ORIGINAL PAPER

Help-Seeking for Marital Problems: Perceptions of Individuals in Strong African American Marriages

**J. Mitchell Vaterlaus · Linda Skogrand ·
Cassandra Chaney**

Abstract   This exploratory study employed a qualitative approach and a strength-based framework to identify African Americans' ($N = 78$) perceptions of help-seeking for marital problems in their strong marriages. Specifically, participants were asked the resources they would seek if marital problems arose, sex differences in willingness to seek professional help for marital problems, and their lived experience with help-seeking for marital problems. African American men and women most frequently cited religion/spirituality and family (immediate/extended) as resources for help during marital challenges. No significant difference was identified between men and women in willingness to seek professional help for marital problems. When discussing experiences with help-seeking for marital problems participants indicated that they considered the trustworthiness of the resource, typically relied on religion/spirituality, and preferred to keep their problems within their relationship. Results are discussed in terms of implications for researchers and marriage professionals.

J. M. Vaterlaus (✉)
Department of Health and Human Development, Montana State University, P.O. Box 173540, Bozeman, MT 59717-3540, USA
e-mail: j.vaterlaus@montana.edu

L. Skogrand
Department of Family, Consumer and Human Development, College of Education and Human Services, Utah State University, 2705 Old Main, Logan, UT 84322-2705, USA
e-mail: Linda.Skogrand@usu.edu

C. Chaney
College of Human Sciences and Education, School of Social Work, Child and Family Studies, Louisiana State University, 323 Huey P. Long Field House, Baton Rouge, LA 70803-4300, USA
e-mail: cchaney@lsu.edu

Introduction

Identification of strengths rather than deficits in African American marriages is just beginning (Marks et al. 2008). A family strength-based approach promotes the identification of positive marital qualities within a culture or ethnicity that can be emphasized and possibly encourage others within the cultural group to have strong marriages (DeFrain and Asay 2007). Research on couples in great marriages (i.e., couples who self-identified as having happy and strong marriages) indicates that such couples still experience challenges, and in some instances even consider divorce (Tulane et al. 2011). Tulane et al. (2011) reported that American Caucasian couples in great marriages who had considered divorce used communication, turning to each other, religion, and seeking professional help as strengths that enabled them to maintain their marital commitment through difficult times.

It is unclear what couples in strong African American marriages, and African American couples in general, do when they experience marital problems. Strong African American marriages have been described as having *equally yoked* (i.e., having a unified marital and family vision, Marks et al. 2008, p. 182) relationships between husband and wife, strong kinship bonds, and a strong religious orientation (Marks et al. 2008). It may be that African American couples in strong marriages utilize these strengths when marital problems arise (e.g., talk to kin about their experience, go to a religious leader), which has been found to be different than how marital difficulties are

handled among Caucasian couples. In fact, Caucasian couples in great marriages frequently used marital professionals when they experience marital problems (Tulane et al. 2011).

A few studies have investigated African American perceptions of professional marriage services including marriage and family therapy (Awosan et al. 2011) and relationship education programs (Hurt et al. 2012). Since common challenges in African American marriages (e.g., financial strain, racial discrimination, etc.) and internal and external stressors (e.g., stress in the workplace; stress in balancing work and family; family-related stress; or stress associated with traumatic loss of family, family financial emergencies; and the challenge to provide care for family members) are generally experienced to a lesser degree among Caucasian couples (Bryant et al. 2010; Marks et al. 2006), the resources of support that African American couples seek and use when they experience marital problems could also be different. The current study was designed to identify the perceptions of help-seeking for marital challenges among couples in strong African American marriages. Marks et al. (2008) identified strengths among African American couples in "strong, happy, and enduring marriages" (p. 174) and we used this as a model for defining strong marriage. Strong African American marriages in the current study are defined as happy (i.e., couples self-reported happiness in the relationship) and enduring (i.e., 10 years or more of marriage) African American (i.e., both partners self-identify as African American) heterosexual marital relationships.

African Americans' Perceptions of Professional Intervention

Individual Mental Health Services

Studies have documented the barriers African Americans' experience in seeking individual mental health services (Davey and Watson 2008; Diala et al. 2000; Thompson et al. 2004; Ward and Besson 2013; Williams and Justice 2010). African American males have reported that participation in counseling was a sign of weakness, embarrassment (Knifton et al. 2010; Williams and Justice 2010) and associated with decreased pride (Thompson et al. 2004). Thompson et al. (2004) identified that both African American men and women viewed that psychotherapy was best for people with severe mental illness, but women saw it as a violation of a perceived historical requirement to be the strength or anchor of the family. However, some studies have reported that African Americans had more positive views of psychotherapy (Diala et al. 2000; Ward and Besson 2013). Diala et al. (2000) reported that African

American participants were more likely to have positive views of mental health services than Caucasian participants prior to seeking services, but were less likely to actually use services. It appears that African Americans have mixed perceptions and potential sex differences in their perceptions of individual mental health services.

Professional Services for Marital Challenges

Marriage and Family Therapy

In reviewing the literature, it appears that the majority of publications on African American participation in clinical services have focused on individual mental health. African Americans are substantially more likely to be poor than Caucasians and experience racial discrimination and unfair treatment (Lincoln and Chae 2010). These challenges have been found to have a detrimental effect on African American psychological well-being, and thus invariably be one of the latent causes of marital discord. However, African American marital satisfaction has been shown to have a protective effect on psychological well-being and can potentially buffer the effects of internal and external stressors (Lincoln and Chae 2010). Thus, strengthening individual mental health may occur through increasing marital satisfaction. This could potentially be accomplished through Marriage and family therapy (MFT).

To date, few studies have investigated African American's perceptions of MFT. Awosan et al. (2011) identified that the most frequent barriers for African American participation in MFT were concerns for cultural sensitivity and the financial inability to pay for services. More recently, Hall and Sandberg (2012) found that the most significant barrier for African American participation in MFT was the stigma associated with therapy.

Relationship Education

Relationship education (RE) has had an increase in public attention because of the unprecedented funding that has been allocated to establish healthy relationships in the United States through the healthy marriage initiative (Brotherson and Duncan 2004). The majority of RE programs have been developed for Caucasian, middle-class participants and it has long been a challenge to reach diverse and low-income populations (Ooms and Wilson 2004). Some evaluative efforts have begun to emerge focusing on African American participants' perceptions of RE and experiences in RE. Hurt et al. (2012) reported that African American men were unwilling to commit to a marriage enrichment program because they felt overcommitted with work and family responsibilities, but these male participants were willing to connect with a mentor or

someone that could provide good advice about being a husband.

Purpose of the Current Study

African American couples in United States face a number of unique challenges (Bryant et al. 2010; Lincoln and Chae 2010; Marks et al. 2006), yet they have a low likelihood of seeking individual mental health treatment (Diala et al. 2000). Little is known about African Americans' willingness to seek professional services for marital challenges. As a starting point we sought to understand what help-seeking resources couples in strong African American marriages have sought or would seek when faced with marital problems in this exploratory study. The following research questions were developed to guide this study: (1) What resources would couples in strong African American marriages seek out if martial problems were present?, (2) Are there sex differences in willingness to seek professional help for marital problems among African American men and women in strong marriages?, (3) What is the experience of help-seeking for marital problems of couples from strong African American marriages?

Method

Sample

A total of 39 (78 individuals) African American couples in strong marriages participated in the study. Participants ranged from 28 to 88 years of age with a mean age of 58 for men and 55 for women. The majority of the sample had some type of continuing education (16.9 % attended community college or technical school, 54.6 % received a bachelor's or post bachelor's degree) following graduation from high school, while 23.4 % reported they were high school graduates and 5.2 % reported that they did not complete high school. On average, participants' reported annual household incomes in the $70,000–$79,999 range. Although, 34.2 % of participants reported an annual household income of over $100,000. Men's ages at the time of marriage ranged from 19 to 57 years old with an average age of 26 years. Women reported younger ages at the time of marriage with an age range of 14–35 years old and an average of 23 years old. Couples reported being married between 14 and 62 years ($m = 32$ years). Fourteen (5 females and 9 males) participants indicated that the current relationship was a remarriage. Religious affiliation was reported as follows: Baptist (43.6 %), Non-Denominational Christian (25.6 %), Jehovah's Witness (12.8 %),

Catholic (10.3 %), Methodist (5.1 %), and Lutheran (2.6 %).

Procedures

The Institutional Review Board approved the study and procedures. As an exploratory study a purposive sampling procedure was implemented. The qualities that make a strong marriage may differ depending on a person's cultural background (Skogrand et al. 2009; Skogrand et al. 2008) and this was carefully considered in defining strong marriage in this study. Inclusion criteria for this study required participants to (a) be in an African American marriage (i.e., both partners self-identified as African American and were in a heterosexual marriage), (b) self-identify that they had a strong and happy marriage, and (c) be married for at least 10 years. Couples in strong marriages were recruited using a mass electronic announcement and through snowball sampling procedures in a southern state. Participants who completed interviews were invited to refer other African American couples who had strong marriages. A gift certificate to a local restaurant was provided as an incentive for couples that participated.

In order to conduct the interviews in a respectful way with members of the African American community, we adhered to the advice of experts who have provided guidance and had success in conducting research in culturally respectful ways (Chilisa 2012; Fisher and Ragsdale 2006). Because we were aware of issues around racial mistrust (Fisher and Ragsdale 2006), we attempted to create mutual power and respect in the interview process (Chilisa 2012). Therefore, participants were given the choice in where they were interviewed (i.e., their home, their workplace, or a restaurant or coffee shop). We also told couples that we wanted to interview the husband and wife separately to limit potential response bias with the presence of both spouses. However, several couples wanted to be interviewed together and we honored that request—this practice in allowing couples to decide has been used in previous research to ensure cultural respect (Marks 2004). A little less than half of the couples were interviewed together ($n = 18$), while the remaining couples were interviewed separately ($n = 21$).

Two researchers who conducted interviews independently used a semi-structured interview schedule. A demographic sheet was completed at the beginning of each interview. These 39 couples were asked a variety of questions about their strong marriages. The current study focused only on the responses about help-seeking behavior for marital problems. There were specific questions about whom they had gone to if they had problems in their marriages and who they would go to in the future. However, they talked about help-seeking behaviors throughout

the interviews, so the entire interviews were reviewed to answer the research questions. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Design and Analyses

A qualitative design was selected for this exploratory study with the inclusion of quantitative procedures for triangulation purposes (Jick 1979). Following the transcription process, all information concerning help-seeking or potential for professional help for marital problems was pulled from the complete transcripts. First, two data sets were created (a) a data set that represented what resources couples would seek if they experienced martial problems and (b) a data set that included whether or not couples would consult professionals if they experienced martial problems. After research questions one and two were answered all data was collapsed into one data set for qualitative analysis.

Research Question 1

The first research question was designed to identify the specific resources that couples would seek if they experienced marital problems. Responses to one question on the interview schedule concerning the resources that couples would seek if they experienced marital problems were used to answer this research question. The question was open-ended and participants were invited to provide multiple resources that they would consult. One independent researcher coded the data (separately for husbands and wives) for specific resources (e.g., children, religious leader). A second researcher reviewed the coding for accuracy. Each response was then numerically coded and quantitative multiple response variable sets were created.

Research Question 2

A similar coding procedure was used to identify the willingness of individuals to seek professional help regarding marital issues or problems. Responses from one question from the interview schedule were used to answer this research question. The question asked couples, "Would you consider seeking professional help if you had marriage problems? Please explain." The yes and no portion of the responses were tallied separately for husbands and wives by one researcher. A second researcher validated the coding, and Chi-squared analysis was used to compare differences between husbands and wives.

Research Question 3

One data set was created for this research question, including all of the participants' responses that were related

to help-seeking for marital problems from the entire interviews. A phenomenological qualitative approach was used to identify African American couples' experiences with the phenomena of seeking help for marital problems. A phenomenon is described as an "object" of human experience and a phenomenological approach focuses on the common experience with the phenomenon among individual participants (van Manen 1990). Two of van Manen's (1984) phenomenological methods were used to analyze the data: the highlighting approach and the line-by-line approach. The highlighting approach requires that the manuscripts are read several times and while doing so statements that are revealing about the participants experience with the phenomenon are highlighted. The highlighting approach illuminated common experiences or themes among couples' responses in the areas of trust, the importance of religion/spirituality, and not seeking outside sources when marital problems were experienced. Two independent researchers discussed and refined the three themes while remaining close to the original data. The line-by-line approach was then employed by two independent researchers who separately coded the participant's sentences into the three themes. There was 92 % agreement between the independent coders. Disagreements between researchers on the establishment of themes or in the process of coding data into themes were resolved through consulting the original words of the participants.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the results a variation of member checking was employed (Vaterlaus and Higginbotham 2011). One African American couple that participated in the study was asked to review the qualitative results. The couple responded to structured questions about the consistency of the results with their lived experience and the larger African American population. In general, the couple reported the results were consistent. Small changes were implemented into the final results section.

Results

Research Question 1

Table 1 includes the resources that African Americans in strong marriages have or would seek out if they experienced marital problems. The use of the multiple response format produced a percentage of responses (adding to 100 %) and a case percentage (often exceeding 100 % because participants reported more than one source they would seek). Case percentages are used in the results section to present findings. As shown in Table 1, African American husbands most frequently mentioned religion/spirituality (48.7 %) and family members (35.9 %) as the resources they would seek if marital problems were

Table 1 Help-seeking resources for marital problems in strong African American marriages

Resources	Husbands			Wives		
	n	% of responses	% of cases	n	% of responses	% of cases
Children	2	3.5	5.1	2	2.9	5.1
Spouse	5	8.8	12.8	5	7.4	12.8
Friends	8	14.0	20.5	8	11.8	20.5
Parent	5	8.8	12.8	8	11.8	20.5
Mother-in-law	0	0.0	0.0	3	4.4	7.7
Grandparent	0	0.0	0.0	1	1.5	2.6
Siblings	6	10.5	15.4	10	14.7	25.6
Professional help (therapists)	3	5.3	7.9	2	2.9	5.1
Internet/book	0	0.0	0.0	1	1.5	2.6
Deity	9	15.8	23.1	8	11.8	20.5
Religious leader	10	17.5	25.6	13	19.1	35.1
Aunt/uncle	0	0.0	0.0	4	5.9	10.2
Nieces and nephews	1	1.8	2.6	0	0.0	0.0
Solve independently/no outside sources	8	14.0	20.5	3	4.4	7.7

present. African American wives also reported high percentages of consulting religion/spirituality (55.6 %). Although, a higher percentage of wives indicated that they would consult a family member (71.7 %). More husbands (20.5 %) than wives (7.7 %) indicated that they would most likely solve the marital problem themselves. None of the couples specifically reported they would seek relationship education as a resource for help during marital problems.

Research Question 2

A higher percentage of women (53.8 %) than men (38.5 %) indicated that they would seek professional help if they were experiencing marital problems. Chi-squared analysis was used to determine the significance of the difference between husbands and wives. No significant difference was identified between gender and willingness to seek professional assistance (see Table 2).

Table 2 Willingness to seek professional help for marital problems in strong African American Marriages

Willingness to seek professional help	Husbands ($n = 39$)	Wives ($n = 39$)	χ^2	p	Φ
Yes	15	21	1.29	0.256	0.15
No	24	18			

The Yates Chi-square value is reported because $df = 1$

Research Question 3

Using a phenomenological qualitative approach three themes emerged and are presented in order of prevalence. First, *To trust or not to trust?*: participants in strong African American marriages explained the importance of trust in seeking resources for assistance with marital problems. Second, *Spiritual Guidance*: prior to seeking any outside resources, participants reported that using prayer and consulting with religious leaders took precedence. Finally, *Self-Governance*: participants talked about the experience of keeping marriage problems in the marriage and not seeking outside resources.

To Trust or Not to Trust?

Husbands ($n = 34$) and wives ($n = 32$) described their experience with trust in terms of resources they would seek for help with marital problems. Trust was discussed in terms of two sub-themes (a) qualities of trusted resources and (b) trust with marital professionals. The participants explained that qualities of trusted resources included blood/marriage relation, religiosity and spirituality, life experience, cultural congruence, emotional stability, honesty, and confidentiality. Participants also discussed the leeriness they perceived about marriage professionals. Although, participants reported more willingness to seek professional help when the marriage professionals operated within a religious framework.

Qualities of Trusted Resources When considering consulting resources for help with marital problems participants collectively described individuals who were family (e.g., children, parents, siblings, in-laws, and extended family) and were religious. In some instances when family members were not accessible participants perceived that they had nowhere to turn. For example, when one husband was asked whom he would turn to if he had marital problems he replied, "I don't know. I don't have any family left. I don't. Mother, daddy, brother—all of them are dead." The family members that are consulted are also religious. One wife said concerning consultations with her mother-in-law, "[My mother-in-law] is really spiritual and I know that she's a child of the Lord. That because I'm her son's wife… What she will say is let's go pray about it."

Religiosity and spirituality were not only important for family resources. Participants used phrases like "filled with the spirit," "Godly woman," "he's a minster," "she's a pastor," "foundation in the church," "very religious," and "very strong in believing in the Lord" when they discussed help-seeking from friends for marital problems. Participants also talked about help-seeking for marital problems from friends and outside resources who were older, with

the thought that age was associated with, "… wisdom and knowledge." A wife explained, "… [the friend I talked to] was an older Black woman. I was very close to her. I could tell her anything and I felt comfortable with it." Another wife explained that she would not seek professional resources for her marital problems because there was no one older than her. She declared:

Hell no, we wouldn't go to none! 'Cause number one, they don't have [marriage professionals] as old as we are that have gone through what we have gone through to be able to tell us how to do nothing. As a matter of fact, they would probably marvel and say, how did you do it?

Trusted resources for help-seeking with marital problems need to be married, which was discussed along with age as a determining factor for experience. One wife explained that the friend and mentor she goes to was not only religious, but also had accumulated experience from being married and raising children. This participant described:

They are like the perfect couple, and I know there's no such thing, but they to me have the ideal marriage. I have watched them for 23 years rearing their own kids, and going through life… but their foundation has always been the church.

Additionally, participants talked about the importance of having resources that have a similar cultural understanding. One wife explained that she relies on her African American female friends when she has marital problems. She explained that amongst African American women there is a strong motivation to keep marriages together. She emphasized:

[African American women] bond, we try to keep each other going… they say Black women don't stand by her man is the biggest lie ever told. We stand by our man… we stand with them, stand beside, we stand wherever we have to stand to keep them strong.

Finally, African American couples talked about qualified resources as being (a) emotionally stable: "… can handle what I'm telling them," (b) truthful: "… gonna give you the truth no matter what," and (c) able to maintain confidentiality: "… who I know won't go talk to Jack Jill, John or Peter and Paul."

Trust And Marriage Professionals Some participants were adamant that marriage professionals should not be a trusted source for marital problems. Summarizing the general sentiment of participants, a wife argued, "If you haven't walked the walk, you don't know what it feels like to put that foot up." Participants indicated that education

and statistics were not a sufficient foundation for marriage professionals to be a useful resource. One wife declared:

My thought process is that with counseling and such, they are not in the situation. They're not even in the family to be able to know the ins and outs. They're going from statistics, and I just don't feel like I'm a statistic.

Participants perceived marriage professionals as having many of their own personal issues that make them unlikely resources for help. Participants stated, "… they have the highest suicide rate" and "Most marriage counselors are divorced already so they don't know what to tell anybody else." Some participants used media resources to describe their perceptions of marriage professionals. For example, one husband exclaimed, "Ain't no Doctor Phil getting near me!" Another participant discussed movie portrayals of marriage counselors indicating that counselors are always depicted as having more problems than their clients. This was a common idea shared—marriage professionals have problems, so they cannot help other people with their problems. One wife explained this point, "[Marriage professionals] got a lot of problems themselves and they have to go find a professional to talk to, you know? They got too many problems of their own so they don't need to know mine too."

A few participants acknowledged some of these perceptions, but explained the history of the stigma with the field of mental health. A husband described this stigma and how he perceived that influences the African American population at large, he observed:

It was a myth that if you saw a [mental health professional] you were mental—you were crazy. Because we were taught to believe that, I think we have cheated ourselves as a people. When we have problems we don't go talk and let somebody listen and share. You see after slavery there was no mental restoration, there was not attention given, action given to try to help Black people with all of the atrocities that they suffered. I think that has a carryover.

Male and female participants in their interviews discussed the stigma of seeking professional help. One wife explained:

I'm like [my husband] in some senses. I would be very reluctant [to seek professional marriage help] because most African Americans struggle with that. And it really has to do with a stigma I think. I don't want nobody else to tell me what's wrong with me.

There were participants who acknowledged that they would seek professional help for marital problems if the professional was Christian, the counsel was "filled with the spirit," and the Bible was used. One husband who had

attended counseling previously indicated that these qualities were missing from his experience. He stated, "I started talking to a professional counselor one time. To me it was negative. It was more of—I don't think it was based on a religious point of view, it was a worldly point of view."

Many of the instances of mistrust with help-seeking for marital problems are associated with perceived discrepancies between religion and the professional world. One husband explained this discrepancy:

I don't believe in these other counselors a lot because a lot of them maybe don't understand the origin of marriage, and its divine origin and divine institution… I can understand why, because most of their counseling would be for people who are not even Christian or maybe any religion at all… but this marriage business, where we're concerned, it's a sacred thing.

This point was emphasized further by one of the male participants whose first wife went to a marriage counselor and was told to acquire a boyfriend in addition to a husband. He lamented, "They don't deal with fidelity. They don't deal with what's real. They deal with what they've learned in some book. Most of the time those books are written by men whose thinking is different from what the Bible says."

When marriage professionals used a religious framework, participants reported positive experiences. For example, one husband and wife reported that they attended professional pre-marriage education/counseling through their church. They stated that they learned about determining roles in marriage and establishing positive communication through their experience.

Spiritual Guidance

Spiritual guidance was commonly presented as a way of coping with marital problems for both husbands ($n = 34$) and wives ($n = 22$). Spiritual guidance appeared to have high priority amongst the African American couples. One wife stated, "God is the best professional there is." When participants were asked what resources they would seek help for marital problems they responded with phrases like "My pastor probably first," "First to Jehovah," "I'd pray first," "God is the first place I go," and "Our Priest first." The spiritual resources that participants listed included God, Jehovah, the Lord, Priest, Pastor, Spiritual Mother, the Elders, Pastor's wife, and the Bible.

Beyond seeing spirituality as a source of help, participants explained that their spiritual roots provided meaning for marriage. A wife shared:

You just have to respect [your husband]. Learn to see him through the eyes of God and when you see him,

see God, because that's who you've made your vows to even though you made them to [your husband] you've really made them to God. So if you can keep your vows God's going to keep your marriage.

Participants explained that a true belief in Deity negated the need for outside help for marital problems. A husband explained:

It's difficult to say that you believe in God and that He can fix all things and then you have to go to an external source. If you really believe that… then you should believe that your problems can be fixed with prayer.

Couples did not believe that God would fix their problems if they were not trusting God or open to spiritual insights. A wife elaborated on this way of thinking, "You have to be at the spiritual level to say, 'God, I know you're going to work it out. You know, I want to go see a therapist but my husband doesn't. I know you can work it out.'" Another wife explained how the process worked when she was experiencing marital problems. She said:

At the time [my husband and I] spent some time apart. It was during that time when I just allowed myself to pray a lot and just really allow God to talk to me about me. There was nobody I could go to, because whenever you get to a point of, in my opinion, that you break, families tend to want to know, "What happened?" and it goes all messed up. But for me it was me and God… I really allowed the Lord to just truly minister to my spirit and what I found out was—I saw my role. I saw how I closed myself up. I saw how I had become so rigid. There were places in my heart that I never allowed [my husband] to be because there were barriers that I didn't know were really there.

Some participants explained that receiving support from outside resources for marital problems could be part of God's way of helping. A wife explicated this point:

[God will] reveal everything to you regardless, you know? Sometimes it takes that one person to reinforce what you already know, what's been revealed by God. It takes a lot of reinforcement, which you already know. So you know that could be a friend. That could be anybody because they may not know what you're going through, but God will use anybody just to reinforce what He already put in you.

Self-Governance

Participants (22 husbands; 13 wives) collaboratively discussed solving problems, "… with the fewest people possible." Husbands and wives talked about this in two ways:

(a) resolving the problem as an individual and (b) finding solutions with spouses. The individual process appeared to provide safety and decreased the chances of amplifying the problem. Solving marital problems with spouses included having a good relational foundation and positive communication skills.

Do It Yourself Participants explained their reasons for solving marital problems by themselves using phrases like, "I'm very personal," "I'm very private," "I turn inward a lot," "I have to work it out myself," and "I believe in keeping stuff to myself." One wife talked about how she would like to talk to other people, but has recognized that this causes more problems. She stated, "[Talking about my spouse with other people] just raises up too many other issues. I would not want to put my [husband] in that situation." A husband explained, "I have to resolve [the problem] in my own head. Figure out which way I'm going. Gotta be careful when you're vulnerable. You can't be running out talking to the whole place." Thinking is required for solving problems by one's self. One husband stated, "I pray a little bit, run a little bit, walk a little bit, think a little bit. I figure I got the resolve to solve it if it's solvable."

Keep It in the Marriage When asked what resources they would seek if they were experiencing marital problems a wife responded, "First and foremost, if I'm having a problem, I am going to my spouse." Participants explained that their spouse should be their, "… number one sounding board." This was made possible by establishing a strong relational foundation. One wife explained the importance of having common beliefs and understanding of family roles. She said:

> All Black families not dysfunctional, you know we all have issues just like everybody else. It can work with a combination of your belief system, your spiritual life in one accord, just knowing each other, being sensitive to each other, and not getting off into what's the man's role and what's the woman's role. You know? Hey, everybody has a role and no one should shoulder the primary responsibility for the whole family.

A strong foundation meant establishing relational rules and sticking to them. A husband explained, "We made our rules, we abide by our rules, and we didn't invite anybody else to participate."

Developing and using positive communication skills were important ingredients in resolving marital problems between spouses. Husbands and wives talked about the importance of being direct with their spouses. A wife said, "I would be straight up with him if there's something not

right and he would do the same." A husband acknowledged, "I'd probably go back to my [wife] and say, 'Girl, what's in your head? Let's talk about it.' This is the line of communication that has to always be open." Another husband explained, "I think you have to communicate with [your spouse], 'cause I don't know what you feel if you having a problem." The topics of communication are not always fun to hear, but participants indicated the benefits outweighed the costs. Illuminating this idea, a wife said:

> … even though you may not appreciate it or like it when you're hearing certain things that your mate is telling you that you may be doing to irritate or hurt them. Just causes hurt feelings, you know? You still want to know… I'm glad [my husband] told me, 'cause what if he hadn't said anything and he just let that sit, fester, and build up? Then you know finally out of nowhere, a bomb. Then you're wondering "What's the problem?"

Participants explained that beyond being direct with communication, resolving problems required attentive listening and learning about how their spouse communicated. One husband explained that if you truly learn about your spouse and listen, this would decrease the likelihood of an argument. He advised:

> All that arguing was because you hadn't listened. If you had just listened, really listened you get the sense of what the person is saying. You got to learn how your mate expresses themselves. Some people express themselves clearly and some of them can't do it so good, so you have to figure out—what is my mate?… you have to really listen and learn your mate, really learn your mate. If you understand your mate a little better then of course you're going to be able to work on your problems a little better.

Discussion

This study investigated help-seeking for marital challenges among 78 African Americans in strong marriages. In particular, this study's three-tiered foundation examined the resources of marital support among African American couples, whether sex differences were present in the willingness to seek professional help for marital problems, as well as the experience of help-seeking for marital support among members of this subset of the African American population. This research contributes to the literature related to attitudes regarding help-seeking in African American marriages and the most salient forms of support on which couples relied/would rely upon during marital difficulties.

Resources for Help with Marital Problems

Our findings revealed multiple resources on which African American couples in strong marriages rely. The top two resources for both husbands and wives were spirituality/religion and family members. These resources aligned with the strengths of strong kinship bonds and strong religious orientations identified in previous work with strong African American marriages (Marks et al. 2008). Given the historical salience of religion in the lives of African Americans (Chaney 2008a, b), it appears that involvement with a religious organization provides an entrée for married African Americans to develop relationships with people within the church who can provide assistance during times of need.

Family members (immediate and extended) were seen as sources of spiritual support, but also emotional support. Family members have likely witnessed the couple's marital relationship since its inception. In addition to the relationship built with these individuals over time, African American men and women in strong marriages may perceive these individuals as having a greater social and emotional investment in their marriages than other resources. In general, considering both religious/spiritual and family resources, African American couples who are experiencing problems in their marriages may be particularly drawn to seek advice from individuals who, by and large, have the same and/or similar life experiences (e.g., poverty, racial discrimination, unfair treatment) (Lincoln and Chae 2010) and internal and external stressors (Marks et al. 2006).

Sex Differences in Willingness to Seek Professional Help for Marital Problems

Thompson et al. (2004) identified that African American men and women had barriers to seeking mental health services. To date, sex differences related to seeking professional help for marital problems have not been documented for African Americans. The current study identified that slightly more women than men stated that they would seek professional help for marital problems than men. However, no significant differences in willingness to seek professional help for marital problems between men and women were identified in this study. Future research should investigate this question with a larger sample size.

Perceptions of Help-Seeking for Marital Problems

Using phenomenological qualitative approach, themes were explored regarding African American couples in strong marriages experience with help-seeking for marital problems. The most frequently mentioned theme centered on identifying trusted resources. The construct of trust has been found to be important and influences various forms of behavior among African Americans (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Musa et al. 2009), and structural forces cause African Americans to be generally less trusting than Caucasians (Wilkes 2011). It appears that trust directly influences whether African American couples will seek outside help as well as the persons to whom they will turn for help.

Closely related to trust was the aspect of spirituality. Previous research identified that African Americans trust that spiritual resources will improve mental health challenges (Thompson et al. 2004). Participants in this study generally reported that they sought religious resources prior to seeking other outside resources. The mistrust of marriage professionals was largely associated with a perceived disconnect between the sacred nature of marriage and the secular approach of marriage professionals. Professionals were thought to conceptualize their cases based on research and statistics, lack real-life experience, focus on the deficits within African American marriages, and were perceived to be in weak and/or failing marriages themselves. It appeared that many of the ideas or opinions about marriage professionals at large have been generated by popular media (e.g., talk shows, movies). Participants indicated that ideal outside resources for help with marital problems would have a strong religious orientation and a strong marriage themselves.

Some participants felt that relationship problems should be kept within the relationship and resolved between the marital partners. Talking about marital problems outside of the marriage relationship was seen as a potential way to increase problems. Participants specified that setting a strong foundation early, being direct in communicating concerns to partners, and being a good listener are the ingredients of resolving marital problems within the relationship.

Strong African American Marriages

A particular strength of this study was the utilization of strengths-based framework (DeFrain and Asay 2007). It is not surprising that strengths previously identified in strong African American marriages (Marks et al. 2008) manifested in this research on help-seeking for marital problems. Participants' responses were consistent with these strengths in this study commonly citing consulting with family member, and seeking religious support when there were problems in their marital relationship. Additionally, participants explained the ability to keep and solve problems within their marital relationship. The ability to use self-governance in solving relationship problems may be connected with the pre-identified strength of being equally yoked (Marks et al. 2008)—with a unified vision of the

marriage each partner has the responsibility and right to communicate problems and be heard. The specific dynamics within this self-governance process could be fruitful ground for identification of additional strengths in African American marriages.

Implications for Clinicians, Relationship Educators, and Scholars

The findings in this study can advance the goals of clinicians, relationship educators, and scholars. Previous research has indicated that inclusion of spirituality has been successful with African Americans in a therapeutic setting (Bell-Tolliver and Wilkerson 2011). To be consistent with previous research and reports from participants' in this study, professionals could benefit from acknowledging the salience of religion and/or spirituality in the lives of their African American clients. The comments provided by the married African Americans in this study demonstrate examples of how both religion (the Bible-ordained roles of husbands and wives) and spirituality (the realization that vows are made to one's spouse, but ultimately to God) can be used to help center the couple's help-seeking efforts and remind them of the meaning of marriage.

The findings in this study should motivate relationship educators to find ways to help couples both strengthen their relationships on their own and increase awareness about resources on which couples can rely *before* difficult times arise. Because African American couples generally have a negative view of the mental health field, relationship educators must work to minimize this stigma. Additionally, the couples in this study did not specifically state that they would seek Relationship Education (RE) as a resource for marital problems. This may be included in other resources (e.g., RE offered through church), but relationship educators could consider raising awareness about the field of RE among this population. One approach to address both of these limitations would be to consider lower dosages of marital education (Hawkins et al. 2004), such as ad campaigns or video clips in mass media, that could be implemented to challenge some of the misconceptions about marriage professionals and/or raise awareness of the option of RE. Mistrust can make it challenging to recruit individuals from minority populations to participate in marriage education, and partnering with trusted resources is recommended (Vaterlaus et al. 2012). Findings from this study indicate that marriage professionals should work closely with religious organizations to provide relationship education opportunities within the African American community.

Lastly, the findings in this study beg scholars to more closely examine the specific characteristics that make some individuals trustworthy help-seeking resources to African American couples. Scholars can explore the various criteria

(e.g., physical, intellectual, religious, spiritual, length of marriage, quality of marriage, etc.) that make the professional trustworthy, the specific points in the marriage when couples individually and collectively seek help, and potential sex differences in help-seeking behaviors. Additionally, researchers should more closely examine the specific strategies that couples in strong marriages use to solve their own problems.

Limitations and Conclusions

Several limitations of the study should be noted. For one, the couples in this study were primarily secured from one region in one state, thus, the findings in this study may not hold true for couples outside the region within the state sampled. Because our sampling procedure was purposive in recruiting strong African American married couples, it is not surprising that all participants were Christian given that a strong religious orientation is a strength in strong African American marriage (Marks et al. 2008). As the majority of the couples were Christian and at a relatively high socioeconomic level (education, income), their attitudes regarding help-seeking may be different than those of their low-socioeconomic or non-religious counterparts. In spite of these limitations, this study has offered a substantive contribution to the growing scholarship on the strengths in African American families, providing additional learning from couples who are "seasoned, firsthand marriage experts" (Marks et al. 2008, p. 185) in African American marriage. The study particularly added depth to the meaning couples in strong marriages attribute to help-seeking for marital problems. The findings provide a starting point to better understand how couples in strong marriages resolve marital problems within their relationships, their perceptions of marital professionals, and the importance of trust and religion in help-seeking for marital problems.

References

Awosan, C. I., Sandberg, J. G., & Hall, C. A. (2011). Understanding the experience of black clients in marriage and family therapy. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 37*(2), 153–168. doi:10.1111/j.1752-0606.2009.00166.x.

Bell-Tolliver, L., & Wilkerson, P. (2011). The use of spirituality and kinship as contributors to successful therapy outcomes with African American families. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work, 30*(1), 48–70. doi:10.1080/15426432.2011.542723.

Brotherson, S., & Duncan, W. (2004). Rebinding the ties that bind: government efforts to preserve and promote marriage. *Family Relations, 53*, 459–468. doi:10.1111/j.0197-6664.2004.00054.x.

Bryant, C. M., Wickrama, K. A. S., Bolland, J., Bryant, B. M., Cutrona, C. E., & Stanik, C. E. (2010). Race matters, even in marriage: Identifying factors linked to marital outcomes for

African Americans. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 2,* 157–174. doi:10.1111/j.1756-2589.2010.00051.x.

Chaney, C. (2008a). Religiosity and spirituality among members of an African-American church community: A qualitative analysis. *Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought, 27,* 201–234. doi:10.1080/15426430802202146.

Chaney, C. (2008b). The benefits of church involvement for African Americans—The perspectives of congregants, church staff and the church pastor. *Religion and Society, 10,* 1–23.

Chilisa, B. (2012). *Indigenous research methodologies.* Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Davey, M., & Watson, M. (2008). Engaging African Americans in therapy: Integrating a public policy and family therapy perspective. *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal, 30*(1), 31–47. doi:10.1007/s10591-007-9053-z.

DeFrain, J., & Asay, S. M. (2007). Strong families around the world: An introduction to the family strengths perspective. *Marriage and Family Review, 41,* 1–10. doi:10.1300/J002v41n01_01.

Diala, C., Muntaner, C., Walrath, C., Nickerson, K. J., LaVeist, T. A., & Leaf, P. J. (2000). Racial differences in attitudes toward professional mental health care and in the use of services. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 70*(4), 455–464. doi:10.1037/h0087736.

Edin, K., & Kefalas, M. (2005). *Promises I can keep: Why poor women put motherhood before marriage.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Fisher, C. B., & Ragsdale, K. (2006). Goodness-of-fit ethics for multicultural research. In J. E. Trimble & C. B. Fisher (Eds.), *The handbook of ethical research with ethnocultural populations & communities* (pp. 3–26). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hall, C. A., & Sandberg, J. G. (2012). "We Shall Overcome": A qualitative exploratory study of the experiences of African Americans who overcame barriers to engage in family therapy. *The American Journal of Family Therapy, 40*(5), 445–458. doi:10.1080/01926187.2011.637486.

Hawkins, A. J., Carroll, J. S., Doherty, W. J., & Willoughby, B. (2004). A comprehensive framework for marriage education. *Family Relations, 53,* 547–558. doi:10.1111/j.0197-6664.2004.00064.x.

Hurt, T. R., Beach, S. R., Stokes, L. A., Bush, P. L., Sheats, K. J., & Robinson, S. G. (2012). Engaging African American men in empirically based marriage enrichment programs: Lessons from two focus groups on the ProSAAM project. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology.* Advanced online publication. doi: 10.1037/a0028697.

Jick, T. D. (1979). Mixing qualitative and quantitative methods: Triangulation in action. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 24,* 602–611. doi:10.2307/2392366.

Knifton, L., Gervais, M., Newbigging, K., Mirza, N., Quinn, N., Wilson, N., & Hunkins-Hutchison, E. (2010). Community conversation: Addressing mental health stigma with ethnic minority communities. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology, 45*(4), 497–504. doi:10.1007/s00127-009-0095-4.

Lincoln, K. D., & Chae, D. H. (2010). Stress, marital satisfaction, and psychological distress among African Americans. *Journal of Family Issues, 31*(8), 1081–1105. doi:10.1177/0192513X10365826.

Marks, L. (2004). Sacred practices in highly religious families: Christian, jewish, mormon, and muslim perspectives. *Family Process, 43,* 217–231. doi:10.1111/j.1545-5300.2004.04302007.x.

Marks, L. D., Hopkins, K., Chaney, C., Monroe, P. A., Nesteruk, O., & Sasser, D. D. (2008). "Together, We Are Strong": A qualitative study of happy. *Enduring African American Marriages. Family Relations, 57*(2), 172–185. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3729.2008.00492.x.

Marks, L., Nesteruk, O., Hopkins-Williams, K., & Swanson, M. (2006). Stressors in African American marriages and families: A qualitative exploration. *Stress, Trauma, and Crisis, 9,* 203–225. doi:10.1080/15434610600854061.

Musa, D., Schulz, R., Harris, R., Silverman, M., & Thomas, S. B. (2009). Trust in the health care system and the use of preventative health services by older black and white adults. *American Journal of Public Health, 99*(7), 1293–1299. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2007.123927.

Ooms, T., & Wilson, P. (2004). The challenges of offering relationship and marriage education to low-income populations. *Family Relations, 53,* 440–447. doi:10.1111/j.0197-6664.2004.00052.

Skogrand, L., Hatch, D., & Singh, A. (2009). Strong marriages in Latino culture. In R. Dalla, J. DeFrain, J. Johnson, & D. Abbott (Eds.), *Strengths and challenges of new immigrant families: Implications for research, policy, education, and service* (pp. 117–134). Lexington, MA: Lexington Press.

Skogrand, L., Mueller, M. L., Arrington, R., LeBlanc, H., Spotted Elk, D., Dayzie, I., & Rosenband, R. (2008). Strong Navajo marriages. *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research: The Journal of the National Center, 15,* 25–41.

Thompson, V. L. S., Bazile, A., & Akbar, M. (2004). African Americans' perceptions of psychotherapy and psychotherapists. *Professional psychology research and practice, 35*(1), 19–26. doi:10.1037/0735-7028.35.1.19.

Tulane, S., Skogrand, L., & DeFrain, J. (2011). Couples in great marriages who considered divorcing. *Marriage & Family Review, 47*(5), 289–310. doi:10.1080/01494929.2011.594215.

van Manen, M. (1984). *Doing phenomenological research and writing: An introduction* (Monograph No. 7). Edmonton, AB: Department of Secondary Education, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta.

van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Vaterlaus, J. M., Bradford, K., Skogrand, L., & Higginbotham, B. J. (2012). Providing Relationship education for low-income and diverse audiences: A phenomenological investigation. *Family Science Review, 17,* 40–61.

Vaterlaus, J. M., & Higginbotham, B. J. (2011). Qualitative program evaluation methods. The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues, 16. Retrieved from http://www.ncsu.edu/ffci/publications/2011/v16-n1-2011-spring/vaterlaus-higginbotham.php.

Ward, E. C., & Besson, D. D. (2013). African American men's beliefs about mental illness, perceptions of stigma, and help-seeking barriers. *The Counseling Psychologist, 41*(3), 359–391. doi:10.1177/0011000012447824.

Wilkes, R. (2011). Re-thinking the decline in trust: A comparison of black and white Americans. *Social Science Research, 40*(6), 1596–1610. doi:10.1016/j.ssresearch.2011.06.007.

Williams, A., & Justice, M. (2010). Attitudes of African American males regarding counseling in four texas universities. *Education, 131,* 158–168.