	7 yrs.	No	13 yrs.	No	M/10

<sup>a</sup> Ethel moved into Fred's residence in March, within a day or so of his leaving for boot camp. Technically, he did not live with her, however they stayed together when he was on leave. They married the following December.

Table II

*Participants' Self-Reported Economic Circumstances*

<i>Couple</i>	<i>Highest Education</i>	<i>Employment Status</i>	<i>Financial Condition</i>	<i>Primary Decision-Maker</i>
Archie, Edith	HS both	Disability both	Stable	Him
Bill, Claire	HS, Bachelor+	Full, Part+Student	At-Risk	Him
Dale, Marlene	HS both	Full, Homemaker	Stable	Him
Dominic, JoAnne	2-Yr Degr both	Disability, Full	Stable	Her
Duke, Daisy	2-Yr Degr, Bach	Full, Homemaker	At-Risk	Her
Fred, Ethel	Bachelors, HS	Student, Homemaker	Stable	Him
Jose & Sarah	Bach+, Bach	Student, Homemaker	Stable	Cooperative
Mike & Carol	Masters, Bach	Full+Stu, Part+Home	At-Risk	Cooperative
Roy & Marie	HS, 2-Yr Degr	Disability, Full+Part	At-Risk	Cooperative
Tyrone & Dharma	Bach, HS+	Full-time, Student	At-Risk	Her

## Appendix F

## Promotional Media – Flier

## Promotional Media – Pass-Along Card

New toll-free Number  
888-680-7981 or  
[www.GoodMarriageStudy.com](http://www.GoodMarriageStudy.com)

**Please answer these 3 questions...**



**1. Do you, or does someone you know, have a marriage that they consider to be “good” or “very good?”**

2. Do they live in a middle or lower income area within an hour or so of Lexington?

3. Does the couple have at least one school-age child together, either by adoption or by birth?

*If you answer “yes” to all three of these questions, please read on...*

I am a doctoral student (University of Kentucky) seeking to learn more about how these marriages happen, how these couples describe their marriage and family, and how other parts of their lives are affected. This research ultimately may help many other couples toward achieving better relationships.

- If *you* are part of such a marriage, call me.
- If *you know someone* who is part of such a marriage, please pass along this card and ask them to call me.

**Thank you!... GREG THOMPSON: (859) 215-2814**

## Appendix G

### Institutional Board of Review Approval Letter



UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY

#### OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY

Initial Review

Approval Ends  
August 10, 2007

Project Ends  
May 1, 2007

IRB Number  
06-0429-F4S

TO: S. Greg Thompson, M.S.  
Family Studies  
3629 Bold Bidder Dr.  
Lexington, KY 40517  
PI phone #: (859)215-2814

FROM: Chairperson/Vice Chairperson  
Nonmedical Institutional Review Board (IRB)

SUBJECT: Approval of Protocol Number 06-0429-F4S

DATE: August 14, 2006

On August 11, 2006, the Nonmedical Institutional Review Board approved your protocol entitled:

*Promises We Have Kept: Using Grounded Theory Methodology to Understand the Backgrounds, Antecedents, Characteristics, and Outcomes of Low-Income Parents' Healthy Marriages*

Approval is effective from August 11, 2006 until August 10, 2007. This approval extends to any consent/assent document unless the IRB has waived the requirement for documentation of informed consent. If applicable, attached is the IRB approved consent/assent document(s) to be used when enrolling subjects. [Note, subjects can only be enrolled using consent/assent forms which have a valid "IRB Approval" stamp unless special waiver has been obtained from the IRB.] Prior to the end of this period, you will be sent a Continuation Review Report Form which must be completed and returned to the Office of Research Integrity so that the protocol can be reviewed and approved for the next period.

In implementing the research activities, you are responsible for complying with IRB decisions, conditions and requirements. The research procedures should be implemented as approved in the IRB protocol. It is the principal investigator's responsibility to ensure any changes planned for the research are submitted for review and approval by the IRB prior to implementation. Protocol changes made without prior IRB approval to eliminate apparent hazards to the subject(s) should be reported in writing immediately to the IRB. Furthermore, discontinuing a study or completion of a study is considered a change in the protocol's status and therefore the IRB should be promptly notified in writing.

For information describing investigator responsibilities after obtaining IRB approval, download and read the document "PI Guidance to Responsibilities, Qualifications, Records and Documentation of Human Subjects Research" from the Office of Research Integrity's Guidance and Policy Documents web page [<http://www.research.uky.edu/ori/human/guidance/htm#PIresp>]. Additional information regarding IRB review, federal regulations, and institutional policies may be found through ORI's web site [<http://www.research.uky.edu/ori>]. If you have questions, need additional information, or would like a paper copy of the above mentioned document, contact the Office of Research Integrity at (859) 257-9428.

*Norman Van Subber, Ph.D./Co*  
Chairperson/Vice Chairperson

---

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*An Equal Opportunity University*

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Department of Family Studies, University of Kentucky (Lexington, KY)	
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Pikeville College (Pikeville, KY)	
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