

GENDER INFLUENCES ON PERCEPTIONS OF MARITAL RECONCILIATION

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MASTER OF SCIENCE

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TABLE ABSTRACT

Hanten, Allyson Rachel, M.S., Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Human Development and Education, North Dakota State University, June 2011. Gender Influences on Perceptions of Marital Reconciliation. Major Professor: Dr. Sean Brotherson.

This study examines the process of marital reconciliation. More specifically, it addresses gender influences regarding perceptions of the marital reconciliation process. Also, this study identifies how turning points in the process of marital reconciliation are similar and different between the partners in the marital dyad. A qualitative methodology was used to better understand gender similarities and differences in marital reconciliation. Interviews with six married couples, 11 participants total, were conducted for this study. This study allows for a better understanding of male and female perspectives related to potential threats to marital stability and processes that help couples resolve relationship difficulties or challenges.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Legal marriage is a central institution in the life of most heterosexual individuals (Larson & Holman, 1994). For purposes of this study, the term "marriage" was used to refer to an existing legal union between two heterosexual individuals. This term is used in this manner while acknowledging that there is a continuing public debate about the concept of marriage, its legal definition, and to whom it can be applied.

Ninety percent of all individuals marry at some point in their lives (Brubaker & Kimberly, 1993). Despite the large percentage of couples who marry, researchers estimate that between 40 and 50 percent of marriages will end in divorce (Cherlin, 1981; Schoen & Standish, 2001). Even though the divorce rates are high, people still desire to marry. A person's intent to marry is affected by such factors as marital status of parents, personal attitudes toward marriage, perception of others' attitudes toward marriage, and level of control he or she perceives over the outcome (Ajzen, 1991; Cunningham & Thornton, 2005). Waite and Gallagher (2000) suggest in their review of research that marriage tends to be good for people mentally, physically, and economically. Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton (2001) further described positive benefits associated with marriage for both men and women. However, there is considerable complexity in explicating whether marriage brings associated benefits with it and how those benefits are experienced by men and women (Wilkie, Ferree, & Ratcliff, 1998).

Bernard (1975) proposed that women and men often experience marriage and its benefits differently, suggesting that men receive greater social and psychological advantages than women generally do. This concept of the "his and hers" marriage has been validated somewhat in empirical literature on gender and the marital experience (Faulkner,

Davey, & Davey, 2005; Wilcox & Nock, 2006). Men tend to receive benefits from marriage regardless of its perceived quality, whereas women are more likely to benefit when in a satisfying marriage relationship (Hess & Soldo, 1985). Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton (2001) reviewed differential effects of marital stress by gender and noted that men's health across a variety of areas tends to show more positive effects when married than for women. Also, they suggest that negative marital experiences seem to impact women's stress levels and health more negatively than for men. Wilcox and Nock (2006) document that women are more happy in marriage when men are emotionally attentive to the relationship and there is perceived equity in distribution of household labor. These findings collectively suggest that marital satisfaction and well-being is a gendered experience, with positive benefits being more prevalent for men on average than for women.

Since marriage typically provides positive effects in a person's life, when the health of the marriage is threatened it raises concerns for the well-being of the spouses and any children who may be involved (Amato, 2000; Cummings & Davies, 2002). Waite, Browning, Doherty, Gallagher, Luo, and Stanley (2002) found that unhappily married adults who divorced or separated were no happier, on average, than unhappily married adults who stayed married. Waite et al. (2002) also found that divorce did not reduce symptoms of depression, raise self-esteem, or increase their sense of mastery. Again, however, these patterns are more complicated when gender is included as a critical variable. Researchers have found that separation and divorce generally have negative effects on the mental and physical health of both partners (Gottman, 1993; Kitson & Morgan, 1990; Marks & Lambert, 1998). Waite and Gallagher (2000) found generally that

couples who stay together tend to be healthier mentally, physically, and economically than are couples that divorce.

However, in cases of marital difficulty or unhappiness it is not accurate to suggest that all couples would be better off staying together rather than divorcing (Coontz, 1997). In relationships where abuse, addiction, or other debilitating circumstances exist, and particularly in which one spouse (often a woman) may be subject to physical or psychological harm, it is important to consider the health of the individual and divorce may be a necessary or preferred outcome. For example, women who live in abusive marital relationships tend to do better psychologically over time after leaving the relationship if they have the necessary economic and social support resources (Sander, 1985). Further, when alcohol use and problems occur with men in a marital relationship, women are more likely to show elevated rates of psychological distress, which would be a harmful circumstance that may necessitate dissolution of the relationship (Tempier, Boyer, Lambert, Mosier, & Duncan, 2006). Thus, while marital reconciliation is possible under many circumstances, women and men may experience the conditions of marriage differently and staying together is not always the optimal outcome.

There is a large amount of existing research on couple relationships that documents the processes related to the dissolution of marriage. However, there is little research on the experiences of spouses who remain together and are reconciled in their marriage despite facing the possibility of divorce. Worthington (2001) defined reconciliation as the restoration of "trust in a relationship in which trust has been damaged" (p. 157).

Reconciliation research related to marriage remains very limited, with little known about the characteristics of those who may attempt reconciliation (Wineberg, 1994). Further, it

has also been hard to estimate the level of successful reconciliations that occur in a marital context (Wineberg, 1994; 1996).

What we do know about marital reconciliation is that at least 5 million couples, or up to 10 percent of married couples, had experienced separation and reconciliation in their relationships with each other when the most recent research on this topic was reported in the early 1990s (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993; Wineberg & McCarthy, 1993).

Reconciliation can happen in all relationships, even those that seem hopeless (Holman, 2003). In Waite et al.'s research (2002), the unhappiest marriages later reported the most dramatic marital turnarounds. Reconciliation happens for various reasons: "some recognize the rewards in their relationship while others may believe the costs of divorce are too high or the available alternatives to reconciliation too unattractive" (Wineberg, 1994, p. 81).

Some couples may reconcile because they believe it is in the best interest of their children (Wineberg, 1994). Wineberg (1996) found that approximately one third of all reconciliations attempted are successful; the other two-thirds struggle with feelings of false hope because their attempts may not be successful. Waite et al. (2002) further found that successful reconciliation efforts occur according to three primary patterns that elicit change: the marital endurance ethic, the marital work ethic, and the personal happiness epic. The marital endurance ethic is characterized by spouses who literally endure or outlast their struggles. The marital work ethic occurs when the couple actively works on their problems and on changing their relationship. Finally, the personal happiness epic does not result in simply resolving the problems of the marriage, but rather requires the individuals in the relationship to find other ways to improve their own happiness.

Because marriage is an institution that brings together men and women, who often have differing opinions and perspectives, it was important to examine the gender perspectives that influence the process of marital reconciliation. Such research might involve exploring similarities and differences for men and women in the reconciliation process. While there is a reasonable amount of research looking at the gender differences in relationships and marriages, there is little research done on the gender perceptions of marital reconciliation. Bernard (1972) studied what he called "his" and "hers" marriages. This idea was based around the assumption that there are differences in the perceptions of marriage between men and women and that each actually experience the marriage differently.

Using a Phenomenological Approach to Studying Marital Reconciliation

Since the topic of marital reconciliation has been studied very little and the perspectives of individuals who have lived that experience in marriage are not widely available, a phenomenological approach to conduct the study and gather information from participants was adopted. A qualitative research process guided this study through a phenomenological framework. A phenomenological framework for qualitative research, as defined by Cresswell (1998), suggests that the meaning of a lived experience is described by individuals who have participated in the phenomenon being studied. This approach is valuable for understanding research topics that need to be explored from the beginning and through the perspectives of individuals who have lived the experience (Gilgun & Sussman, 1996).

The phenomenological approach was utilized to gain insight into the experience of men and women who have lived through the process of marital reconciliation. This

approach was suited to the purposes of this study because it “describes the meaning of the lived experience for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (Creswell, 1998, p. 51). A phenomenological framework allows assessments of how individuals undergo a particular phenomenon to be grounded in the concrete descriptions of their lived experience (Cresswell, 1998). This study sought to further understand marital reconciliation and the varied perspectives of men and women through an accurate portrayal of what the participants themselves describe (Moustakas, 1994).

Purpose of the Study

This study explored the gender similarities and differences in perceptions of marital reconciliation for husbands and wives. It also investigated the processes of marital reconciliation and how that process was similar or different across genders. Finally, it sought to identify whether the turning points in the marriage relationship that make marital reconciliation possible are the same or different between partners. This study was conducted using qualitative approaches to better understand the gender similarities and differences in marital reconciliation.

Research Questions

The object of this study was to explore the gender similarities and differences in the process of marital reconciliation. It was also to identify turning points in the couple's relationship and whether those points differ between women and men. The research questions identified for this study were:

- (1) What does marital reconciliation mean to each partner? How do men and women experience marital reconciliation differently or similarly? Are factors involved in the reconciliation process similar or different for men and women?

- (2) What does the term “turning point” mean to each partner? Have they experienced turning points important in their reconciliation process? If so, are they similar or different for men and women?
- (3) What type of resources and coping mechanisms do men and women use in the reconciliation process? Are they similar or different for men and women?
- (4) How do men and women perceive the dynamics of gender regarding their marital relationship during and after the reconciliation process?

Delimitations of the Study

This study only included heterosexual participants, meaning it did not include any relationship other than those of a man and a woman. This study was specific to legal marital relationships that have experienced instability and have considered separation or divorce at one point in time. The study of heterosexual couples in marriage allows for the examination of gender across couple relationships. This study did not include participants that did not remain married or currently report high levels of unhappiness with their marriage. The study only included participants who feel their relationship has been stable for at least 18 months to two years since reconciliation. The rationale for this criterion was that such a time period denotes evidence of continuing marital stability and also allows spouses to provide a perspective based on reflection and experience over time beyond the point of marital threat and reconciliation.

Definition of Terms

Marital Reconciliation. The process of resolving relationship challenges and stabilizing the marital relationship between two marital partners who contemplated separation or divorce.

Gender Differences. The differences that exist between members of the opposite gender, which is socially constructed.

Marital Stability. Implies that couples have been neither divorced nor separated since they got married; characteristic of the couple.

Marital Satisfaction. An individual characteristic that refers to how the individuals evaluate the quality of their marriage.

Assumptions of the Study

This study first assumes that marital reconciliation is an important dynamic in some couple relationships that actually occurs when people consider separation or divorce. The second assumption is that gender is an important social construct and can be useful as a lens for looking at relationship dynamics as perceived by men and women when looking at marriage.

Significance of the Study

The importance and worth of this study is significant. This study allows researchers to explore men and women's perspectives related to potential threats to marital stability. It also fosters increased understanding of processes that help couples resolve relationship difficulties or challenges. Another contribution for this study exists in the possibility for developing insights into the perceived contributions of men and women in the reconciliation process, as well as how gender shapes individual perspectives of marital stability and reconciliation. This study also contributes to research-based knowledge about the reconciliation process of married couples and how gender similarities and differences contribute to that process. Given that the research on this topic is limited, this

study provides an opportunity to learn and make a meaningful contribution to the literature on this subject.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the varied research literature on factors in marriage that affect marital difficulty and reconciliation. The section explores the value of a gender-informed perspective on relationships. It also provides an overview of marriage and divorce is given, as well as a look at gender perspectives in relation to people's heterosexual relationships. Finally, a brief review of programmatic efforts related to marital reconciliation is included.

Addressing Marital Reconciliation

In this study of marital reconciliation, a phenomenological approach will allow us to explore how men and women experience marital difficulty and reconciliation. As this subject has been little explored and we wish to understand it from the lens of experience that women continue to men and women themselves, we did not utilize an explicit theoretical framework to investigate the subject. Rather, consistent with the phenomenological tradition, we emphasized understanding the experiential world of marital reconciliation as it is defined and described by married spouses themselves (Hollnagel & Johnson, 1993). Further information regarding the phenomenological approach to this study is included in Chapter 3.

While using a phenomenological approach to address the topic of marital reconciliation, we do also utilize a gender-informed perspective to help us look at how gender plays a role in men and women's experiences. Some basic assumptions articulated in gender theory and practice will help to shape how we examine our findings. The first assumption is that a human experience is a gendered experience (White & Ryan, 2001). This means that people tend to be influenced by gendered expectations, which are

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

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While using a phenomenological approach to address the topic of marital reconciliation, we do plan to utilize a gender-informed perspective to help us look at how gender plays a part in these couples' experiences. Some basic assumptions articulated in gender theory and feminism will help to shape how we examine our findings. The first assumption is that a human experience is a gendered experience (White & Klein, 2002). This means that people tend to be influenced by gendered expectations, which are

structured by societal messages about what it means to be male and female. Jaggar and Rothenberg Struhl (1978) explained that we were born male and female and we learned how to be men and women. The social construction of gender and the differences between the seemingly dichotomous concepts carries with it many more discrepancies than actually exist between men and women (Enns, 2004). It is such gendered expectations that can shape how people experience events and relationships (White & Klein, 2002).

The second assumption we considered important was that gender has a large impact on how we perceive our world (White & Klein, 2002). "Gender is used as a basic class distinction in all societies" (White and Klein, 2002, p. 182). A person who identifies as a male will experience things differently than a person who identifies as a female. Not only is gender used as a class distinction, but also as an organizational tool to privilege one group while suppressing another (White & Klein, 2002). There are societal expectations and roles that are placed on each gender and these roles are subject to shift given the current state of our society (Jaggar & Rothenberg Struhl, 1978). Gender impacts the decisions people make, the pressures they feel, and the experiences they have. It also helps partners in marriage to organize their relationship and assign responsibilities accordingly. In the specific case of marriage and divorce, research shows that in the process of divorce former partners begin to see the story of their relationship through their own gendered experiences (Hopper, 2001).

A final assumption that we worked from was that we value all voices and experiences as important and valid. Throughout history there have been many groups of people whose voices went unheard. In particular, women have gone unheard throughout the majority of our history. Hopper (2001) suggested that gender may play an influential role

in the disadvantage women often experience in divorce situations in terms of money and power and the fact that they must fight hard for an equitable outcome. A gender-informed perspective allows us to acknowledge the injustice of dismissing certain voices and perspectives and proceed with a commitment to valuing the voices of both women and men regarding their family experiences. Such a perspective thus provides us with a lens for making such assumptions visible and helps us to give a voice to each partner and learn how he or she has experienced their marriage and relationship (Enns, 2004).

Marriage and Divorce

Marriage is often a central and primary relationship in a person's life (Larson & Holman, 1994), so it is not surprising that a high percentage of all individuals marry (Brubaker & Kimberly, 1993). A variety of studies tend to show that people who are married are happier and healthier on average than others (Gottman, 1994; Kelly & Conley, 1987; Orbuch & Custer, 1995; White, 1994). Marriage can provide both men and women with a sense of meaning in their lives and an obligation to others, decreasing the rate of risky behaviors (Waite, 2003). Waite also suggested that it is less expensive to be married than it is to be single, and therefore marriage may provide an economic benefit as well.

Among those who get married, only about half of the marriages will last while the other half are somewhat likely to end in divorce (Cherlin, 1981; Schoen & Standish, 2001). Typically, separation is a common precursor to divorce. When couples separate they have a 25 percent chance of their marriage lasting; 75 percent of all separations end in divorce (Bloom, Hodges, Caldwell, Systra, & Cendrone, 1977). There are two pivotal points in which divorce appears most likely to happen in the life span of a marriage: within the first five years after the wedding and approximately 16 years after the wedding (Gottman &

Driver, 2005). Early cross-sectional studies of marriage suggest that marital satisfaction steadily declines over time (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Dentler & Pineo, 1960; Pineo, 1961, 1969). With men's satisfaction higher than women's, later research has shown that marital satisfaction reaches low points after the birth of the first child and when children are adolescents, and reaches high points at the beginning of the marriage and when the children leave the home (Anderson, Russell & Schumm, 1983; Burr, 1970; Cowan & Pape-Cowan, 1988).

Despite the prevalence of divorce, there are those couples who remain together and work through difficulties. Two out of three unhappily married adults at one point in time who avoided divorce or separation noted that they were happily married five years later (Waite, Browning, Doherty, Gallagher, Luo, & Stanley, 2002). Nearly half of those who divorce indicate that they wish they had tried harder with their ex-partner to make their marriage work (Waite et al., 2002). If marital reconciliation is possible, what tactics do these surviving couples use to outlast unhappiness? There is an accumulation of research that has been conducted on what factors cause divorce and what factors lead to a satisfied marriage. Unfortunately, there have been few studies examining what it takes to come back from unhappiness in a relationship, avoid divorce and separation, and create a happy marriage (Arcus, 1992; Schvaneveldt & Young, 1992; Waite et al., 2002). A variety of studies provide information on characteristics that contribute to a positive marriage and also on patterns that lead toward divorce.

Factors Contributing to Marital Well-Being

Since it is not uncommon for couples to experience marital difficulty, there is value in understanding the factors that contribute to marital well-being and may help couples to

effectively work through such difficulties. Such factors may prove to be important for couples as building blocks in the reconciliation process. Thus, factors contributing to marital well-being are reviewed here since the study will ask individuals about what factors contributed to their ability to resolve marital concerns.

Researchers have found commitment in marriage to be more than just simply a side effect of marriage (Waite et al., 2002). People who value marriage and are committed to its long-term success find their marriages to be happier and tend to have a lower divorce rate (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Couples with commitment have a greater sense of devotion to both the relationship and each other (Waite et al., 2002). For example, one longitudinal study found that when a couple has a more accepting attitude of divorce, their marriage is more likely to deteriorate in quality (Amato & Rogers, 1999).

Many researchers have their own ideas and theories as to what leads to a successful and satisfying marriage. There has been an abundance of research on characteristics that contribute to a positive or lasting marriage relationship. Bentler and Newcomb (1978) found that couples who remained married were similar in age, interest in art, and attractiveness, thus suggesting that couple similarity is an important factor. Main and Oliver (1988) found that couples who have similar personality characteristics show better marital adjustment than do couples that have complementary characteristics. Fenell (1993) identified the 10 most important characteristics in fostering a long-term successful marriage, in order from *most* to *least* important: (1) Lifetime commitment to marriage; (2) Loyalty to spouse; (3) Strong moral values; (4) Respect for spouse as a friend; (5) Commitment to sexual fidelity; (6) Desire to be a good parent; (7) Faith in God and spiritual commitment; (8) Desire to please and support spouse; (9) Good companion to

spouse; (10) Willingness to forgive and be forgiven. Collins and Coltrane (1991) reported that according to a public opinion poll the most important aspects to marriage were faithfulness (93%), understanding (86%), a good sex life (75%), children (59%), common interests (52%), sharing household chores (43%), having enough money (41%), and sharing similar backgrounds (25%).

Other researchers have studied couples at different periods of marriage to find characteristics that contribute to a lasting relationship. Kurdek (1991) studied couples at the beginning of their marriage and after one year, seeking to discover what differentiated couples that stayed together versus those that did not. Kurdek (1991) identified three personality characteristics that predicted marital satisfaction: (1) motives to be in the relationship; (2) satisfaction with social support; and (3) psychological distress. Lauer, Lauer and Kerr (1990) studied couples that had been married for at least 45 years. The couples that participated in the study identified these elements as important factors in a marriage: (1) they were married to someone they liked; (2) they had a commitment to the person as well as to the marriage; (3) they had a sense of humor; and (4) they were able to reach agreement. Robinson and Blanton (1993) also studied couples that had been married for 40 years or more and they identified intimacy, commitment, communication, congruence, and shared religious orientation as important factors in a marriage.

Gottman (1993) found evidence of three types of stable couples: volatile, validating, and conflict-avoidant. The volatile couples were most animated in their emotional expressiveness, meaning that their fights are heated and passionate, and both partners are very involved in the argument (Gottman, 1993; 1994). They give significance to their own individuality and feel marriage should strengthen and challenge their uniqueness (Gottman,

1993). During arguments they express both negative and positive emotions, although for every negative there are typically five positive behaviors, which keeps these couples thriving (Gottman, 1993). Validating couples are intermediate in their level of expressiveness. They "talk out" their problems (Gottman, 1993). These couples are very good about validating the other spouse's feelings and experiences and tend to emphasize "we" over "me" or "I" (Gottman, 1993). They are also skilled at compromise and rarely, if ever, raise their voices during conflict (Gottman, 1993). Conflict-avoidant couples are low on their levels of expressiveness (Gottman, 1993). They minimize their problems and thus completely avoid conflict (Gottman, 1993). When ignoring their differences is not possible, they often agree to disagree (Gottman, 1993).

While researchers have studied characteristics that couples possess that contribute to a satisfied marriage, there is also research on the processes that need to be implemented in the relationship for the marriage to be successful. Mackey and O'Brien (1995) recognized five processes that need to be present to promote marital satisfaction: (1) containment of conflict; (2) mutuality in decision making; (3) quality of communication; (4) sexual and psychological intimacy; and (5) relational values of trust, respect, empathetic understanding, and equity.

Another aspect of relationships that researchers have found to be important to marital satisfaction is forgiveness. Forgiveness has been found to lead to greater emotional and relational health (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). In one study, forgiveness was found to be significantly related to marital satisfaction and forgiveness predicted overall behavior toward the partner that was independent of marital satisfaction (Fincham, 2000). Fenell (1993) found couples of long-term first marriages acknowledged that the ability to seek and

grant forgiveness is one of the most important factors contributing to marital longevity and satisfaction. The more that partners are able to forgive one another, there will tend to be more positive marital suppositions, more feelings of equal balance of power in the marriage, and a greater likelihood of having close and well-adjusted marital relations (Gordon & Baucom, 1998).

Factors Leading Toward Divorce

Just as there are characteristics that insure a satisfied marriage, there are characteristics that also tend to be predictors of divorce as well. Some researchers have identified unrealistic expectations that spouses hold about themselves, others, and the relationship itself that can lead to marital distress (Ellis, 1986; Ellis, Sichel, Yeager, DiMattia, & DiGuiseppe, 1989). Ellis et al. (1989) identified irrational beliefs in relationships that can cause marital dysfunction: (1) demanding nature; (2) neediness; (3) intolerance; (4) awfulizing; and (5) damning.

Buehlman, Gottman, and Katz (1992) found evidence that a couple's view of their history significantly predicted divorce. Therefore, if a couple was to have had a past typified by frequent conflicts and other negative behaviors, the couple is more likely to get divorced if they focus on negative aspects of their history together. This case illustrates a situation in which the past and how it is perceived impacts the future of the relationship. It is interesting to see how people begin to story their relationship after it has ended also. Hopper (2001) found that since people do not plan on getting divorced when they get married, they have a hard time explaining why their marriage ended. He suggested that people have to undo the meaning that they have placed on marriage. People who initiate the divorce come to see their marriage as never being a real marriage in the first place;

therefore there is nothing there to save (Hopper, 2001). People who are on the opposite end of divorce, the spouses who do not initiate divorce, often come to believe their partners deceived them and feel that their entire relationship was built on lies (Hopper, 2001). Hopper (2001) found that people gave different meanings to what marriage means after a divorce. He found that some preferred to think of divorce as an "undoing" of marriage. They did not consider it a transition or a change of relationship, but more of a retroactive nullification of what once was. Social views of marriage are that this relationship is forever and it is sacred, and even after facing divorce people still hold on to this view of what marriage is (Hopper, 2001). This means that in order to hold on to one's beliefs about marriage, those who divorce often must "redefine the nature of their marriages so as to resolve the contradictions posed by those marriages ending" (Hopper, 2001, p. 435).

Gottman (1994) conducted extensive research on marriage and divorce relationship processes and patterns that lead to relationship breakdown. In brief, Gottman (1994) has identified relationship factors termed "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" that are predictors of divorce. The four horsemen include: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling (Gottman, 1994). When these four horsemen are present and used habitually in a relationship, there is a significantly greater likelihood that the relationship will end (Gottman, 1994). Criticism is used frequently in relationships, but it is not parallel in meaning to complaining. Criticism is more global and includes character attacks (Gottman, 1994). Complaints are different than criticism which uses global complaints such as "you always" or "you never" or a laundry list of complaints (Gottman, 1994). Criticism focuses on the character of a person rather than their behavior. Contempt is the most destructive pattern that affects relationships, as a result of conveying messages of disgust and

disrespect between spouses (Gottman, 1994). Contempt sends a message of disdain and superiority. Contempt can be represented in comments that include sarcasm, mockery, insults, eye rolls, scowls, or hostile humor to belittle the partner (Gottman, 1994). Contempt hinders conciliatory attempts by the other spouse and may severely escalate negativity on both sides (Gottman, 1994). Defensiveness is a natural way to protect oneself, but it can lead to spousal blaming (Gottman, 1994). Frequently, defensiveness takes a childish tone, with both partners trying to avoid attack and personal responsibility (Gottman, 1994). Lastly, stonewalling happens after many arguments and one spouse becomes overwhelmed and shuts down (Gottman, 1994). This response gives the other partner the message that they do not want to talk about it anymore and that they are no longer listening (Gottman, 1994). There are clear gender differences in these interactions, with the male normally being the person who stonewalls and the female being more demanding (Gottman, 1994). With all Four Horsemen present in a relationship, researchers are able to predict divorce with 94 percent accuracy (Gottman, 1994).

Marital Reconciliation

Very little research has been conducted on those couples who encounter difficulty and do not choose to divorce, but work through their problems and better their marriage. This process of avoiding divorce and working towards a happy marriage is called marital reconciliation. Waite et al. (2002) conducted a small focus group study with such individuals and identified three primary narratives in which spouses attributed meaning to their marriages getting happier: (1) the marital endurance ethic; (2) the marital work ethic; and (3) the personal happiness epic. The marital work ethic was characterized by spouses "actively working to solve problems, change behavior, or improve communication" (Waite

et al., 2002, p. 24). After the problem was solved the marriage got happier. Strategies that spouses gave to improve the problem were spending more time together, getting advice from relatives or counseling, or threatening divorce and consulting divorce lawyers (Waite et al.). In contrast, the marital endurance ethic did not involve working on the marriage problems at all, but rather enduring them. Spouses did not report that they worked on their problems; they just stubbornly outlasted them (Waite et al., 2002). They reported that over time the problems just got easier, which in turn, made the marriage happier (Waite et al., 2002). Finally, for those who cited the personal happiness ethic, they also did not describe working on their marriage problems. Instead, these spouses reportedly worked on finding ways to increase their own level of happiness and build a good quality life despite the marital difficulties (Waite et al., 2002).

Gender Differences in Relationships

While there is little research on marital reconciliation, there is even less research on the gender differences that are involved in the reconciliation process. There is, however, a substantive amount of research addressing the gender differences in relationships and marriage. Bernard (1972) observed that marriage often encompassed two diverse views of the marital relationship: "his" and "hers." According to Bernard (1972), men and women often differ in their subjective experiences of marriage, which tends to reflect the gendered perceptions and experiences that differ between a man and a woman. Bernard's (1972) work suggests that partners' expectations about their future are important in understanding the course of their relationship, and whether they share similar expectations is important to whether or not they are working towards a common goal. If the partners have different

goals they may have never formed an identity as a couple, or have already begun to detach from one another (Berger & Kellner, 1964).

When we think of gender differences we may think of characteristics and actions that support the social norms of what we perceive to be male or female. There have been many differences between men and women addressed in research that regard their interactions in a couple context. Men tend to value physical attractiveness and women are more likely to value a mate who can provide for a family (Schmitt, 2002). Women have been found to initiate conflict discussions more often than men (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). Women also tend to feel more comfortable handling conflict in their relationships than their male counterparts (Gottman, 1994). Women are more likely to be attuned to the emotional quality of the marriage and more sensitive to the events that occur in the relationship (Johnson, 1997).

When it comes to the mental and physical benefits of being married, men benefit regardless of the marital quality, whereas women only benefit when the marriage is satisfying (Hess & Soldo, 1985). Hochschild (1989) found that wives' role overload and working the "second shift" lead to decreased marital satisfaction and an increase in wives' marital conflict. Husbands' marital satisfaction tends to decrease with wives' labor force participation (Booth, Johnson, White, Edwards, 1985). However, Lye and Biblarz (1993) found that marital satisfaction is greatly reduced when husbands and wives do not agree on female workforce participation. Wives' marital satisfaction is increased when they feel that they have positive social support from their husbands (Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994; Julien & Markman, 1991). The question of how gender may affect couples during the reconciliation process remains a topic to be explored through further research.

Approaches to Strengthening Troubled Marriages

One of the questions asked of participants in this study is what resources or sources of support were used by them in the marital reconciliation process. An awareness of how such resources compare to existing resources and programs for couples in distress is important as a foundation for understanding their responses.

There are a variety of approaches to helping couples deal with relationship or marriage concerns and issues. The primary approaches tend to be assessment for compatibility (e.g., relationship evaluations – FOCCUS, RELATE, etc.), relationship and marital education (e.g., PREP, PREPARE, ENRICH, etc.), and therapeutic intervention (e.g., Emotion-focused couple therapy, narrative, Solution-focused brief therapy). In the specific area of marital difficulty and reconciliation, we furnish a brief summary of known existing approaches, emphasizing educational and therapeutic approaches.

Giblin, Sprenkle, and Sheehan (1985) conducted the most comprehensive meta-analysis of marriage enrichment, analyzing 85 studies, which included more than 15 marital enrichment programs. This analysis revealed a moderate effect size (.419) across marriage enrichment programs, suggesting the programs tend to provide a consistent and positive benefit to participants. A more recent review examined 12 controlled trials of programs, with follow-up assessments of at least six months (Halford, Markman, Stanley, & Kline, 2003). The results indicated that marital enrichment programs lead to an improvement in communication skills and relationship satisfaction (Halford et al., 2003). Halford et al. (2003) proposed seven principles to make marital enrichment programs successful: assessing the risk profile of couples, encouraging high-risk couples to attend relationship education, assessing relationship aggression, offering marital education at

change points, promoting early presentation of relationship problems, matching content to couples with special needs, and enhancing accessibility of evidence-based marital education programs.

Educational programs for couples are now adapting to become more specific to address relationship needs in particular situations (i.e., culture, context specific, etc.). Such program adaptations can include adjustments for couples facing separation or divorce. Examples of specific educational programs designed to assist couples in troubled marriages are Third Option, Retrouvaille, and Marriage Mentoring. Third Option is an educational support group intended to build more enriched marriages and mend broken ones. Retrouvaille is a weekend retreat program that typically occurs in a faith-based setting and is designed to provide the tools to help couples put their marriage in order again. The main emphasis of the program is on communication in marriage between husband and wife. Marriage Mentoring is an approach that pairs a mentor couple with another couple to assist them in their relationship. This program operates more as a partnership than a structured program with a specific agenda.

Therapy is another option for couples facing difficulties in their relationship. Marriage and Family Therapists (MFT) are specifically trained to work with families and couples facing struggles. There are very few theories that are used in this field that are tailored specifically to couples. Two approaches that have been used most widely with couples are: Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT) and Brief Solution Focused Therapy (BSFT). EFT is the only theory that was designed to be used with couples (Johnson, 2004). BSFT has been tailored to be used with couples (Zimmerman, Prest, & Wetzel, 1997).

EFT draws attention to the importance of emotion and emotional communication in intimate partner relationships (Johnson, 2004). One of the basic principles of EFT is that intimacy is an emotional bond that provides a secure base and a source of comfort, care, and protection (Johnson, 1996). Johnson (1996) also suggests that creating connection requires changing our pattern of how we deal with each other's pains and joys by engaging and understanding, rather than distancing and attacking.

BSFT looks toward constructing solutions rather than solving the problems (de Shazer, 1982; 1985; 1988). Also, Solution-Focused therapy assumes that there are parts of the solutions that already exist in the clients' lives and just need to be highlighted (Weiner-Davis, de Shazer, & Gingerich, 1987). Couples identify exceptions to the problem that they are facing and try to live out more of those exceptions (Weiner-Davis et al., 1987). BSFT is meant to be finished in six sessions (de Shazer, 1982).

These approaches to working with couples in difficult circumstances exist to help those who seek to repair relationships in trouble. However, little research has been done with couples who have successfully addressed such difficulties and found stability in their marriages. Marital reconciliation occurs but little examination of this important relationship pattern has taken place. This study sought to explore the patterns of marital reconciliation and how men and women are both similar and different in their experiences related to this subject.

CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The purpose of this study focused on understanding how married heterosexual participants experience and overcome the threat of separation or divorce in their marital relationship, and how that experience varied by gender. The study utilized a phenomenological qualitative methodology to gather participants' experiences of the process of marital reconciliation. This chapter outlines the qualitative design of the study, methods used in interviewing study participants, and the process used for analysis of the material collected during the research process.

Methodology

For this study a phenomenological qualitative research approach was chosen. Through in-depth interviews both partners of a married relationship expressed in detail their experience of how they each perceived the threat of separation or divorce, what turning points they each identify, and how they were able to reach the point of reconciliation. Using a qualitative research methodology was useful in allowing flexible responses to structured open-ended questions in the interviews (Brotherson, 2000). Further, a phenomenological approach focused on allowing spouses to define and describe marital reconciliation and related issues from within their own perspective. Individual spouses were given time and space to openly reflect on feelings and thoughts raised by their experience of facing the threat of their marriage ending and how they got through it with their partner. Since marital reconciliation is a relatively new topic of investigation, a qualitative research process fit well with using a phenomenological approach that allows individuals to provide detailed descriptions of their experiential lives. Also, a qualitative approach was useful in responding to the assumption that gender shapes individual

experiences and capturing the voices of individual spouses provided insight into this dynamic process.

Phenomenology pays attention to the manner in which people frame and interpret their life experiences (Cresswell, 1998). For example, phenomenology has been described as an “interpretive exercise focused on everyday subjective meaning and experience,” with the goal of explaining “how objects and experience are meaningfully constituted and communicated in the world of everyday life” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1998, p. 140). The descriptions of life shared by people about their experiences tend to highlight the themes and issues of importance to them regarding such experiences. A phenomenological approach tries to both capture the substance of an experience and express the meaning that it carries for them as an individual. For individuals who have undergone selected family experiences (i.e., marital reconciliation), sharing their life experience can provide others with an opportunity to understand how they have passed through this particular experience. Indeed, certain individuals find value and personal meaning in sharing their experience because they feel it might be helpful to others (White & Epston, 1990). Gathering individual perspectives through a qualitative research process facilitated the opportunity for understanding their experiences through a systematic process of qualitative analysis.

Gender is a key component in the shaping and understanding of personal experiences (White & Klein, 2002). Using a gender-informed view allowed us to take into account this crucial piece of people’s experiences in the context of family, as well as other areas of life. It further allowed us to acknowledge that all experiences are gendered experiences, and that valuing that component of this phenomenon provided greater insights and understanding. Such a view also emphasized the importance of listening to the voice of

each person's experience and valuing what is shared. This allows people to share their own experience in their own words. By giving each spouse the opportunity to share, we were in a way acknowledging the importance of their experience (Enns, 2004). Utilizing a qualitative research approach through listening and gathering people's experiences through individual interviews facilitated the accomplishment of key objectives for this study.

Research Design

Qualitative in-depth personal interviews were the particular method utilized to gather information in this research study. These interviews focused on collecting participants' individual personal accounts about their relationship experiences and perceptions on overcoming the threat of separation or divorce. Individual accounts were examined to provide a broad descriptive context for understanding such patterns as marital distress and interaction. Qualitative interviews further provided an effective format for spouses to reveal their personal experiences. As this topic has been the subject of limited research, the research design was exploratory and intended to investigate patterns that can lead to better comprehension of marital reconciliation and couple relationships.

In preparation for the study, there had been some discussion as to whether the study interviews should be conducted individually or with couples. It was decided that both partners in the marital relationship would be interviewed separately, in order to ensure safety and comfort in disclosing personal experiences and opinions. Given the power differentials that exist in heterosexual relationships, we considered that if spouses are interviewed separately they would share their experiences without having to feel censored or guarded in their responses. Interviewing spouses individually ensured that there was less potential for the responses to be skewed or biased due to fear of a partner's reaction.

Finally, it seems more likely that gender differences in expression of how marital reconciliation had been experienced would emerge if spouses are interviewed separately rather than jointly.

Participant Selection

This study targeted a sample of 10-12 couples to be selected for this study and recruitment was intended to move towards this goal, or until the researchers felt saturation was reached. Recruitment efforts were intensive, yet challenging and resulted in 11 participants (six couples) to fill the needs of this study. This sample seemed to ensure some measure of variation across participants and a cross section of experiences to compare in the analysis process. There were participants that expressed interest in the study and after they were given the study information and spoke with their partner, chose to not participate stating that it would bring up too many sensitive topics that they did not want to rehash.

Selection to participate in the study was based on specific criteria. The criteria for inclusion in the study were that: (a) both spouses have had to experience the threat of divorce or separation in the marital relationship; (b) the participant had felt stable in their marriage for 18 months to two years beyond the period of threat regarding separation or divorce; (c) the participant was heterosexual; and (d) the participant had been married a minimum of three years total. The criterion of being married at least three years provided a time frame for an enduring relationship to have developed between the spouses, as well as a history of lived experience to reference their relationship past and future. The criterion of being 18 months to 2 years beyond the threat was to allow for a period of healing and stability to have occurred in the reconciliation process, as well as time for a sense of perspective to be gained by the participants.

Participants were recruited through a variety of avenues. Participation in the study took place through self-referrals or referrals from other contacts aware of the study. Information about the study was delivered to family law attorneys, faith communities, local therapists and counselors, a series of ads in local newspapers, Craigslist, and Iowa State Extension. These community resources seemed most likely to have had contact with couples who may have experienced marital reconciliation and could pass the study information along to them. Significant recruitment efforts took place for a year and a half and a variety of strategies were employed to ensure the successful recruitment of study participants.

Data Collection

The process of gathering information from study participants was accomplished through two semi-structured interviews for each couple, one with each partner. Once initial contact has been made with a couple, the researcher(s) contacted potential participants by phone to visit with them about participating in the study. This contact furnished an opportunity to confirm the interest in learning more about the study, explain the study procedures, and provided assurance of the criteria for participating in this study. The researcher provided an overview of the study's purpose and importance for participants. For those individuals who express further interest, a packet of study information was mailed to them that contained several explanatory documents and forms (see Appendix A).

The researcher then reviewed the informed consent document that was included in the packet of materials. The researcher explained that this document explained the study procedures and issues regarding potential discomforts, benefits, confidentiality, and voluntary participation (see Appendix B) (Leedy & Omrod, 2001; Seidman, 1998). If

participants agreed to the conditions outlined on the informed consent document, they were asked to sign the form and return it to the researcher during the interview. If they did not agree to the terms of the informed consent, the researcher provided answers to any concerns or questions that the participants had. Informed consent was required by the university Institutional Review Board (IRB) and was necessary in complying with ethical research guidelines.

The next form contained in the packet was an additional document concerning demographic information (see Appendix C). The participants were asked to complete this demographic form and bring it to the initial interview. The information included the couples' names, address, phone number, ages, number of children, length of marriage, indication of any previous marriages, ages when the couple married, levels of education, and a short description of the experience regarding how the couple overcame the threat of separation or divorce. This information sheet was followed up on at the beginning of the interview and questions were asked to ensure that answers given were complete and accurate (see Appendix D).

The interviewer had a set of prepared research questions that was asked of the participant during the interview (see Appendix E). This was not sent with the study information packet in order to prevent any discussion that may occur about the study between the partners. We wanted to ensure that participants' answers were not biased or influenced by sharing of information with their partner.

Once the potential participants had received the study information, they were contacted again and asked if they would like to participate in the study. If the partners agreed, a time was set up for the interview. If they did not agree, the researcher asked the

participants if they have any questions or concerns regarding any of the information that was reviewed. If they did have questions, the researcher answered the questions and provided any needed information. The participants were then be asked again if they would like to participate, and if they agreed a time will be set up for the interview. If they did not wish to participate, they were thanked for their time.

Interviews were conducted by one researcher, either male, or female. This was to make certain that the gender of the interviewer has as little impact as possible on the interviewing process. Questions were asked systematically by interviewers in each interview, although flexibility to ask probe or follow-up questions was maintained.

Interviews were tape-recorded on audio tapes. The interview process was explained so that participants understood that it was desirable to capture interview information on tape for later analysis, and relevant information was likely to be lost if the interview was not tape-recorded. If participants did not feel comfortable or did not agree to be taped they were not included in the study. The researchers were able to stay engaged and focused if she or he were able to have full access to their data at a later point in time, due to tape-recording (Seidman, 1998).

The interviews were conducted in the participants' place of residence at their convenience. If the participants did not wish to do it at their residence, an alternate place was decided on based on the participants' choice and comfort. The researcher worked with participants to determine the best location for the interview to take place (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001).

Interviews with the couples ranged from one to two hours. An interview schedule was used to guide the couple interview process. The interview process focused on

collecting information regarding the couples' experiences related to the phenomenon of marital reconciliation. Probe and follow-up questions were asked to gain further detail and information regarding their experiences (Seidman, 1998). Questions that seemed insufficiently clear to participants were clarified. Also, researchers were careful to avoid leading questions so as not to unduly influence couples in their responses. Participants were asked to share their experiences and insights related to the process of marital reconciliation.

Ethical considerations were also followed in the process of conducting interviews and gathering study information. So that information might be kept confidential, as it is prepared, each couple was assigned a study code and identifying information was altered as necessary. Materials gathered in the data collection process were kept in a locked filing cabinet with access limited only to those involved with the study. These steps assisted in securing the information and treating it in a careful and ethical manner.

Trustworthiness of Data

In qualitative research, efforts to ensure the accuracy and credibility of data gathered are summarized by the concept of trustworthiness (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The trustworthiness of data consists of five constructs: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and the role of the researcher. The paragraphs that follow briefly explain how these constructs will be addressed in this study.

Credibility

Credibility can be compared to internal validity, in that it refers to how well the researchers' observations and measurements are accurate descriptions of a particular reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). This study designed the research interviews to include probing questions to ensure the intent of the experience and the participants' meaning will be

clearly conveyed. Many of the research questions had already been pilot tested with the target population in previous research. Also, study interviews were tape-recorded and precise transcriptions were created to allow for credibility of the data obtained in the research process.

Transferability

Transferability is parallel to external validity, in the sense that enough information is provided about the participants, data collection processes, and results so the reader can conclude to what extent the results can be generalized to other contexts or populations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, transferability was addressed by providing participant descriptions in the findings section, and further by providing specific quotations from participant interviews, which highlight directly the findings being discussed. This process allows readers to determine for themselves whether the findings can be applied to other contexts on the basis of transferability.

Dependability

Dependability is analogous to the concept of reliability in quantitative research, which relates to whether findings can be replicated in successive studies over time. It is unlikely for data to have reliability without possessing validity; therefore dependability of findings and credibility of data are also closely linked (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure that dependability is reached, my advisor and I coded each interview individually and then came together to create a cohesive analysis. Further, the study sought to interview a sufficient number of couples that saturation in study findings was achieved.

Confirmability

Confirmability is similar to objectivity in that it assesses the degree to which the findings are upheld by the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To create an awareness of factors influencing the researchers' thinking, each worked to be reflexive and keep a brief research diary that allowed for entries that reflect thought processes while analyzing the data. Also, the coding for each interview was discussed so that the researchers could reach agreement and converse about perspectives or biases that may influence the analysis process.

Role of the Researcher

In order to be effective in conducting a qualitative study, the researcher needed to be prepared in understanding the research process and the subject to be studied. To be familiar with qualitative research processes, I had taken coursework that included some information on qualitative research and read extensively, as requested by my advisor, on qualitative research. I also have significant experience working with individuals and couples regarding family issues through my graduate program in Couple and Family Therapy and now my work as a Family Support Worker. This background has helped me to be familiar with emotional dynamics in visiting with people about personal issues, as well as building a rapport with individuals in an interview setting. Finally, I had read extensively on the subject of couple relationships and marital reconciliation to be more informed about themes that emerged in this research.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed after being conducted and then were prepared for analysis. To ensure accuracy of the initial transcription, the interviews were transcribed and then listened to again by both researchers and compared with the transcript. The initial step

in the analysis process included a careful reading of each transcript a couple of times to become familiar with the interviews and their content. This step assisted in being able to highlight useful and relevant information (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). The analysis process consisted of a systematic exploration for themes and patterns that existed within the couple interviews in order to better understand marital reconciliation (Seidman, 1998). Both researchers conducted an analysis of each interview and then jointly discussed their analysis to check each other's interpretations and construct a set of findings that was conclusive.

The formal analysis of the information began with a close assessment of the data. This type of analysis involved initial coding of the interview transcripts with descriptive codes which allowed for the future formation of categories, which suggested potential relationships existing in the data (Shank, 2002). The next step was to identify common issues and themes through open coding (Seidman, 1998). Data was broken down into smaller parts, which was then examined, and compared for similarities and differences (Shank, 2002). The researcher marked interesting excerpts within a transcript and utilized descriptive codes that allowed common themes to emerge or be highlighted. These excerpts were labeled with the category name that the material seemed to fit (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001; Seidman, 1998). Categories included topics such as past and present feelings of the relationship, sources of conflict, time periods when the conflict was especially prevalent, coping strategies, turning points, and sources of support and resources.

Once initial category topics had been identified and labeled, the next step in the analysis process was axial coding. This process involved marking sub-categories or smaller common themes within the larger topical categories (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001; Seidman,

1998; Shank, 2002). These sub-categories included smaller topics or patterns within each category relevant to the main category. This type of coding refined assessment of the data and illustrated connections between a category and its sub-categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Once these coding processes had been conducted for each individual interview transcript, the materials was read and coded once again with a sensitivity to gendered perceptions or experiences. The material that had already been coded into a set of categories was highlighted with an emphasis on whether the material indicated differences or similarities or unique aspects by gender.

After this step in the coding process, a final step took place in which the categories which had been created within singular interviews was compared across interviews so that a broad set of categories and sub-categories could be identified. This enabled the process of exploring some possible descriptions of the experience of the threat of separation and divorce from perspectives of both men and women (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001).

Summary

In order to get a better understanding of how couples overcome the threat of separation or divorce, a qualitative research process was implemented to gather information regarding marital reconciliation. Personal narratives were used to discover patterns and themes of distress that exist within a marital relationship. These narratives provided researchers with an in-depth look at the experiences of a couple that underwent turmoil.

Eleven participants were obtained for this study through a variety of strategies, and in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted to gather information about the participants' experiences and insights related to the process of marital reconciliation. The in-depth

interviews utilized a schedule of questions with the option for probe and follow-up questions. Participants were asked about their experiences with the threat of separation or divorce and the gender differences that exist in the perceptions of marital reconciliation.

Data analysis involved the identification of common issues and themes. The goal of this process was to further explore the process of marital reconciliation and possible gender influences on perceptions of that process. Such an effort yielded further understanding and provided insights that will benefit efforts to strengthen the relationships of couples within marriage.

CHAPTER 4. PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to observe and analyze the construct of marital reconciliation, its related processes, and the potential gender differences in the individual spousal perceptions of the experience. Research on marriage and what makes it successful or not is quite prevalent in the research literature; however, there is limited available research on the experiences of couples who navigate through their problems and the mechanisms they use to regain marital stability and satisfaction when it has been significantly threatened. Also, little research has been done on how the process of stabilizing a marriage is perceived by men and women and how gendered perceptions may play a role in the reconciliation process.

This study centered around the narrative accounts of individual married partners and their path through the reconciliation process. Also, the analysis process was conducted with a focus on sensitivity to how gender may have shaped each individual's experience. The study interviews document the challenges faced within the marital relationship by couples and how individual spouses navigated through them. This chapter first provides an overview of the marital partners that were interviewed, their backgrounds and a brief history of their marital challenges. The chapter then notes and describes key themes that were discovered throughout the interviews in the analysis process. The findings highlight the struggles that individual spouses perceived in their relationships, elements in the marital reconciliation process, and the similarities and differences that emerged in the perceptions of men versus women.

Overview of Study Participants

The participants in this study included either one or both partners in a marriage that had faced the threat of separation or divorce and the spouses reconciled and live in a current stable marital partnership. All partners were interviewed and shared their marital struggles and the elements that they found helpful in putting their marriage back together. There were eleven separate interviews. Interviews were conducted between January 2010 and June 2011. All but one participant was of Caucasian decent; one man was of Latino origin. Participants ranged widely between the ages of 25 and 77. Their education levels varied from high school diploma to advanced graduate degree. The number of children present in these couple's marriages ranged from zero to 10. All participants were given pseudonyms and I.D. codes to be used in sharing information associated with the study. Male participants were given a code of "M" and a number from one through six. Female participants were given a code of "W" and a corresponding number to their partner from one through six. When a quote is referenced from one of the study participants, the participant's I.D. code and a dash followed by the page number (of their interview transcript) is used to help identify the source of the quotation (i.e., W1-23). Participants are also referred to using pseudonyms throughout this paper.

All participants who were interviewed for this study came from differing family backgrounds, providing a varied and rich context for their descriptions of experiences with marital reconciliation. Each interview began with the question, "Can you tell me a about the history of your relationship and your life currently to put this conversation into context?" This question was generally interpreted in a similar way, but some participants chose to give a more elaborate history than others. Women tended to give a more full and

rich picture of their relationship history than men did, providing more details regarding the things that led up to the marital crisis point, rather than just describing threats to the marriage itself. Answers to this question furnished meaningful background context and provided the groundwork for the rest of the interview. A brief contextual description of each participant in the study is included below. Although members of a couple were interviewed separately, I will be combining their contextual background described below for purposes of ease and clarity.

Couple M-1 and W-1

Matt (M1) and Debbie (W1) were high school sweethearts and grew up together. Matt (M1) grew up in a loving home and at the time of the study interview his parents had been married for 60 years, so in Matt's (M1) eyes divorce was never an option. Debbie (W1) came from a family of divorce and so her perceptions of divorce are much different from Matt's (M1). They got married young and waited a while to have children after going through a bout of infertility.

After they got married they went through some hard times surrounding different life contexts they were experiencing. Matt (M1) was still in college and had different priorities than Debbie (W1) who worked full time. Their schedules were opposite which limited time with each other and caused tension in their relationship. Later in life, after they had two children, more problems surfaced surrounding finances. Matt (M1) was working a strenuous job and was in charge of their family's finances. He had a hard time making ends meet and ended up with a large amount of debt because of it, unbeknownst to Debbie (W1). Debbie (W1) was feeling overloaded with work and taking care of the house and kids and was also unaware of the financial crisis they were in at the time. She felt betrayed that Matt

(M1) did not inform her about this challenge before or while it was happening. This issue brought up feelings of distrust in Debbie (W1) and also further enhanced her feelings of being unappreciated.

Couple M-2 and W-2

Ryan (M2) and Mary (W2) had been married for three years at the time of the interview. Mary's (W2) parents were still married at the time of this interview and she indicated that she felt very loved and supported growing up. Ryan (M2) came from a family of divorce and contention. He felt as though his family members were always trying to create a problem, which led to his own feelings of jealousy and anxiety. Ryan (M2) and Mary (W2) both felt they had a very honest and open relationship and prided themselves in talking about problems when they came up. They lived abroad for a year and felt that it made them closer as a couple.

Mary (W2) went on a trip for a wedding after they moved back to the United States and while she was on the trip she met a man that she found very interesting. She reported that nothing physical happened in their interaction, but there was chemistry between them that she did not think was possible to have with anyone but her husband. After returning from the trip she told Ryan (M2) about this man she met and the feelings she had experienced. Ryan (M2) became jealous and confused about what had happened while she was gone. They continued to talk about the situation, but it was clear that both Ryan (M2) and Mary (W2) were both confused and unsure how to feel about the situation and where that left them as a couple.

Couple M-3 and W-3

Mike (M3) and his wife Jessie (W3) met at the wedding of Jessie's sister. She was the maid of honor at the wedding and Mike (M3) was the best man and best friend of the groom. After the wedding they did not stay in touch until a few years later when Mike (M3) jokingly emailed Jessie's (W3) sister to ask her to reconnect them. They had a long distance cyber-relationship and ended up getting engaged within the year. Mike (M3) moved to Iowa to be with Jessie (W3) and they ended up getting pregnant and had the baby a week before their wedding. Jessie (W3) had a child from a previous relationship, which created a blended family situation when they got together. Eighteen months after marriage they had another child together. Both Mike (M3) and Jessie (W3) stated that everything happened very quickly in their relationship and that quick progression did not leave a lot of time for them to get to know one another before they were married with children.

Mike (M3) grew up as the son of a Marine who was quick-tempered and both physically and emotionally abusive toward Mike (M3) and Mike's (M3) mother. Mike (M3) was previously engaged and had a child with another woman. That child was killed in a car crash and his fiancé was the driver. She committed suicide after their daughter's death. Mike (M3) is a war veteran as well and suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). After the deaths of both his daughter and his fiancé he went down a path of chemical abuse and depression. Jessie (W3) was raised in a loving faith-based family. Her parents were still happily married at the time of this interview. The abuse from Mike's (M3) past carried over into his relationship with Jessie (W3). There have been trust issues between them involving money and infidelity, which caused major concerns in their already stressful relationship.

Couple M-4 and W-4

Sandy (W4) and her husband (whom chose not to be interviewed) have been married for about 50 years and have 10 children together. Sandy (W4) believes that they have set a good example for their children by sticking with each other through the hard times.

Sandy's (W4) husband is a farmer and he has farmed most of his life. They suffered a farm failure that added to the strain on their relationship. Sandy (W4) describes her husband as a "workaholic" and she has found other hobbies to do while her husband worked. Sandy (W4) talked about her bout with mental illness and her struggles with physical health and how those stresses impacted their relationship. She stated that they lost a grandchild and her husband lost his brother, both of which contributed to the stresses in their marriage. These combinations of losses and illnesses made it hard for them to feel satisfied in their marriage relationship.

Couple M-5 and W-5

John (M5) and his wife Rhonda (W5) have been married for 24 years and have three children together. They are both teachers and have lived abroad and in various places throughout the United States for their jobs and schooling.

The primary threat to their marriage came when Rhonda (W5) found out about John's (M5) affairs that had been going on throughout a long period of their marriage. John (M5) had been pursuing his needs and desires outside of the marriage, while at the same time Rhonda (W5) was feeling unfulfilled in their marriage as well but kept on muddling through their relationship and family stresses. When Rhonda (W5) found out about the affairs she had to make a hard decision regarding whether to stay or to leave the

relationship. She decided to stay in the marriage and she and John (M5) both worked to change and make their marriage something that was satisfying to both of them.

Couple M-6 and W-6

Andrew (M6) and Melanie (W6) have been married for 26 years. It is Andrew's (M6) second marriage and Melanie's (W6) first. They have two children together and three from Andrew's (M6) previous marriage. Andrew (M6) is an IT Project Manager and his wife works in Special Education. They lived in various places throughout the United States at the beginning of their marriage, moving for Andrew's (M6) job opportunities.

Financial issues started within the first four years of their marriage and continued to plague them throughout the early years of their marriage. Andrew (M6) had suffered from some mental health issues from his deployment in the military, which ended his first marriage and then impacted his second marriage before he sought treatment. Between the financial struggles and Andrew's (M6) mental health issues they grew disconnected and overwhelmed. Andrew (M6) had an affair with another woman which caused the main threat to their marriage and made Melanie (W6) question whether she wanted to stay in the marriage or leave. Andrew (M6) went to every effort to prove to Melanie (W6) that he wanted to be married to her and was committing himself to her again.

Qualitative Analysis of Narrative Accounts

The study interviews with participants provided narrative accounts of their relationship experiences and the marital threats that once occurred, as well as how each partner perceived the reconciliation process within their relationship. Analyzing the study interviews involved a careful review of the qualitative material and the identification of key themes that emerged from the process of qualitative analysis. Certain patterns emerged

through analyzing the narratives in relation to the specific research questions being explored in the study. Such themes were identified and presented in conjunction with their corresponding research questions. At the end of discussing each key theme, a gender-sensitive analysis will examine whether any gendered differences or similarities were observed in relation to that particular theme.

Contributing Factors to Marital Difficulty

There are many contributing factors that can lead a couple toward the possibility of separation or divorce. The concept of marital reconciliation emerges from a prior process of marital difficulty and potential divorce. Those factors which may contribute to difficulty in the relationship can be issues that are created within the relationship after its beginning or may involve particular life experiences or prior challenges that couples bring to the relationship.

The first research question explores the experience of marital reconciliation for each partner, its specific meaning, and whether factors involved in the process are similar or different for men and women. Throughout the narrative accounts, many participants talked specifically about what led them to the point of separation and divorce, as well as how they got through the marital threats. Thus, it became clear that understanding the relationship background and contributing factors to marital difficulty is a necessary prelude to exploring the meaning and experience of marital reconciliation. This section of the study analysis explores the contributing factors that participants described as issues that occurred within the relationship as well as the issues that each spouse brought to the relationship. Several contributing factors emerged from the narratives as key themes related to difficulties that triggered the threat of separation or divorce. The key patterns included: (1)

Family of Origin Influences; (2) Life Stressors; (3) History of Relationship Problems; (5) Infidelity; (6) Mental Health Concerns; and (7) Issues with Children. Many of the study participants experienced the patterns described in general; however, it was found that participants encountered unique and specific issues within each pattern. A description of these contributing factors and the patterns that emerged in the participant narratives is given here.

Family of Origin Influences

One of the primary themes that appeared in the narratives was how participants' familial experiences growing up have impacted their life with their partner. The relationship experiences occurring within one's family of origin become the model that is used as the foundation for other relationships and also help to navigate one's future. The major patterns identified within this general theme were: (1) Differing parenting styles; (2) Past abuse; and (3) Family history of divorce. In our interviews eight of the eleven participants talked about how their family life growing up had impacted their current relationship with their spouse.

The first pattern identified regarding family of origin influences was the differing parenting styles that existed between some participants and their partners. For example, Mike (M3) expressed in his interview that his wife felt he disciplined their children too harshly. He said:

I saw myself discipline my kids like my dad did and I said, "No. I'm making a change. I don't want to do that." Because I swore [to myself]... "Don't be like dad! Don't be like dad!" But yet I was doing exactly what he was doing. So I knew it had to stop. Step back and refocus. (#M3-7)

Discipline style was a frequent argument that this couple experienced that affected how they saw each other as partners and parents. In her interview, Jessie (W3) stated that she

often felt that their parenting differences were a major source of contention between her and Mike (M3).

The second pattern associated with family of origin influences was past experience of abuse. Some participants identified past emotional and/or physical abuse as something that affected their current relationship dynamics. Ryan (M2) came from a family in which yelling was common and often felt put down by his family. He stated that he tried hard not to yell like his family did, which then led him to withdraw from arguments completely and refuse to talk about a situation. Mike (M3) stated, "I've had a rough go. I was...my dad was a Marine and was a hard core, strict guy. It's okay now, but he was verbally abusive; sometimes he would hit" (#M3-6). He stated that he found himself using a similar pattern of response during times of frustration. Mike (M3) said, "I swore [to myself], 'Don't be like dad! Don't be like dad!' But yet I was doing exactly what he was doing. So I knew it had to stop" (#M3-7). Jessie (W3) stated that it was hard for her to be treated so harshly by her husband Mike (M3) because she came from such a loving family life. She stated that it caused her to become someone who yelled also and this felt very foreign to her.

The third pattern linked with family of origin influences that emerged was a family history of divorce. Again, several study participants talked about how their family history of divorce impacted their perception of whether divorce was an acceptable outcome of their relationships. Matt's (M1) parents were married for 60 years at the time of the interview. He did not see divorce as an option for his relationship. He was determined to make his marriage work with his wife Debbie (W1). Debbie (W1) comes from a family of divorce, which Matt assumed meant that she was more tolerant of the idea of divorce. He stated:

The other thing is that my side of the family, my mom and dad, they've been married for 60....over 60 years right now, you know. They've been in a loving

relationship, you know, and commitment. And, that was another thing, you know, that just put me on and stuff. (#M1-7)

He found motivation to reconcile in the potential of his marriage failing and knowing that he did not wish to accept the outcome of divorce. Debbie (W1) expressed sentiments of not wanting her marriage to fail, but did not express such blatant feelings of opposition towards divorce. The same pattern was true for Jessie (W3), as her parents had been married for 40 years and divorce had never been an option for her. She took the marital vows that she made very seriously and did not want to break them.

Two of the patterns associated with family of origin influences were negative factors that contributed to difficulties in the marital context: divergent parenting styles and past history of abuse. However, family history of divorce could emerge as either a positive or negative factor influencing marital reconciliation, as those who grew up with a strong family history that discouraged divorce were likely to exhibit strong commitment to maintaining the marital relationship.

Life Stressors

There were many stressors in life that the participants noted as an influence related to the threat of marital separation or divorce. The stressors that are prevalent throughout many marriages thus emerged as a second primary theme that was a contributing factor to marital challenges. The most common stressors mentioned by participants were: (1) Finances; (2) Job strain; and (3) Loss of a loved one. Nine of the eleven participants talked about their experiences with such stressors.

The first pattern noted was the stress of finances and the subsequent arguments that couples engaged over financial concerns. Matt (M1) managed his family's finances and had done so for many years. His wife left him in control of the money and did not pay

much attention to the financial issues. Matt (M1) had a hard time making ends meet and did not want to burden his wife, Debbie (W1), with the worries he was experiencing. Matt (M1) described the stress of financial pressures in some detail:

I would say probably 90% of the problems we had were all based on finances and financial problems. I handled, you know, over the years I used to do all the books, you know, handled all finances. Everything. And I was always one not to... I always hated to say "no" to my wife, you know, so I would jockey the records and stuff, just to make things, you know, so if she said, "Hey, can we buy this?" I didn't want to say, "No," you know, and I'd say, "Yeah, we'll work it out!" and I would juggle, you know, rob Peter to pay Paul here, and stuff from this account and initially and stuff. We got into financial trouble because I started charging things up, you know, and I would make the payments. I was never late on anything, but I was only making minimum payments-type deal, and the credit card was getting itself racked up, and she thought everything was fine and on the back side and stuff or whatever. No, I knew we were in some, you know, some financial trouble-type deal, but I was trying, at that point, I was trying to protect her, you know, from knowing that. (#M1-2)

When his wife found out about their financial troubles she felt betrayed and no longer trusted him. She stated:

Looking over our finances during that time, I just found some of the numbers not crunching right, the way I thought they were and felt betrayed in that way. That Matt wasn't honest with how our finances really were. And, and I didn't like that feeling of him doing things with our money without consulting with me, and yet, in hindsight his reasoning was to protect me from the stress of how things really were looking when he lost his job. (#W2-2)

Difficulties with money therefore led toward other difficulties such as lack of honesty and betrayal of partner trust. Another study participant, Mike (M3), stated that there were times when he would give his wife a check to pay the bills and the bill would never get paid, even though she would tell him that she did it. He felt that she was using their money for other things rather than the bills that they needed to pay.

Melanie (W6) stated that she and her husband Andrew (M6) went through some financial struggles. Andrew (M6) said, "Financially during that period we were on a roller

coaster” (#M6-3). There were times when both of them were jobless, or both were working at least one or two jobs at a time. They went through bankruptcy and struggled with varying increases and decreases to their family’s income. Andrew (M6) stated:

That was probably the low point of our lives. Subsequent to that we wound up going through bankruptcy, which in itself . . . even though our lifestyle changed dramatically and we went from a very nice place down to basically a two-room apartment that was very tiny, very costly, very crowded, very cold, and very expensive, but we worked together to pull through that. (#M6-10)

These financial burdens put a strain on their relationship, distracting them from connecting with one another. Financial concerns were a common source of stress in the marriage that added to the difficulties that couples faced.

Another sub-theme among life stressors affecting marriage that developed was the pressure of job strain and how that affected the marital relationship. For example, John (M5) talked about the hectic nature of his and his wife’s jobs. He talked about feeling that he and his wife got to a point where they rarely made time for each other because of feeling overwhelmed and busy with work. John (M5) explained:

Sometimes we just have to talk about something else, but we were so busy with our work, and I was busy with school, that I went off into my own world and she went off into her own world, and the little kids that we had were about the only thing that seemed to be a connection at times. (#M5-6)

He felt that their lives seemed to keep on going even though they did not feel connected to each other. His wife, Rhonda (W5), expressed her concern with the strain she felt from their job and raising their three kids. She said:

We were just knee deep in work and family, knee deep—neck deep—and I guess that I remember having conversations [about it]. There were occasions when I tried to express to John that I thought our marriage was not . . . it functioned well. We took care of the kids and were both employed, but it didn’t feel like there was much passion in it. There was love but it was kind of a familial love. (#W5-3)

She felt that her relationship functioned on the surface level as far as meeting all the basic needs, but did not fulfill her need for passion and connection in her marriage. In another situation, Matt (M1) experienced a loss of his job, which put strain on their relationship and left him feeling like he was not providing for his family. He stated:

I lost my job. You know, so that kind of played into it too. Debbie was working, you know, full time, we both had worked full time and she still was working full time. I lost my job. That put a lot of stress on the situation too at the same time. (#M1-1)

Sandy (W4) and her husband had experienced a farm failure, which particularly left her husband at a loss regarding what to do with his time. She stated that he was a “workaholic” and after the farm failed, he withdrew from her and the family, which caused strain on her as a mother taking care of their children and strain on their relationship because he would not talk about it. Andrew (M6) struggled with losing multiple jobs over the first few years of him and his wife’s marriage, which led to stress and bankruptcy.

The third pattern that emerged as a common life stressor that impacted marriage was the loss of a loved one. The loss of a loved one can cause a great amount of overwhelming grief that can often overshadow a couple’s intentions to show love for one another. This was a life experience that was discussed by a number of the participants and they referenced the negative toll it took on their marriage relationship. Sandy (W4) and her husband lost their granddaughter when she was 16 years old. She stated that this loss not only affected their marriage relationship but their entire family life. Her husband also lost his brother within the next couple of years. She noticed a certain change in him and stated:

I think it’s because he’s thinking of retirement and his brother just passed away, and of course we lost a granddaughter, which has put a big strain on everything and because of the change in him, I considered leaving—even after 48 years. (#W4-1)

People handle grief in different ways depending on what feels natural to them, but in some situations it can turn into self-destructive patterns that negatively affect marriage or other relationships. Mike (M3) had a daughter from a previous relationship that was killed in a car accident when she was four years old. A few years later his ex-wife killed herself in prison because of the guilt she felt about the accident. He stated of this experience, "Yeah, when that first happened I was pretty...I was actually homeless for a while, because I didn't care. I was doing every drug there was, drinking everyday, couldn't hold a job. Didn't care. Tried to commit suicide a couple times" (#M3-11). He went on and talked about how it took him a long time to deal with the death of his child and his ex-wife, and the challenges associated with it affected his later marriage, but he now tries to enjoy his wife and kids as much as possible as a way of taking a lesson from the loss experiences he had. Unplanned events such as a loved one's death can trigger significant stress that makes it difficult for a spouse to cope and therefore undermines the marriage relationship.

History of Relationship Problems

The third key theme that emerged as a contributing factor to marital difficulty was a past history of problems within the relationship. When troubling issues are left unresolved they can lead to resentment and contention. Small things that go unresolved may have a tendency to offset the balance that partners seek in a relationship. There are always small issues that couples have to navigate through in their marriages, but some issues tend to cause larger roadblocks that eight of eleven participants identified. The two most common relationship problems identified were: (1) Trust issues; and (2) Discontentment/Disconnection.

The first pattern that existed as a common relationship concern was trust between partners. Spouses who were interviewed had differing issues that led to the emergence of distrust in their relationships. Matt (M1) and Debbie (W1) both stated that financial concerns and lack of honesty regarding finances was the biggest cause of distrust in their marriage. Debbie (W1) felt like she had been betrayed by Matt (M1) when he accrued a large amount of debt unbeknownst to her. Their story highlights the process of losing and rebuilding trust over a period of time. She stated:

I felt I wasn't able to trust Matt. So, to me that, that is huge! Um. For me in marriage it is huge. If you can't trust your partner how can you, how can you keep it going? How can you keep that strength going? So, our counselor's very helpful in helping Matt recognize what I needed, and being honest and truthful is huge to me and now that was going to take time as well. And I think even today it's not 100% of my trust being there, just because of what we went through. What caused me to leave was a breach of trust. (#W1-5)

Matt (M1) stated that he understood why she would have distrusted him and that he realized it would take time for her to fully gain back her trust in him. He noted:

She was afraid it was going to, history was going to repeat itself and she didn't want that. So again, it was just building that trust factor back up and it's still, it still does come up, you know, and it's not something I can just turn a switch on for her and she's going to... I know I need to earn that back and you know I'm trying to do that. (#M1-3)

Debbie (W1) talked about seeing him commit to working on their financial issues as a sign that he was committed to making their marriage work and understanding her concerns. She said:

And through the process of counseling, to see him willing to work on our finances and go to a financial workshop with me, and our counselor made us sign a little contract with each other, that every Sunday, 2:00, we would talk about the budget. It's easy when 2:00 comes and both of us want to avoid it, because that's a stressor for us. But to see him say, "You know what? It's 2:00 and we're going to set the timer on the stove and in a half hour we're done." Whether we're done or not, just to get us used to talking about things that are uncomfortable for us. (#W1-6)

In situations where trust issues became a concern it took both time and specific processes for trust to be re-established in the relationship.

In another example, Mike (M3) talked about trust being something that can find its way back to the relationship, but it takes some work by both partners. He felt that once trust was re-established, even in a minor way, he and his wife were able to communicate better and more openly. John (M5) went through a bout of infidelity and talked about how much it meant to him for his wife to start to trust him again and how hard that must have been for her. He explained:

I had to make commitments to fidelity and the relationship and everything, but Rhonda is the one who really had to overcome the most, because I was the one that was doing what I was doing and she was the one that had to forgive and accept, and then ultimately trust that I wouldn't do this any more. (#M5-4)

John (M5) stated in his interview that causing such emotional damage to their relationship seemed impossible to come back from, but his wife made it seem manageable by trusting in his re-commitment to their relationship. John (M5) further noted:

I think she felt that she could trust and believe me, even though I hadn't had a good track record in the past. I think that she thought the possibility was strong that we would have a good rest of our lives together. She believed me when I looked her in the eye and told her that I would do that. It would not always be easy, of course, but we could make it work. (#M5-12)

Rhonda (W5) stated in her own interview that she trusts John (M5) now in their marriage, because the breach of trust was something that was in the past and they worked through it together, but it took a long time and a lot of reassurance from him to get them to that place in their marriage. Melanie (W6) felt betrayed after her husband Andrew's (M6) extramarital affair. She said, "I felt like we had to start at square one again and work on that relationship and have that trust. I think that is a huge part, to be able to trust again that things will get better" (#W6-4). She felt that the relationship had to be stripped back to its

foundation to rebuild it again. Andrew (M6) felt that he had to prove a lot to his wife to make the necessary amends to their relationship. He stated:

Frankly, the challenge that we went through . . . it took me a couple of years to gain her trust. It was not something that we could flip a switch and it was back on. I had to earn her trust. It was good for me to go through that process. I think that since that time it has helped us to weather the other storms that we've been through.
(#M6-8)

Andrew (M6) noted that he felt that he needed to go through that process in order to get his priorities straight and get his marriage back on track. Trust between partners may be damaged for a variety of reasons but re-establishing trust is a necessary element for marital reconciliation to occur.

The second pattern seen among the spouses interviewed as a common relationship concern was a sense of disconnection or discontentment. Being in a committed relationship over a significant period of time can at times lead a spouse toward a lack of connection or discontentment with one's partner, particularly if each partner is not intentional about being an active member of the relationship. The participants talked about how the feeling of being disconnected from their partner or feeling discontentment in the relationship often led them toward thinking of leaving or ending the relationship. John (M5) stated that when they ran into relationship problems, "I went off into my own world and she went off into her own world, and the little kids that we had were about the only thing that seemed to be a connection at times" (#M5-6). A variety of factors can lead to feeling disconnected. For John (M5), it seemed to occur because he and his wife were being too busy with work and not taking the time to focus on their relationship. In her own interview, Rhonda (W5) mimicked the sentiments of her partner John (M5), stating that she felt that she was so consumed with work and family life that there was no passion left in their marriage. She

said, "There was love but it was kind of a familial love" (#W5-3). Debbie (W1) indicated that her lack of contentment was also about feeling overwhelmed with her roles as a wife, mother, and nurse. She stated:

I think it was about 10 years ago, I felt, I was just getting discontent with marriage. It seemed like all I was doing was taking care of the house, the kids and working. And I just, one night I just woke up and felt like I needed a breather. Not that I, I never said I wanted a divorce, I just felt, I just need to have some space and time to think through, just what is our life all about? Is this all there is? Kind of a thing. (#W1-1)

Debbie (W1) recognized that her relationship had the potential to be what it used to be and desperately wanted to get back to a place where she and her partner felt connected and satisfied in their marriage. Lack of connection or contentment in the relationship thus seemed to characterize a number of the individuals who experienced marital threats and existed as a key theme among contributing factors to marital difficulty.

Infidelity

The fourth pattern identified among key contributing factors to marital difficulty was infidelity. When there is any type of infidelity in a relationship that is understood to be monogamous or exclusive it can cause what may seem to be irreparable damage. The type of infidelity can be an emotional connection with someone other than your partner that may cause uncertainty in your current relationship, or another relationship that your partner feels uncomfortable with. It can also be physical infidelity, either real or assumed. It may be that in some situations the assumption of infidelity can be just as threatening to a relationship as if it were actually taking place. Two patterns emerged that were found among the participant narratives: (1) Emotional infidelity; and (2) Physical infidelity. Eight of eleven participants identified that infidelity, on some level, took place in their marriage and led to difficulties.

The first sub-theme identified was the occurrence of emotional infidelity. Mary (W2) went on a trip and met a man that she found quite interesting and she connected to him on a level that even she was surprised by. She stated that she did not think it was possible to connect with someone, other than her husband, as intensely as she did. Nothing physical happened between them, but she felt drawn to him in a way that made her feel unsettled. When she got back from the trip she told her husband, Ryan (M2), about her experience. Ryan (M2) stated that he immediately felt threatened by her relationship with this man and got very jealous. They talked immensely about the incident and Ryan (M2) came to the conclusion that it is inevitable that he and his spouse will be attracted to other people, but what they choose to do with those feelings is what matters. In another example, Jessie (W3) had suspected that her husband was cheating and found messages on his phone and a dating website that made her suspicions stronger. She stated:

I was on Yahoo! and we shared an account and I ran across...my husband had put a personal ad on Yahoo! Personals saying that he was looking for "Mrs. Right." [This happened] four weeks before we were supposed to get married. And I was 8 months pregnant with our daughter. So, he told me, "Well, I just got cold feet, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah...that's why I did that." But, you're adding all this stuff to the mix and it keeps going. And he was used to being by himself, being free, not being tied down and so, um, you add all that stuff to the mix and it was like, I just wasn't prepared for that type of stuff. (#W3-2)

That incident of perceived emotional infidelity at the start of their marriage caused many trust issues between her and her husband. He denied ever following through with any of his advancements toward other women, but just the idea that he was seeking other relationships had a similar effect on her perception of the relationship as an actual act of physical infidelity would likely have had.

The second sub-theme in this category was the occurrence of physical infidelity.

John (M5) had multiple affairs with other women in the first decade of his marriage. He stated:

I had three affairs. The last one was the only one that ended with her finding out. I told her about the other two, but the last one was the only one that ended with her finding out and its discovery and the crisis that created. I was caught. Before that I hadn't been caught. Sometimes I think back on what might have happened if I had not been caught. What if that affair would have just fizzled out? I might have had another affair until I would have gotten caught. (#M5-13)

He stated, "Getting caught was the best thing that happened to our relationship, obviously, because it stopped me from that behavior. We have a very strong relationship now, far from perfect, but very strong and I feel very confident about the future" (#M5-13). The experience of his wife finding out about his infidelities was the catalyst for him to finally realize what he had done and also that he wanted to be a part of his marriage and make changes in his life. He commented:

I have been faithful now since 1998. It is kind of like being an alcoholic or something. I have been sober since 1998, and I have been faithful since 1998, and I have had no worries or struggles that were close since that time. Now I'm so old and fat that I don't worry about it anymore. (#M5-8)

He looks at his life in pre- and post-reconciliation phases and feels that his relationship is now where it should be.

In circumstances of infidelity, the experience of each partner in the relationship is quite different. Rhonda (W5) also looked at her marriage (with John) in terms of pre- and post-reconciliation terms. She talked about what led her to question her husband's faithfulness and recalled:

I was beginning to suspect something but it was against my will to suspect it. I asked him if there was a phone number where I could reach him up there if I needed something, and he gave me a number. Then he called back later and said, "I'm not going to be there until late" or something like that. It was just really weird. So, at

this point I can't even really remember, but it was one of the very next nights that I just came out and asked him if he was having an affair. Something was bothering me. He confessed to me right away that he was. I made him get on the phone and call her and tell her that I knew. (#W5-3)

After she found out about the infidelity, she reported that she had to decide whether this relationship was something she wanted to continue with and work on or leave. She said:

I just felt really "jumpy." I wanted comfort so badly. Just trying to find any kind of answer. I think "jumpy" is a good way to describe it. I was just waiting for the next thing. I felt like the floor was possibly going to fall out from underneath me at any second. (#W5-8)

Finding out her husband was having affairs outside her marriage shook the foundation of her marriage and her trust in their relationship with each other. She knew that it would take time for her to decide what direction she wanted to go in her relationship. Andrew (M6) had an affair with another woman and told his wife Melanie (W6). Melanie (W6) stated, "It took me a while, I think, I mean I felt like I wanted to [stay] but at the time I was hurt and felt like maybe I don't. Maybe it's easier just to get out of the relationship and not have to deal with it" (#W6-4). It took Melanie (W6) a while after Andrew (M6) made a commitment to stay to make the same decision herself. She stated, "When he would have to go out on business, it was always there in the back of my mind. It took a few years before I really felt like I didn't worry when he was gone that something might be going on" (#W6-4). Andrew (M6) stated:

I have no excuse for what I did or what happened. It was wrong. It hurt Melanie very badly. Her pride and her self-esteem. She was ready to go. She was ready to go. I didn't want her to go because I loved her, and that is why I did everything that I could. (#M6-8)

Infidelity, whether emotional or physical, is a factor that destabilizes the relationship between partners and contributes to significant marital difficulty when it occurs.

Mental Illness

The fifth overall pattern identified as a contributor to marital dissatisfaction was living with a mental illness. Living with a mental illness affects how you are able to live your life and your relationship with your loved ones. A mental illness that is undiagnosed or untreated often causes challenges in relationships of all kinds, and six of the eleven participants noted that struggles with mental illness affected their relationships with a spouse.

Among the participants, some were able to acknowledge their struggles with mental health and get the help they needed. Sandy (W4) struggled with a mental illness and saw that it affected her relationship with her husband. She stated, "I actually had a mental illness and that put a big strain on everything and I think he was told to probably leave me in the hospital and leave me, but he didn't" (#W4-1). For Sandy, the experience of having her husband stay by her side throughout her battle with the illness just furnished more motivation to get her mental health under control and reclaim her relationship and her life. She said, "You set such an example [for their children]. You've been through all this crap including the farm failure, illness and all this stuff, and you're still together, which amazes them and keeps them together probably" (#W4-6). Ryan (M2) had a similar experience and really felt that he needed to get his mental illness regulated to be a better person for himself and his partner. He pointed out:

One of the things that I had, that I had to realize is that I do live with anxiety and I actually had to be medicated for a while. I had to change my lifestyle completely, because it was an issue that was making it very difficult to be successful, as it was preventing me from being a good spouse, being a good...the person I wanted to be. And so, with that comes self-doubt and I wasn't valuing myself very highly because I could see myself only failing instead of being productive or succeeding at what I wanted to do. In turn, I was passing that on to Jessie and she saw me suffer to an

extent, but really not [being] happy, and she started to internalize the, my unhappiness with the inclusion of hers. (#M2-3)

Ryan (M2) saw how his unhappiness was affecting his wife's happiness and knew that he had to make changes in order to be the productive person he wanted to be and untangle his wife's well-being from his struggle. Finding solutions to mental health concerns can be a challenge. Ryan (M2) found help from medication and alterations to his lifestyle that enabled him to improve his mental health.

Jessie (W3), another participant, however found medication altered her mood so significantly she did not feel like herself anymore and this negatively impacted her relationship. She said:

I actually went on anti-depressants and I could tell people I would never, ever do that again, because I was like a zombie. I literally didn't cry. I had no feeling. And so I went off them, just totally took myself off them, because the gal that was, the psychiatrist that was prescribing them, she actually went to South Carolina, moved to South Carolina, so I just quit taking them. And it was like night and day. It was like, Oh my God! Because I have feeling now. And so, it numbed all that you know, so I was going through that time and I just kind of numbed it. I just went with it. But then when I started feeling it more, that's when I thought, you know, I know the happiness. (#W3-3)

While trying to manage her mental health she ended up feeling so detached from her feelings that she felt numb, which also negatively affected her relationship with her husband. Both Jessie (W3) and Mike (M3) suffered from mental illness which was being poorly managed. Mike (M3) had a different way of handling his mental health that was unhealthy and further affected the quality of their relationship. Mike (M3) stated, "Yeah, I mean, actually now I'm talking to a friend and don't just drown myself in a bottle of Jim Beam and not worry about it, because the problem is still there when you get done. I used to be more hard and put walls up, but I can't do that anymore, got to...[talk more]" (#M3-7). Mike (M3) realized that the way he was managing his mental health was doing more

harm to his relationship and his family than helping him get better. He and Jessie (W3) now talk about their mental health to support each other. Andrew (M6) also dealt with mental illness after three tours in Vietnam. It ended his first marriage and he sought help so it would not end his current marriage. As with other contributing factors to marital difficulty, mental health concerns can feel overwhelming and make it hard to function positively in a couple relationship, particularly if the illness is not well managed or coping mechanisms are unhealthy.

Issues with Children

The last theme noted as a contributing factor to marital difficulty was how the stresses of raising children can impact a couple relationship. As parents begin raising children, an entirely new set of challenges is introduced in the family and the couple relationship. Some couples choose to become parents, some have the decision confront them before they are prepared, and others marry into a situation with children already present. There were two major patterns associated with raising children that emerged from the narratives: (1) Unplanned pregnancies; and (2) Blended families. Four of the eleven participants expressed the challenges that raising children brought to their marriage.

The first sub-theme related to how unplanned pregnancies impacted the couple relationship and related pressures. John (M5) recounted his couple history and stated, "Then our first son came along and he was kind of a not-planned surprise. We got married in January and we found out that we were pregnant with him in September, so that was earlier than we had planned on having a family" (#M5-3). This unplanned pregnancy caused substantial role strain for John's (M5) wife, Rhonda (W5), because she was still in school and had to manage parenthood with also being a full-time student. Rhonda (W5)

talked about what it was like to have an instant family so soon after they got married. She said:

That seemed to have gotten kind of overwhelmed with being parents and stuff. We went into that so quickly, getting pregnant in the first year of marriage and being in grad school, and it's so funny now. Our oldest [child] has been around our whole marriage. We look at our brothers and sisters and they all waited five years or so after getting married before having kids. We were going to [wait]! (#W5-10)

The early years of marriage involve many transitions and adjustments, and the added pressures of parenting place time and energy constraints on couples.

Mike (M3) and Jessie (W3) had a blended family and also had two unplanned pregnancies, which led to the formation of an instant family the day they got married. Jessie (W3) felt that having a child from a previous relationship, as well as getting pregnant and having their baby a week before they got married, left her and Mike (M3) with little time to get to know each other as a couple before they started a family. A new baby and a new marriage in one week is a recipe for marital stress. Mike (M3) talked further about how hectic it was getting pregnant so early in their relationship and having the baby one week before they married. He figured if they could get through that experience then they could get through anything together. Mike (M3) also talked about what it was like being a step-father. He said:

No, I can't say it [blended families] doesn't have any effect on it [their family], but...her son, my step-son's dad has nothing to do with his biological father and he has no contact with us, so he sees me as his dad. You never know when he could come back into the picture. You never know I guess. He could come back and say, "Well, you know what? I'm really your dad." And eventually my son will be at that age where he's going to wonder. I'm sure he, he knows. (#M3-8)

Mike (M3) feels he is his step-son's father and that he is all his step-son knows as a dad, but despite that there are still challenges that come along with it. He talked about how it can be difficult to discipline his step-son. Mike (M3) stated, "At first it was extremely hard,

being the way his temperament was and [him saying], 'You're not my dad. Shut up!' or 'Mommy said this, I don't have to listen to you.' It's getting better though" (#M3-8). The arguments with his son can often lead to arguments with his wife about parenting styles, and so it introduces an element of complexity and challenge into the marital relationship.

The key themes and patterns identified in this section illustrated what factors contributed to marital difficulty and the threats that participants experienced. This information provides valuable context, insight, and a collective set of marital patterns that furnishes better understanding of the participants' experiences. Although the purpose of this study is to better understand how participants experience reconciliation in troubled relationships, this objective is better achieved with a clear knowledge of the marital background and processes that couples experience. It was also interesting to note that little to no gender differences seemed to exist among the factors that led to the marital threat.

Participant Understanding of Marital Reconciliation

After participants were asked about their relationship history with their partner, they were asked to define what the term "marital reconciliation" meant to them. In a phenomenological approach, such a question allows participants to furnish their own conception of an experience and its meaning to them. Most participants answered the inquiry simply, while others answered it in the context of their own relationship. There were two common theme identified in the participants' responses regarding their understanding of marital reconciliation. The first sub-theme associated with this concept was that marital reconciliation involves both acknowledging there is a problem and then working actively to fix it. The second sub-theme simply implied that marital reconciliation

is to come back together. While some participants defined it as something you work on as a process, others defined it more as a resolution of concerns.

The first theme suggested that one significant dimension of marital reconciliation as understood by participants is acknowledging the problem and working to remedy it. Matt (M1) talked about reconciliation as being a time of understanding the differences in the relationship and working to overcome them and come together as a couple. He stated:

I guess it means basically that ah...not to use the term again, 'to reconcile' but to ...to understand that we had differences, and those differences took us apart and after we recognized what those differences were, how do you, you know, rectify them? Get those persons [with differences] back together and then talk about it. We were able to bring ourselves back together. (#M1-2)

Debbie (W1), his wife, had similar sentiments and talked about how important it was for her to engage the process and consider all she would lose if the relationship ended. She explained of marital reconciliation:

I think it is digging the roots down deeper with the marriage. I think it involves looking back. We've come through so many, many tough times in our marriage that's...it's a look at what are you throwing away? If you do let it go is it really going to be better without each other? So, I think it's just digging in deeper and building a stronger unity, and coming to some common ground on why did we get married and where are we going with our marriage. (W1-3)

Sandy (W4) had a fairly simple explanation of marital reconciliation as a process of working things out: "If you have problems in your marriage, and maybe one of you decides to separate or even talk divorce, then you work things out and you try to get back together again" (#W4-1). She and her husband had been married for 50 years at the time of the interview and for her it was as simple as working things out and seeing if the relationship is still worth being in and saving. Andrew (M6) thought about it as more of a reflection. He explained:

Marital reconciliation, to me, in many ways means accepting what has taken place but also putting it in the context of reflecting on why you originally got married together and the things that you loved in each other. Then, acknowledging the harm that has come through the indiscretion or issue, whatever it is, and together talking about it and saying, "What can we do to try and avoid this going forward so that this doesn't happen again? Can we learn from this?" (#M6-9)

Again, this definition fit the profile of working through a process together and acknowledging mistakes.

The second theme in which participants defined marital reconciliation focused on achieving a resolution of concerns. Ryan (M2) stated, "It's like making up after a fight or argument. Getting back to the fun part" (#M2-1). He saw reconciliation as more of a settlement in order to continue on in the relationship, as a means to an end, per se. Jessie (W3) included forgiveness in her definition, noting, "It means reconciling. It means you are reconciling your marriage. You're committing to one another. You're forgiving one another" (#W3-3). She also talked about the concept of reconciliation in a way that implies finality rather than simply the process that got them there. Rhonda (W5) referred to it in the sense of making peace and putting things back in order so that the relationship moves forward. This perspective on marital reconciliation revolved around a resolution of problems and the achievement of a sense of normalcy in the relationship, so there was a sense of a defined relationship outcome that was accomplished.

In summing up perspectives on marital reconciliation, Debbie (W1) stated, "It, to me, it's like a speed bump. It depends on how hard you're going to hit it and what is it all about" (#W1-3). This statement sums up the topic of marital reconciliation quite nicely. A threat to a marriage can look like many things to many people, but when it comes down to it, it is a bump in the road that couples have to figure out how to get past so their relationship can continue further down the road.

Analyzing what marital reconciliation means to the participants, there were no clear gender differences that emerged in the responses given. Both men and women identified that marital reconciliation was a process that involved acknowledging the problem that existed and working together to amend their relationship. Thus, in this view marital reconciliation is a process of identifying and resolving problems that obstruct the relationship. In addition, some participants felt that the continuation of their relationship was the reconciliation in itself, and that continuing the relationship was aided by reaching a defined outcome of relationship normalcy or stability. In this view, reconciliation is more of an identified outcome. It would be interesting to further explore a phenomenological definition of marital reconciliation in a larger-scale qualitative study and determine if there are specific features of the reconciliation process and if they vary in significance by gender of the spouse or circumstances of the marital challenge.

Turning Points Toward Reconciliation

The second research question explored in the study was what participants identified as major turning points in their marital relationship, either positive or negative. While participants could identify negative turning points, nearly all of them simply acknowledged the contributing factors previously discussed as issues that were negative and turned the relationship toward separation or divorce. However, the discussion of turning points was nearly all related to positive developments that turned the relationship toward reconciliation. Most participants defined specific turning points in their own relationship, while some defined the concept in a more general sense. The process of analysis also identified five key themes that participants found to be important as turning points in their reconciliation process: (1) Realizing one's own commitment to the marriage; (2) Seeing a

commitment from one's partner; (3) Regulated mental health; (4) Hope; and (5) Forgiveness.

Participant Definition of Turning Points

Participants in the study were asked to share what the definition of a "turning point" meant to them. Some defined the concept in relation to their own experiences and specific turning points in their relationship, while others defined the idea in more general terms.

A general definition of turning points that participants articulated was that it involved a sense of understanding and mental clarity regarding the marital relationship and its value to them. Ryan (M2) defined it generally as a moment of clarity. He said, "I would imagine it would be something along the lines of an 'Ah-Ha' moment, where things just make sense. Um, there's no real rhyme or reason to it, it just makes sense" (#M2-3). He viewed a turning point as a moment when you realized what you wanted in the relationship and things seem to fall into place. Mike (M3) defined the idea of a turning point similarly. He said, "[It is] a point that awakes your senses and makes you realize what you have" (#M3-2). In her comments, Sandy (W4) saw a turning point as an indication of hope. She stated:

I think of when you get to the darkest of the darkest [places], and then you can probably fix things or change things or maybe your thinking is different. And then you see that there's maybe a glimmer of hope, or maybe you think you'll try it one more time. So, then you try it and turn it around and do something different. (#W4-1)

Sandy (W4) thus saw herself as an active participant in the turning point taking place, and that it could be facilitated by trying again in the relationship after all that had happened. For her, it seemed less like something that she stumbled upon and more something she sought out deliberately.

Melanie (W6) reflected on her own turning point and weighing the options of staying versus leaving. She said:

You have to come to a point where you say that there are two paths out there, at least in my mind, one where you can work on the issues and get past that and the other is to separate and then you would have other issues, such as being a single mom. (#W6-9)

She stated that it took her a while to make the decision to stay. She said, "It took time for me to get over the hurt and to say that it was worth working on, and then to think about what we needed to do to repair what had happened and move forward" (#W6-10). Andrew (M6) also stated:

The concept of a turning point is an interesting one. It is not as though you come to a corner and you turn left or turn right. It is a gradual thing that you look back on and realize that you have been turning. It is kind of like if you've been on a ship out on the ocean. As it makes a turn, it is not an abrupt turn and sometimes you don't even know you're turning until you look back and see that you have made a change and it is good. (#M6-12)

He looked at a turning point as something that progresses over time rather than one single experience.

Other participants described turning points that reflected their specific situations and what they saw as important to their reconciliation process. Jessie (W3) saw a turning point in her relationship that occurred during a time of personal reflection back to where they had been as a couple in their relationship and what she would be giving up if they divorced. She stated:

But I think the turning point comes when you stand back, you take a look and say, "Okay, I've been in the relationship, married for five years, together for six, this is what we have invested in this relationship. We have this amount of time. We have these years together." You know? So, do I really want to undo all of that, upheaval my children, you know? As I told Mike, you know, you need to think about your children's happiness. It's not, when you get married, it's not "I," it's "We," as a team. (#W3-5)

This reflective turning point allowed her to realize that she had been through a lot with her partner and she was not ready to give that up. Debbie (W1) found her personal turning point in a time when she least expected it. She and her husband's home had been flooded and they had to work together to save it. Debbie (W1) talked about how it was a time that she was not looking forward to and she wanted to just get it over with and complete the task. She was pleasantly surprised when she realized during the clean-up process that there was still something left to their marriage and it took a flood to make her see it. She said, "I think being around each other and being stuck here together I saw that ray of hope. And I think Matt felt it as well and that's a good way to describe it, as there was something that we could grasp onto to make it work" (#W1-5). Thus for Debbie (W1) the turning point was less of a reflective realization, but instead it was an experience working together that inspired her and became a turning point. Her husband Matt (M1) experienced the same turning point, but in a different sense. He saw that moment as an indication that his hard work had paid off and that she was still willing to work on their marriage. He said:

I would say a defined turning point would be that I saw hope that she was talking about moving back home, you know? That's what I would kind of define as a turning point. Okay, hey! I've got...I think she's thinking about moving back. Or how I need to...the steps I need to prove, you know, to take to get her to go. You know, to come back. So that's my...the turning point I was trying to get. (#M1-3)

Matt's (M1) goal, after Debbie (W1) moved out of their home, was to do whatever it took to get her to come back. After seeing all of his hard work begin paying off and discussing that she was ready to talk about moving back home, it gave him more motivation to continue making the necessary changes in his life and in their relationship to make things better.

John's (M5) turning point was similar to Matt's (M1) experience, in the sense that it relied on his partner's desire to want to continue with the marriage. He stated, "I think it's realizing that your spouse has actually forgiven you, and is willing to stay with you. In our situation, it was not so much that I decided to stay, at first, but that she did" (#M5-7). John (M5) saw his wife's strength in being willing to stay in the marriage as an indication that it was worth fighting for and saving. He described his turning point as more of a process rather than one moment of realization or a specific experience. He said:

That was the good part, the positive part, and at least in my case it was not just a Saturday afternoon that I realized I really wanted to stay committed to Rhonda and all of that. For me, it sort of feels almost like you come out of a long illness, and you start to feel better and you start to feel stronger, and you can eat and you can walk more. That's what I sort of remember, as I remember back on it, where I started to realize that I could come out of this too and I didn't feel that it would only be fine until maybe the next affair comes along or presents itself. I started doing things, we started doing things that would make our relationship safe. (#M5-7)

For John (M5) the turning point process was more drawn out and involved a sustained progression toward where they wanted to be in their relationship.

The participant descriptions of turning points captured both the general and specific dimensions of this portion of the reconciliation experience. In general, a turning point was described by participants as a mental recognition of the value of the marriage relationship and a related desire to continue it. In specific circumstances, a turning point could result from a variety of mechanisms including a reflective re-commitment to the marriage, an experience of working together that generated new hope, or a gradual realization of a spouse's willingness to keep trying in a difficult situation.

Key Turning Points in the Reconciliation Process

While there were many turning points that participants identified as important to their reconciliation process, there were five common themes that emerged and stood out in

analyzing the narratives. These particular themes that reflected key turning points were: (1) Realizing one's own commitment to marriage; (2) Seeing a commitment from their partner; (3) Regulated mental health; (4) A sense of hope; and (5) Forgiveness. Participants in the study identified certain experiences or moments of understanding that helped them turn toward reconciliation and these key themes stood out.

Realizing One's Own Commitment to Marriage

A strong and consistent theme emphasized by participants as a turning point was realizing one's own commitment to the marriage and its continuation. Recognition of one's own commitment came from a variety of motivating factors. Some participants relied on their beliefs about avoiding divorce as one source of commitment, as well as their sincere desire to remain married. For others, commitment came from a realization that marriage is fragile and that it takes work to maintain it. Five sub-themes that emerged as reasons for realizing one's own commitment to marriage were identified throughout the narratives: (1) Beliefs about avoiding divorce; (2) The desire to be married; (3) Importance of work in maintaining marriage; (4) Shared history in the relationship; and (5) Setting an example for others. Nine out of eleven participants stated that realizing their own commitment to continuing the marriage was a turning point in getting their marriage back on track.

The first sub-theme that aided participants in realizing and affirming their personal commitment to marriage involved their beliefs about and experiences with divorce. As an example, Matt (M1) had very strong beliefs about divorce and the possibility of divorce being an outcome of his marriage. He said:

Divorce was not, you know, not...[it was] a word I just hated. And I did not want, you know...I just dreaded even hearing that word or any talk of that, that wasn't going to happen, because I don't even go down that road. And so it was, it was not even an option to me. I mean, I just took it completely off the table [for] myself,

you know that that wasn't going to happen in my marriage. I was not giving up. You know, no matter what. (#M1-3)

He was determined to do whatever it took to make his marriage work and prove his commitment to his wife. Looking back on the marital threat he stated:

I never, I never truly, myself, I never gave up on our marriage. I totally, you know...I had always been committed to our marriage. When we got married I made a commitment, when we said our marriage vows that we were going to be together for rich or for poorer, for sick...you know and health and everything. And I felt very strongly about that, that I was not giving up on this marriage, no matter what. (#M1-3)

Matt's strong belief and desire to avoid divorce reinforced his personal commitment to do everything in his power to prove to his wife that he was in the marriage for life. This personal commitment endured even through all the hard parts of their relationship. In another case, Ryan (M2) came from a family of divorce and observed, "I'm from a family of divorce, like, my father's been married three times. My mom's very poor, and being and seeing that you really can leave any time you like, then the only reason to stay is because you want to" (#M2-7). His family experience with divorce led him to strongly believe that in a marriage both people have the choice to stay or to leave, and if you want to remain married then you personally commit and do what it takes to make that happen.

There were a variety of perspectives shared by participants regarding why they perhaps carried a belief in avoiding divorce. For example, Jessie's (W3) strong belief about avoiding divorce was rooted in her deep Catholic faith. She stated:

I am Catholic and I take my religion very seriously, my vows very seriously. I thought I can't divorce because if I divorce in the Catholic Church's eyes I could no longer receive Communion, and I couldn't do all the stuff I wanted to do in church. And I could have applied for an Annulment, that takes a year, and I wasn't going to do that. (#W3-2)

She made a religious commitment to her husband, her family and the church that she was not willing to break, no matter what problems came about in the marriage. Reflecting on that personal commitment motivated her to work with her husband to make their marriage work. The same pattern was true in Sandy's (W4) experience. She said, "We're both Catholic, so that has, I know for him, it has a lot of weight [referring to divorce]" (#W4-1). Sandy (W4) went on to say, "Well, when you stand up in front of a whole church of people and then...it's like you don't want to make a liar out of yourself" (#W4-4). She found motivation for her commitment in the religious vows she took and the promises she made to her husband. She noted that it gave her motivation and said, "It made me want to stay married and maybe reach that goal of 50 yearsIt made me realize that, when we made those promises in the beginning, we're still trying to keep those promises" (#W4-4). In a somewhat different pattern, Rhonda (W5) had mixed feelings about divorce, but part of her motivation was that she did not want to deal with the repercussions of divorcing her partner. She stated of reaffirming her commitment:

At that point, I was ready to re-think it because it seemed like I was going to take a foolish chance. But I got to thinking about the idea that at that point I probably would have ended up sharing my family and my children with this other woman. It was like I couldn't divorce him and get him out of my life. He would not just disappear just because I ended the marriage. He was going to be there at weddings and I would need to be figuring out all of my holidays with him. I just couldn't walk away from it. So, weighing that out I decided that I would go ahead. (#W5-4)

Rhonda (W5) was not turned off by the idea of divorce in general, but instead she disliked the ramifications of what divorce meant for her life in the future. She considered whether she was willing to assign a different role to her husband in her future, and stated frankly, "I didn't want to share it with somebody else. That was kind of in the short term. I just didn't want to accommodate that other woman [in our lives]. Even though I didn't believe that

would last [the affair]—I wanted to win” (#W5-9). She believed and recognized that divorce meant more than just the ending of their marital relationship; it was a change in her life that meant he would still be around but not in a way that she wished to accommodate.

Beliefs about avoiding divorce therefore played a significant role in causing participants to realize anew their commitment to marriage and pursue reconciliation.

Melanie (W6) talked about her parents being married for a long time and instilling in her that a marriage is something that is forever. She said:

My parents were married for 50-some years before my dad passed away, and I guess I always felt like once I was married then I was married forever. It was just something you had to work through when you had difficult times. (#W6-3)

Although she and her husband and gone through hard times and she felt at times it would be easier to not be a part of the relationship any longer, she had a strong belief about marriage being a life-long commitment. She stated:

I guess that in my generation, or at least in my parents' families, neither one of them—there were no divorces. I guess that in a way I felt like I didn't want to be the one that failed, so I wanted to work on it and make things work. (#W6-5)

It was important for her to stay in her marriage and continue the legacy that her parents had set for her. After one failed marriage already, it was also important for Andrew (M6) to make this marriage work. He explained:

The reason for that, in large part, was because I know the pain that happened from my divorce. Melanie had never been married before and the popular culture of “let's get a divorce”—it tears families apart. It doesn't just impact the husband and wife, but it impacts the kids and the parents and the rest of the extended family. It's a lot of pain and a lot of grief. (#M6-7)

It was not his family's history with divorce, but his own divorce that shaped his belief about marriage and the pain that divorce caused.

This theme seemed to be of similar importance among both men and women participants that were interviewed for the study. Similarities among participants regarding this theme seem to be more related to participants' experience with divorce in their family and their corresponding beliefs about marriage and divorce rather than due to gender.

The second sub-theme associated with realizing one's commitment to the marriage simply involved the desire of participants to remain married and experience again the happiness that their marriage could bring to them. John (M5) stated that he feels that he and his wife are meant to be together and he could not imagine a life without her. He said of his commitment to being together:

I think that realizing that truly Rhonda and I, are truly each other's lifetime love, that person that it is impossible when you really think about it in your heart of hearts, that there really isn't anyone else who would fill all of those needs in a relationship and a marriage. The friendship, the romance, and just slogging through life together in talking about money and other mundane things. (#M5-6)

His reaffirmation of his marital commitment came from reflecting on their experience as one another's "lifetime love" and his ultimate belief that she is the best person for him and he is the best person for her. Ryan (M2) expressed similar sentiments when he said, "The only benefits that counted was how happy I was. Very much thinking about, well, I enjoy my life now. I enjoy it with her" (#M2-7). Andrew (M6) also expressed, "I would not trade Melanie for anything. We are husband and wife, but more than that, we are friends" (#M6-5). For spouses who described the desire to remain married and enjoy the happiness they had previously realized, their focus on happiness together in the good times trumped the trials and tribulations they went through with their partners. This pattern led them to appreciate what they valued in their marriage and realize their own commitment to its continuation.

In this pattern, it was primarily men who talked about their desire to be married and how that factored into their commitment to the marriage. Men in this study seemed to be able to focus on the positives of their relationship as a motivating factor in helping them to re-commit and want to reconcile. For men, this mental investment in the positive benefits of marriage for themselves (and hopefully their partner) seems to play a role in their efforts toward reconciliation.

The third sub-theme which facilitated a realization of personal commitment to marriage emerged in participant explanations of the fragility of marriage or the need for hard work to maintain a good relationship. Mike (M3) felt that people give up too easily on their marriage and that you have to work hard if you want to make the relationship last. He said, "If we are still together through all this, I mean. nowadays people quit too easy. [They say], 'First time I have a problem, I'm done.' I don't quit. So, just keep trying" (#M3-5). Debbie (W1) further talked about how fragile marriages can be and how easily a relationship can be derailed. She said:

It makes you realize how fragile marriage is and the amount of work it takes to keep it going. And how special it is, and I think in our fast-paced world, maybe those road bumps happen for a reason so that you do need to pause and recognize, you know, what is important here. (#W1-8)

She felt that some relationship threats come about to remind you that you have to pay attention to the importance of the marriage in your life and that it will not manage itself.

She commented:

You have to fight for your marriage and work together, and not just throw up your hands, and after we got back together I think both of them [their children] were thrilled obviously, but also said, "Well, it's not easy." Whoever said it's easy is not telling the truth. (#W1-7)

For these spouses, the experience of working hard to maintain a strong marriage generated a clear recognition that a strong personal commitment was needed in the relationship. For Debbie (W1), her commitment to her marriage showed her that the relationship needs to be constantly tended.

Melanie (W6) had a mindset that a marriage is something that you work for and that it is not something that can be set on autopilot. She stated:

I guess those things always come into your mind because divorce is so common in the world today. I guess I never felt, even though it was tough times, I always felt like somehow we would get through it. That is what you did. You just worked through your issues and moved on. So, I guess at those times when things are tough, you have to look for the times that you had good memories and think of how to get through this tough time right now and get back to where it was a positive experience and life is good. (#W6-3)

She knew that tough times did not mean she left her relationship, it just required her to work harder to make it work. She said:

My beliefs that I wanted a marriage and that there was nothing that we couldn't overcome if we just wanted to and worked together. I guess we came to a point that we felt it was worth working on but it's not going to happen overnight, it's going to take time, but it was worth working on it to save marriage. (#W6-11)

She and other participants indicated that perhaps it took a threat to the marriage for them to see the fragility of marriage and reaffirm a commitment to the importance of work in maintaining the relationship.

Both men and women in the study identified the reality that marriage requires work. Also, both men and women equally expressed the sentiment that often people give up on their relationship too quickly and felt that it requires sustained effort in a marriage to work through the hard experiences. This sub-theme did not seem unique to either gender.

The fourth sub-theme associated with realizing one's own commitment to the marriage centers in the shared history that spouses have created with their partners and how hard it would be to walk away from that. A number of participants commented that in reflecting on their shared history it was painful to consider discarding the investment and memories that they shared with a partner. For example, Matt (M1) talked about the history he and his wife Debbie (W1) have together. He said:

Well, number one is my love for my wife. I mean, we were high school sweethearts, we grew up across...we lived across the street from each other and always were growing up. We dated for, what, 7 years I think before we got married. We got married young—21, 22. And, you know, we just have done so much together. (#M1-6)

Matt (M1) did not strongly question staying with his wife, and in looking back upon his past and shared history with her that sense of commitment was only validated. Debbie (W1) had a similar outlook. She said:

I love him! Deep down inside, I love him. [I] always have and we've been together since we were teenagers. So I just think we grew up together, we're not the same people we were obviously when we were 15, 16, but I love him and he's been like my rock through a lot of tough times. And so, I would hate to throw it away and I can't imagine in today's world, starting all over or being alone. It's like we've been best friends and I think we still are. (#W1-6)

The thought of starting over again and not being with Matt (M1), particularly after reflecting on their long friendship and shared history, was hard for Debbie (W1) to think about and it was not what she wanted. Sandy (W4) felt the same way when looking back at her years of marriage with her husband. She said:

Um, I, when you try to, when you look back at 48 years it's kind of hard to throw it all away. We have 10 children and 33 grandchildren. And so far they think we're a shining example and, ah, we have a lot of investments in the marriage and it would be a shame to call it quits now. (#W4-1)

Sandy (W4) saw her marriage as an investment that she had put a lot of love and memories into over a lifetime. She further expressed that she wanted to see how far they could go together. Thus, being with someone for a significant period of time and sharing a special history with them can motivate strong personal commitment in marital partners. John (M5) said of his relationship, "We had already had such good life experiences together. There were so many things that we enjoyed doing together" (#M5-11). Rhonda (W5) also talked about how much they enjoyed each other and what they had been through together. She said of her decision to recommit to their marriage:

We had enjoyed each other for so long. He was always somebody who made me laugh and I enjoyed spending time with him. We had so many memories together. We had done so much [together]—the whole grad school thing, moving to Norway and experiencing that together, working at the stupid theater in Minnesota. Planning our wedding it was very much "our" wedding. (#W5-10)

As she recalled the important events in her life, it was very apparent that Rhonda was happy with her choice to stay and continue making history with John (M5). The rich experience of a shared history across time between partners may serve as a powerful reminder of what commitment can produce and aid spouses in realizing that they wish to continue that commitment.

The value and meaning of a shared personal history seemed to be an anchor that both men and women held onto when considering the end of their marriages. Both women and men in the study expressed in a similar manner that their relationship history together and the experiences they shared were worth fighting for and preserving.

The last sub-theme which reflected upon the individual commitment of spouses was seen in participants' desire to be an example for their family and friends. In her interview, Jessie (W3) stated that she has had great examples of marriage set for her by her parents

and her husband's grandparents who have been happily married for years, and she wants to be such an example for her children. She observed:

I think his grandparents, his mother's parents, are wonderful examples, because they've been married for 64 years and we look to them for a lot of guidance, you know. I think it's hard on Mike because my parents are involved in our life every day. They're here in town. They help us with the kids. And I look to them as an example for my marriage and I think it makes Mike feel bad because he doesn't have that. His parents aren't here. (#W3-6)

She feels that maintaining her commitment to her husband will be a good example of how you make a marriage work, similar to what she has seen from her parents and his grandparents. Sandy (W4) also wants to be a positive example to her children and grandchildren. She said:

[To be an] example to the children and just the idea that we put in so much time together, and it would be like if you took your family pictures and cut him out of every picture. It just wouldn't be the same, I mean, it's a whole lifetime of events is what it is. (#W4-3)

Sandy said that all of her children believe that she and her husband have always had a great marriage and are shining examples of a happily married couple. She has always wanted to live up to that belief and present a positive example through continuing commitment and effort in their marriage. Debbie (W1) insisted that she wanted to show her children that marriage is hard work but it is worth the effort. She said:

But I think over all the motivations, probably the one common thread, I think it's different but yet, one common thread is probably that our family is very, very important. And our children are very important. And not that we'd stay together for it, but it's, we're trying to serve as an example to them that marriage is hard and it is tough, but overall it's worth it. (#W1-7)

She also explained that it was not just setting an example for their kids that was important to her, but also to their family and friends who were struggling in their marriages. Debbie (W1) said:

I have many, many friends and neighbors that have known us for 30 years, and it's like, wow, you know, you guys were high school sweethearts and you're still married. I mean, that's unheard of. People look at us and think that we're just role models for marriage, and I think we just believe in the institution of marriage and believe if there's any way of helping other couples have what we have, it's something worth fighting for. If it's genuine and it's worth fighting for, then we've done our job. (#W1-9)

Some participants wanted to share with others, whether children or long-time friends, that it is possible to get through the hard parts of a relationship if they were willing to be committed to each other and work hard. This desire to be a positive example assisted them in realizing their own commitment to marriage and making it work on a continuing basis.

The motivation to set a positive marital example for family, friends and children (or grandchildren) appeared more often among women than men. Women spoke in their interviews about the importance of showing to others, including children, that marriage is something worth fighting for and instilling that value into their family members. In addition, they commented on the value of showing their friends and family members that they made it through the tough part of their marriage. Although this ideal was mentioned by one or two men in the study, it was more common among the women interviewed and perhaps showed their commitment to the public value of their marital relationship to children, family members and friends.

Seeing a Commitment from Their Partner

Another common theme which acted as a turning point toward reconciliation for spouses was seeing the marital commitment exhibited by the other spouse. Many of the participants indicated that an important part of their own decision to stay in the marriage was seeing the same commitment from their partners. In situations where one partner betrayed the other partner in some way (infidelity, etc.), it was a pattern clearly pinpointed

from both the offending spouse and the betrayed spouse. In a sense, the status of the marital relationship was in limbo and it was clear that each partner did not feel they could make a decision to move forward and stay in the relationship without knowing that their advances would be reciprocated. This pattern was important because the decision to reconcile thus hinged to a degree on the willingness of the partner to show evidence of his or her own marital commitment.

Seeing the commitment of one's partner was illustrated in a variety of ways that had an impact on the decision to reconcile. Debbie (W1), at first, was very frustrated at how seemingly comfortable her husband was with their relationship situation. She moved out of their home and in with a friend while her husband, Matt (M1), stayed in their home. She realized that this was not how she wanted their relationship to be. She said, "I didn't feel him reaching out to me to make it work. I just felt that he was pretty cat...cozy here at home and we weren't going anywhere. And that was a little bit of a turning point realizing I do want to make the marriage work, but wasn't feeling it coming from him" (#W1-4). In this case, Debbie felt that she had taken a stance when she moved out and she did not feel that Matt (M1) was making the appropriate changes and reaching out to her in the way she wanted him to do. It took some time and patience, but during a counseling session Debbie (W1) finally saw the commitment she needed from Matt (M1). She stated:

I felt Matt actually reaching a breaking point where he recognized finally what I was needing to hear him say, with the counselor coming right out and saying, "Are you afraid that you're going to lose Debbie?" And for him to break down and cry and say, "Yes!" You know? "And are you willing to work on, on building that trust, that level of trust?" and to see him, I felt, actually you know reaching for my hand and realizing, hey, we can do this! (#W1-5)

Even though Matt (M1) had been making efforts to reconnect with Debbie (W1), it took this experience in therapy for Debbie to feel those efforts. She said, "I think for me it was

being that he was willing to work, to work at it" (#W1-5). For Debbie, a recognition of her spouse's commitment seemed to involve a conscious and intentional declaration on his part that she could observe.

In another situation, remorse from his partner was what it took for Ryan (M2) to feel that Mary (W2) was truly committed to their relationship working. He said, "I think to an extent she was looking for forgiveness, because in the end, like if she didn't feel bad about it, well even at that, like, I remember her saying that, 'Not that I did anything wrong, but that I feel bad about this, and this happened'" (#M2-8). Although Mary (W2) was not physically unfaithful to Ryan (M2), there were still feelings of uncertainty surrounding the situation. For Ryan (M2), it was helpful for him to see that she felt remorseful about the incident and felt that what happened was inappropriate. He said, "It was just like, okay, you're willing. Yeah, I'm willing too" (#M2-8). He understood that what happened was something that she felt badly about and she made it clear that it was not something she was interested in pursuing and wanted to continue on with their relationship. Again, an observable declaration of commitment seemed to spur his recognition of her commitment to their marital future.

In John's situation (M5), he was not certain what to expect from his partner regarding forgiveness for his betrayal and a commitment to their future. After he revealed multiple affairs, John (M5) was not sure his partner would be willing to stay in the relationship with him. He said:

I had to make commitments to fidelity and the relationship and everything, but Rhonda is the one who really had to overcome the most, because I was the one that was doing what I was doing and she was the one that had to forgive and accept, and then ultimately trust that I wouldn't do this anymore. (#M5-4)

John (M5) felt that he had the easier part of re-committing to the marriage, while Rhonda (W5) had the hard part of forgiving and trusting. He said, "After everything I had done, she was willing to keep going and to keep working at it and to just accept that past and forgive that and trust my words when I said that I was done with that part of my life" (#M5-7).

John (M5) also talked about Rhonda's (W5) acknowledgement of her contributions to their dissatisfaction as something that he felt made the re-commitment process easier for him.

He said, "I think that Rhonda coming to me and just sort of saying that, and actually letting me know that she was making an effort with some of these things, I think that was very helpful when we were getting back together" (#M5-10). John (M5) said that he felt a stronger commitment to their marriage knowing that both of them were contributing to the betterment of their marriage. He stated:

She did make the reconciliation process a two-way street even though the damaging part of the experience came from my side of the relationship. However, for us to get back together, she was willing without my prompting or encouragement to extend that olive branch, and she did that on her own, and it was very helpful and made the process of us getting back together much easier. It also made our bond more sincere, because I think that if we lay ourselves open to something it just makes the healing process more strong. (#M5-10)

It is easy to consider that the one who has betrayed their partner would need to work to make the necessary changes and show evidence of remorse or changed behavior. However, it may not be recognized as often that reconciliation is a two-way process and both partners need to be active contributors to make the relationship work. Rhonda's (W5) extension of forgiveness to John (M5) over time enabled him to see her commitment to their marriage. Rhonda (W5) felt that she saw the same level of commitment from her husband John (M5) as she was putting towards the marriage. She said, "I think we had the same level of commitment. I don't know. It is what we both wanted. We loved each other and had this

'big picture' view of life together, kind of a big adventure together" (#W5-10). Reaffirming that they shared the same view for their future together helped both of them to stay in the marriage.

Seeing a commitment from one's partner was something that both men and women identified as important as a turning point in their marriage toward reconciliation. Both men and women needed reassurance from their partners that they were not in the reconciliation process by themselves. Also, men and women in the study expressed that it felt comforting to know that their partner showed commitment as well. In circumstances where a spouse had been betrayed in some manner, the dynamic of reconciliation and negotiating re-commitment seemed to hinge on evidence of a continuing desire to work on the marriage by the offending spouse. For the offending spouse, there was a reliance on the betrayed partner's willingness to believe in the effort to change and stay committed despite having hurt the relationship. Women were on the side of the "betrayed spouse" and men were more often the "offending spouse" among the couples interviewed in this study, but the study is not large enough to ascertain if this is a common gendered pattern in marital reconciliation.

Regulated Mental Illness

As was addressed previously regarding factors that contribute significantly to a marital threat, mental illness can affect not only the person living with it but his or her loved ones as well. Another key theme that emerged in the analysis regarding turning points was that gaining assistance to cope with mental illness facilitated the possibility of reconciliation. A mental illness that is left untreated or unacknowledged can alter a person's ability to function in day-to-day life and relationships. A number of participants in

this study talked about how regulating their mental health helped them be the person they wanted to be, as well as the partner they wanted to be. The regulation of someone's mental health can look different for each person. It may mean being medicated for a condition; it may mean being taken off certain medications; or it may mean finding the right person to talk to about their feelings. It may be some combination of all of the above approaches. The mental illnesses reported as troubling in the narratives were mainly depression and/or anxiety. Six of the eleven participants identified the regulation of their mental illness as being an important part of their turning point process.

Mental health concerns do not typically appear all at once and thus may gradually erode an individual's functioning or a couple's relationship over time. Matt (M1) noticed himself sinking deeper into his depression and did not recognize himself any longer. He said:

I was on medication and stuff or whatever, for depression, and I was just not myself and you know, and things....and finally ah, I was just laying around, you know, sleeping. I was just...I was depressed. I was just totally out of it. And I don't know if it was....exactly, if something just came up, but one day and stuff, I just decided, you know what, this is not me. This is...I am not my...the person, you know, I have been or whatever. And I remember going to my doctor and I said, I want to get off of these, this medication and basically what they ended up finding and stuff or whatever, is that I actually had a Thyroid condition and stuff and they didn't have me on the right kind of Thyroid medication. That's why I was so tired, so they got me on some Thyroid medication, got that all cleared up. Within a month she weaned me off all my medication for my depression and things just turned right around. (#M1-4)

For Matt (M1), it was a physical difficulty that was adding to his depressed state and he found that once he regulated the physical condition he was able to better manage his depression and feel more like himself. He said, "I got off the medication and got on my thyroid medication and things, then they started, you know. seeing the Matt they knew. Things were switching around at that point" (#M1-4). After Matt (M1) was able to manage

his mental illness he was better able to respond to his wife's wants and needs in the relationship and started heading towards reconciliation.

Recognizing a mental illness and the need for treatment or support is an important part of getting it regulated. Ryan (M2) realized that his mental illness was something that was getting in the way of him feeling like himself both in life and in his relationship. He stated:

My first thing is that I have these depression tendencies. I don't necessarily, I always go, if I have an issue, I go through slight levels of depression. Not deep depression, ah, so the first thing I want to do is sleep. I sleep and I get mad and I want to be alone. (#M2-6)

Ryan (M2) was able to identify the patterns of his depression, which better allowed him to understand how it was affecting his life. He said:

Once I realized that I was going to, going in a bad direction and was able to get help, that actually opened us up to [help] and that was the turning point, I was able to look into myself as part of a relationship. I was able to look at myself as an individual and then see myself as a part of the relationship and be able to make the certain changes that allowed us to work more evenly together. (#M2-3)

He was able to observe the effect that managing his mental health had on his relationship, which allowed him to make some further changes and be an active member of the relationship.

In some cases, mental health concerns occur as a result of experiences that a spouse has gone through in the past. Mike (M3) had suffered the abuse from his father growing up. PTSD from being a war veteran, and the loss of a child and his ex-wife. His mental health is something that he constantly battled to maintain. He stated:

Pretty rough [referring to past]! But I just have to kind of cope with that the best I can. And I was in the Army, so I've seen a lot of stuff. Previously, I was engaged and stuff, she was Vietnamese and my dad was in Vietnam so that was kind of a hard...and we lost a child and then she ended up killing herself over that. Well, I

have talked about it. At first I dealt with it through physical and chemical needs, but I made some changes and that was a long time ago. (#M3-6-7)

Mike (M3) stated that he felt the tactics he had used to deal with his pain were unhealthy and unhelpful, but that he eventually learned to talk about what he was going through. He stated that he had never been medicated for his mental illness, but he felt that he was managing it on his own, in his own way. He said, "One part of me that is just there and I just sweep it away and keep it that way. I cope with it. She [his wife] tries to, she brings it up sometimes, but I think I'm dealing with it the best I can" (#M3-7). Through internal processing and talking with a friend, Mike (M3) feels he is doing what he thinks is best for his mental health. In the case of Andrew (M6), his past experiences as a war veteran also contributed to his anger and mental health concerns. Counseling and an anger management class helped him understand why he had particular reactions and also helped him to regulate his patterns of mental health in a more healthy way. Regulation of mental health concerns can be a critical aspect of life management that improves a person's well-being and enables a marital relationship to function with less stress and more hope for a continued future.

In this study, it was mainly men that discussed how regulating their mental health positively helped their marriage and contributed to a positive turning point. This pattern does not suggest that women do not suffer from mental health issues which may need assistance. However, the sample in this study showed the effects of men regulating their mental health for the betterment of their marriage. Future studies should look at larger and more diverse sample sizes to understand more clearly the effects of mental health regulation on marital difficulty and reconciliation.

A Sense of Hope

The fourth theme identified in the study analysis that participants reported regarding turning points was that something led them to feel hopeful that they could work to save their marriage. This theme was identified as a sense of hope but it did not have other specific features. Rhonda (W5) talked about how the first step you take towards reconciliation is based on hope. She said, "I guess the first step in that was acting on the hope that it could be [whole again], and trying to structure things to make that happen" (#W5-5). Sandy (W4) said that for her the sense of hope came from somewhere deep inside her as she held on to the belief that things would get better. She said:

There's something deep inside that keeps thinking that it will get better, or things will change or maybe we will follow that dream, like we had this spring planned to go to Niagara Falls and keep traveling on to the East coast. But then he fell and hurt his back. There's always, well, tomorrow or next year, and I think that comes from a farm background. If you have a rotten year one year, the next year might be better. (#W4-3)

It may have been her long-term perspective nurtured by a background in farming that helped her see past the immediate threat and see hope for their future together. She said, "I don't know, I think each day you get a different, maybe, every morning when you wake up you have another chance to start over" (#W4-2). Jessie (W3) had a similar belief: "I guess every day, [being a] new day, gave me hope that things will get better" (#W3-7). She held on to the belief that every day had the potential to be different or better.

Women in the study were able to identify gaining a sense of hope as a turning point in their marriage toward reconciliation. While some participants found a sense of hope through some experience or action, others found hope from nothing other than the desire for their marriage to continue and be satisfying again. A sense of hope could be fueled by such beliefs as "each day is a chance to start over" or "things will start to change." Women

articulated this theme more commonly than men and it seemed to be an important element for them in the possibility of marital reconciliation.

Forgiveness

In the participant situations that involved a spouse being mistreated or betrayed, or in offending or mistreating one's partner, forgiveness was a key sub-theme and it played a key role in the turning point process for each of these spouses. Forgiveness was an important part of the process that eased the possibility of reconciliation.

The circumstances that truly seemed to require forgiveness to launch a turning point involved some type of infidelity or other significant betrayal (dishonesty about money, etc.). After engaging secretly in three affairs, John (M5) was amazed by his wife's love and strength when she committed to working on their relationship and forgiving him (M5). He stated:

The big statement for that [wife's role in reconciliation process] is that I really firmly believe that she wasn't just taking me back, but that she really did love me enough to forgive (emotional). I really believe that and that was enough to make me believe in it too. That was pretty important. (#M5-11)

Taking John (M5) back would not have been enough to make their marriage work. He felt that her forgiveness was the main factor that determined whether they could continue on and be successful in their marriage. Rhonda (W5) talked about how this experience was a lesson for her that changed her view of forgiveness. She said:

It was one of my greatest, probably the greatest life lesson I have had in forgiveness. I always thought that forgiveness was kind of a condescending thing. [I thought] that there was one person who was wrong and the other person was right, and the person who was right kind of chose to overlook . . . I realized that this is really about wanting things to be right between us. That is really what mattered—for the relationship between the two of us to be whole again. (#W5-5)

Rhonda (W5) talked about how forgiveness does not involve excusing a person's behavior, but, in this case, figuring out what she wanted from their relationship and doing what it took to make that happen. John (M5) talked about how she put her own pride aside and truly forgave him. Rhonda (W5) discussed an experience with her priest that reframed the idea of forgiveness and gave her something to hold on to throughout the process of reconciliation. She stated:

One of the things at that point which was important to me came as I was talking to my priest. He talked about forgiveness. He talked about when Christ was resurrected and how he still had the scars in his hands. That metaphor, to me, was something I held on to for a long time. I still hold onto it. I felt like I had been a pretty dutiful wife. It wasn't fair that I had this kind of scarred marriage after how hard I'd worked at raising kids and trying to do the right thing. (#W5-4)

This metaphor helped her make the decision to forgive and move through the process of forgiveness regarding her spouse. Even though he had not treated her fairly and she had focused on doing the right thing in raising their family, nevertheless she pursued forgiveness as the pathway to "making the relationship between the two of us whole again" (W5-5). John (M5) reported that her forgiveness did not waver and she did not throw his transgressions back in his face, saying, "After everything I had done, Rhonda was willing to keep going and to keep working at it and to just accept that past and forgive that and trust my words when I said that I was done with that part of my life" (#M5-7).

Time and patience were important in the role that forgiveness played for spouses in the reconciliation process. Rhonda (W5) stated that at first the process seemed "insurmountable" but she found that "time will heal things" (W5-11). Eventually they found happiness again as the forgiveness process occurred. Mary (W2) stated that after she got back from her trip and had told Ryan (M2) about her encounter with the other man, she

did a lot of mental and emotional processing both internally and with Ryan (M2). Ryan

(M2) stated:

I think to an extent she was looking for forgiveness, because in the end, like if she didn't feel bad about it, well even at that, like, I remember [her] saying that, not that I did anything wrong, [but] that I feel bad about this, that this happened. (#M2-8)

For Ryan (M2) it seemed that Mary (W2) needed him to understand her remorse about the situation and also needed Ryan (M2) to forgive her. He eventually came to understand that Mary (W2) was genuine in her remorse and did forgive her. Forgiveness was thus seen as a process rather than as an event among the spouses.

Andrew (M6) found that his wife took a process of time to trust him again and he worked at it for two years after he confessed an extramarital indiscretion to her. Melanie (W6) said that forgiveness was something that was hard for her to do in this situation, even though her faith beliefs tell her that forgiveness is an important part of life. She said:

It is our responsibility to forgive those people . . . if people ask you for forgiveness then you should forgive them. That is what I grew up believing. You should be willing to forgive others. None of us are perfect. We all make mistakes. So, if I want to be forgiven of my shortcomings, then I should forgive others. I think it was probably one of the more difficult things to forgive, but I had to be willing to forgive and know that he would get past that difficulty and we had to get past it and not dwell on it. If we wanted a good relationship, then we had to forgive each other and be able to move on. (#W6-12)

She said that forgiveness was a big part of them being able to reconcile her relationship, even though it was trying. It was a lesson in forgiveness for her. She stated, "I think that I learned the power of the Atonement and of being willing to forgive, and knowing that our Father in Heaven forgives, and if He is willing to forgive then we need to forgive" (#W6-13). Andrew (M6) agreed that the biggest step towards reconciliation that his wife made was forgiving him and making a commitment to move forward in the relationship with him.

Forgiveness was something that both men and women suggested was important as a seminal turning point in their reconciliation process. Both men and women identified its healing nature in their marriage. Neither gender avoided the concept of forgiveness as a critical theme in the reconciliation process, but instead both acknowledged its significant power in opening an opportunity for genuine reconciliation.

Resources and Coping Mechanisms Important to Reconciliation

Specific resources and coping mechanisms are important in getting through for individuals through any challenging situation. This is no different in the process of marital reconciliation. The participants identified many mechanisms that they found to be helpful in reconciling with their partner. Ten main patterns identified as important resources or coping mechanisms in the reconciliation process were: (1) Faith; (2) Journaling; (3) Educational Reading; (4) Social Supports; (5) Introspection/Self-work; (6) Counseling; (7) Recognizing triggers; (8) Communication; (9) Hobbies; and (10) Dating. Many of the study participants experienced some interaction with these patterns in general, although there were varying degrees of the experiences within each theme.

Faith

The first pattern which emerged as a common theme among resources used during reconciliation was the role of faith in the reconciliation process for many of the participants. Both male and female participants talked about many facets of faith that they utilized to guide them through the reconciliation process, such as Bible studies, spiritual friends, reading, and consulting a member of the clergy. Participants who highlighted this resource stated that faith was something that helped them hang on to their marriage and then guide them through their threats.

One dimension of faith relied on by participants was the personal strength it provided for them in coping with challenges or adversity. John (M5) talked about how the faith he and his wife shared gave them a common understanding and common ground to begin again. He stated:

I think faith had something to do with that. I was sort of rediscovering the process of going to church, and feeling more comfortable in a relationship with God, and just being able to discuss the idea of sin and forgiveness and all of those things. Rhonda has always had a strong religious commitment and strong faith. I think that that helped an awful lot. (#M5-9)

Their faith together helped them explore the ideas of forgiveness and realize their commitment to each other and their relationship. Rhonda (W5) talked about the fact that her faith gave her a constant source of meaning in her life when everything else seemed out of place. She said:

Experiences in my faith were important to me. The Episcopal Church is really into liturgy and "marking the year," and it's all about cycling through the prayers again and again at times of the year. These things have a familiarity to them. Even when you feel in life like you are really being tossed about, there is still this kind of familiarity in your faith that pulls you along through it. (#W5-7)

The familiarity of having something solid in her life was always something she went to when feeling overwhelmed by their situation. She stated that having their faith-based community was really important in helping find themselves again and feeling connected to the community. Jessie (W3) talked about how her faith helped her get through all of the hardship they faced in their marriage. She felt that her faith helps her remain positive even in the face of adversity. She said, "Just a lot of my faith in God helps me get through things and, you know, I try to be positive. I mean, people here are like you [and] are so positive, well it is hard, but I try to find the positive in every situation" (#W3-5). Debbie (W1) found similar strength in her faith, saying, "[It was] just my own personal faith, to get, I just get

strength from God, that all things happen for a reason and nothing's impossible without him, so I always felt that there was ray of hope" (#W1-6). Her husband Matt (M1) also talked about how his faith played a big part in his ability to get through the hard parts of their marriage and then making the reconciliation process possible. Turning to faith as a source of personal strength during difficulties thus served as a primary coping mechanism for some participants.

Another aspect of faith that participants identified as helpful was association with fellow believers that acted as a support system. For example, Jessie talked about how her faith friends helped her through her hard times as well. She observed:

I started relying more heavily on my faith, and just prayers and prayer partners and that type of stuff, to kind of get us through things. You know, I have friends that have gone through divorce, so we've read about things and the horrors of it and we thought we don't really want to do this. (#W3-2)

Jessie found "prayer partners" through her church that she confided in and she asked them to pray for her. Debbie (W1) also participated in Bible study and relied on friends within her faith-based community. She said:

I was involved in Bible study fellowship and I ran into a friend who has a very strong faith, and she just pretty much said that she believed that our marriage was going to work. And it was just odd that she would say that and we just prayed together. (#W1-2)

Debbie felt a lot of reassurance when she spoke with friends in her faith community about her situation. For Melanie (W6), fellow believers in her faith community played the role of friends who stood by her at a difficult time and provided assistance through watching children so she and her husband could go to counseling. She felt these friends in her faith community gave her a support system that she needed and could rely on.

The practice of prayer played a big role as a coping resource for some participants in the reconciliation process. Both Debbie (W1) and Matt (M1) said that they did a lot of praying to get them through their concerns and seek comfort. Matt (M1) said, "We relied on our faith quite a [bit]...both very similar. We did a lot of reading, a lot of praying back and forth" (#M1-7). He talked about reading the Bible and different prayer books that he and his wife would do together and separately as a way to reconnect and mend their marriage. Jessie (W3) spoke about how she often sought prayer to feel comfort and recruited the help of her church's prayer chain as well. Sandy (W4) said that talking with her parish priest was helpful and that she prayed a lot, even though she stated that faith was not as important to her as it was to her husband. For Andrew (M6), prayer was also used as a coping resource:

The main thing is that I prayed a lot. In my prayers, I asked God what I needed to do. I got feedback from my ecclesiastical leaders and the counselor, but it was more a question of me, in my own mind, committing myself to my marriage in the same way that I did when I committed to my religion. I had made a commitment to God that I would be the best person I could be in my faith. I knew what felt right in response to my prayers. I took it to the Lord and I listened. I tried to apply those things in my marriage. (M6-15)

Prayer activities seemed to provide participants with a variety of perceived benefits, including personal comfort, greater ability to cope, and a sense of individual direction in the relationship.

Emphasis on faith and related practices as coping resources were similar among both men and women, of those participants that identified faith as important to them. Both men and women noted that they relied on their faith to guide them through the reconciliation process. This study did not use a sampling mechanism that would specifically target people of faith for the study; however, perhaps the individual

personalities of participants or the region of the country (central and upper Midwest) resulted in a greater likelihood of recruiting people who valued faith.

Journaling

A second pattern that served as a useful coping mechanism for some of the study participants during the reconciliation process was journaling. In particular, a few of the women participants identified journaling as a pattern that was helpful for them to sort out their feelings and get them through trying times in their marriage and the reconciliation process. Debbie (W1) said, "I journal, I love to journal. So I journaled a lot of what I was feeling" (#W1-5). She said that it helped her understand her feelings better and process through all of the inner turmoil of reconciliation. For Jessie (W3), it was very therapeutic for her to write down her experiences and how she processed them. Journaling was her escape that allowed her to manage the feelings she had and work through them, and ultimately then work through the problems in her marriage. Rhonda (W5) also identified journaling as something that helped her through the immediate threat to their marriage and eventually the reconciliation process. She said:

I did a lot of journaling. I picked up my own style of meditation, getting up in the morning and praying and journaling. I don't journal as much anymore, but I still get up early in the morning and have that quiet time and pray. Actually, that was really important to me. (#W5-7)

Journaling was a time of reflection for her that she made sure she took every day. She recalls looking back at her journals and noticing the progression of their experience and how she made sense of it all. She explained:

Also, looking back over my journals a year or two later, I could see where I had come from and that I had made a lot of progress. I could see things that had seemed really challenging at a previous point and also that I had moved beyond that [point]. There were also some self-discovery things. One of the things that got us into that point was thinking that maybe I was just expecting too much. I am a mother. I have

a career, and maybe that should just keep me happy. That contributed to the strain on the marriage. So, in journaling I was finding out more about who I am and what I really like, and just being okay with pursuing my interests and trying to accommodate that within my life as a mother and a career person. Having girlfriends, just friends, and a life outside of what I had. (#W5-7)

Journaling was an introspective process for Rhonda (W5) that she found helpful in finding her way through reconciliation, as well as finding out who she was and what she wanted out of their relationship and for herself. The journaling process thus seemed to act as an emotional release and also as a resource for noting personal insights and progress in the relationship.

Journaling was a theme that was mentioned predominantly among the women participants of the study. No male participants identified journaling as a primary coping strategy that they employed. Women felt that writing down their thoughts and feelings allowed them to process their experiences better and helped them sort out their decisions. It was their way of finding clarity in the experience of marital reconciliation. For women caught in the daily challenges of family life and the intense feelings associated with marital stress, journaling seemed to provide a release valve for them to hear their own personal voice and let it ring more clearly in their process of seeking insight and making personal decisions about the relationship.

Educational Reading

Reading about what makes a marriage work, using a variety of self-help or faith-based books, was a third pattern that emerged as a coping resource among study participants. This process was something that mostly male participants identified as helpful to their reconciliation process, although it was also mentioned by one or two women. Matt (M1) remembered:

[I] did a lot of...any book I could get my hands on, you know, that was related to, helping out with marriage, or you know the financial issues, on how to...things like that. Did a lot of reading, so I was pulling books and I was buying books, because I had all this down time. I mean I was around this...I did do, you know, quite a bit of reading and everything like that as I went through [it]. (#M1-4)

Matt (M1) felt that he had a lot to learn and a lot of down time, so he filled his time with reading anything he thought would help his situation. He would take the information he learned and try to apply it to his marriage, to better it. Mike (M3) also noted that he would read books about how to handle his feelings and better his marriage. He felt that it was more beneficial to him than processing it with someone else. Andrew (M6) also found reading helpful as he sought to deal with his situation. Rhonda (W5) was one of the women who also identified reading as something that was helpful to her. She said:

I read a lot of books. Going back, it's probably not really quality stuff, but I would go to the public library and go to the marriage section and just start pulling books. I was getting whatever kind of pop psychology was there. You find little bits and pieces that are helpful. That is my natural inclination. Now and then I would give John something to read. (#W5-7)

It felt natural for her to seek out educational resources to help her make sense of what was happening to her and how she could deal with it. Human beings passing through a life crisis instinctively seem to seek knowledge that might help them to process the experience and cope more readily with it. The usage of educational reading as a coping resource in the reconciliation process fits this pattern.

Although women did note educational reading as a resource they used, more men in the study commented on it specifically and found it helpful as a main coping resource. For these men, they indicated that learning about marriage and sustaining a positive relationship through reading books on the topic helped them in making decisions and understanding their situation and partner better.

Social Supports

The fourth theme identified among common coping resources in the reconciliation process was the use of social supports. More female than male participants identified relying on their friends and family members as a means of finding their way through the reconciliation process. Seeking social support was noted among a majority of participants as they struggled with marital difficulty and the reconciliation process.

The individuals that were typically sought out as sources of social support included trusted family members, friends, and ecclesiastical leaders. Sandy (W4) talked about how she sought the confidence of her priest when she felt overwhelmed with the situation. She said, "Well, I think if you're really in trouble maybe you should, like I sought help with a parish priest, um, in different times through my marriage" (#W4-5). Her priest was helpful not just because he was a religious leader but because he was someone that she had known for a long time and felt close to as a source of support. Jessie (W3) confided in a close friend. She said, "...my family, my friends. My dear friend, who passed away in '06, she was a big person to help me cope with a lot of stuff, so when I lost her it was really hard" (#W4-5). Jessie (W4) was tearful when talking about her friend, but it was apparent how much she meant to her. Debbie (W1) also used her friends and family as sounding boards. She said:

I sought out my friends; friends that know me well enough to not give their opinion, but just to be supportive of me, and my family. My family knew that I left and everybody was supportive. And even our kids, it was like you have to do what's right, what's right for you, um, to keep it working. (#W1-5)

It was really important to her that her friends and family understood what she was going through and offered support rather than advice. Melanie (W6) found great solace in selected friends who were supportive of her despite not knowing all of her difficulties:

Good friends were important to me at that time. I don't know that they knew everything that was going on, except that they knew it was a tough time and they were there for me. I think that was a big part. We still keep in contact with some of these friends after all these many years. I don't know that she really knew what was going on, she knew that we were having a tough time, but she was just there for me. Also, I had friends that were willing to help and to take the children so we had time to work on the relationship, to have time away from the kids, because at that time they were two years old and a baby, so it was a lot to do. (#W6-4)

She also indicated that she valued the dimension of social support rather than specific advice on her relationship issues.

While women noted social support from others as a top coping resource they accessed, men found social support from others to be helpful but perhaps not as vital in their coping efforts. Matt (M1) stated:

I'm not one to go out and have, you know, a best friend that I went out and talked with and had problems. I kept everything inside. So I didn't talk a lot. My brother who is six years older than me, knew about the situation we were in. In fact I didn't, when we were separated, my parents did not even know about it. I did not tell my parents what was happening, ah, just because I knew it would be devastating to my mom and dad. And I knew things were going to work themselves ba...they knew we were having some tension and problems with what was going on, but they never knew that Debbie had moved out. Ah, my brother did because I did, you know, talk to him and he would try and call me up and say, "Hey, I'm here for you. Any time you need to talk or whatever." And I knew that was there, and a couple times I'd talk with him a little bit, just kind of opened up on how it was. But mainly I dealt with it myself. And just worked it through. Whether that was, probably not the healthiest way to do it, but that's the way I dealt with it. (#M1-5)

He talked about feeling it was helpful to know that his brother was there for him, but he did not always feel talking to him was what he needed to get through the reconciliation process. He also talked about not telling his parents about the situation because of his fear of how they would react to the news. He stated that he knew it would work out, so he did not see the sense in upsetting them. Ryan (M2) talked about how when he has an issue with his wife, Mary (W2), he felt it was most effective to talk with her about it. There were

some times when he needed to process his feelings first before going to her, and in those situations he noted:

If I have an issue with Mary, Mary and I talk about it. Um, I may on occasion, in anger, not in anger but when I need to debrief pretty much, when Mary's not the person I want to debrief to . . . I will find a friend more often than not and debrief kind of with them and just kind of express generally what's going on, or what I'm frustrated with. (#M2-6)

In this case, Ryan (M2) uses his friends to sort out his frustrations before going to his wife. He did not indicate that he needed validation for his feelings, but instead he wished to have a person to organize his thoughts with before he and his wife talk about it.

Women sought out social support from others as a primary resource in dealing with their struggles while in the process of reconciling their marriage. Women interviewed in the study emphasized the "support" dimension of the experience and the comfort that occurred through having a safe emotional harbor. In particular, it seemed important to them to be able to process their feelings with someone they felt accepted by and have someone support them. For men, those who identified social support as a coping resource noted that it was important to know that someone was there for them, but typically they chose not to utilize it as often as a resource. Instead, they relied more on formal sources of support such as counselors or religious figures.

Introspection/Self-Work

The fifth theme identified in the analysis as a key coping mechanism was personal introspection and/or self-work. This pattern was discussed more frequently by men than women among the participants. All of the male participants talked about the importance of processing through their feelings alone or internally.

Engaging in a process of self-reflection or personal introspection was valued as a useful component of the coping process by each man who participated in the study.

Women did mention this topic but it was focused on more intently by male participants.

Matt (M1) highlighted this pattern when he said, "But, mainly I dealt with it myself. And just worked it through. Whether that was, probably not the healthiest way to do it, but that's the way I dealt with it" (#M1-5). He acknowledges that he felt it was not always healthy to not reach out to others, but for him it was easier to work through it on his own. Ryan (M2) recalled, when asked about his turning point and if his wife shared the same turning point or something different:

I doubt that she shared the same pivotal moments, um, because a lot of the pivotal moments for me, from my perspective, were actually realized alone, where I'm by myself being like, oh, you know what, yeah that's really important, or this is a really key thing that's a big change, or that big issue that really defined us as a relationship, as a couple. (#M2-5)

It was often in times of self-reflection that Ryan (M2) felt he came to better understand their relationship. He went on to say:

A lot of that alone time allows me to process and think about things and evaluate whether or not what is going on is positive or negative, and that's when I come to the realization of, that's when I'm able to think about [and] put myself in their shoes. (#M2-6)

While a number of female participants talked about the importance of talking with their friends and family to reach some personal understanding, Ryan (M2) and other male participants found a similar value in being introspective.

Personal introspection and self-work seemed to be useful both for clarifying one's feelings and intentions and also processing what individual changes needed to occur for the relationship to continue. Mike (M3) thought of introspection as a time to process all the hard experiences he had gone through in his life and then minimize their impact on the

relationship. He said, "One part of me that is just there and I just sweep it away and keep it that way. I cope with it. She [his wife] tries to, she brings it up sometimes, but I think I'm dealing with it the best I can" (#M3-7). John (M5) recognized that he needed to make changes and spent introspection time figuring out what he needed to do:

It was something that I needed to fix in myself, and then if I fixed that in myself that would facilitate that this relationship, which had been good except for my falls from fidelity, that our relationship would be a good and strong relationship. If I could overcome that and figure out what it was that led me to do that. I remember in marriage counseling the woman, the counselor, asked me, "Why do you think that you have the right to do that?" I could not answer that. I did not know. It was not like Rhonda had done something to me. There was not any real reason for that. I still don't honestly know, except for fear of something or I don't know, but I felt that if I could figure that part of myself out that this relationship was the love of my life. I needed to do that. I needed to figure out fidelity and once I did that things would be better. (#M5-11)

It took some self-work for John (M5) to gain personal insight and make changes that allowed him to be the right partner for his wife. He reflected on who he was and why he was unfaithful to his wife and then made some necessary changes. Andrew (M6) conducted a similar process of personal introspection, looking for an understanding of himself and what he needed to change. He recounted:

[I spent time] reflecting also on whether that was the smart thing to do. It helped me to understand more about why I did what I did, and to put it into perspective. Then, asking deep questions in terms of how I really felt about Melanie and how I felt about our marriage. As I reflected on those things, it helped me to forget all the noise and other stuff and realize what was really important. It helped me to focus on what was important. The fact is that I loved Melanie. We love our children and we are committed, at least I am committed to her, and I am hoping that she will be as committed to me as I am to her. (M6-14)

While other coping mechanisms were helpful, this process of personal introspection seemed to be a central element in the coping process utilized by men interviewed for the study.

Women interviewed in the study found a need for social supports, whereas men often seemed to find it more helpful to process their thoughts and feelings internally. When they utilized informal social support from others it was often done with the focus on helping them to process their internal thoughts and feelings. The men in the study reported that they were able to reach a better understanding of their relationship and their partner by taking time to be by themselves and think about their problems. Again, this seeming gender difference did not indicate that women were not introspective or did not engage in self-work, but simply that men seemed to focus on this coping mechanism more intently than women did in their discussion of coping resources and strategies.

Counseling

The sixth pattern that emerged from the study analysis as a helpful coping mechanism was participation in marriage and individual counseling, if participants felt that it helped their marriage. For some of the participants, counseling was found to be very helpful to the reconciliation of their marriage. Other participants did not find it as helpful, due either to a bad fit with their counselor or a lack of commitment to the counseling process. However, the counseling process was identified frequently as a resource that was sought out and which was used on both an individual and a couple basis.

Counseling was described by participants as a helpful coping mechanism because it allowed them to learn how to see the other partner's perspective and learn communication or other skills. For example, Matt (M1) and Debbie (W1) both talked about how they found their counseling experience to be very helpful and that, at the time of the interview, they would still periodically check in with their counselor to touch base. Matt (M1) said:

Yeah, it was, yep [referring to the helpfulness of counseling]! We went separately at times to the marriage counselor, we went together, you know, as couples. Ah, so

yeah, it was good to have that third person there as our mediator, to give us a whole different kind of perspective, you know. Open up my eyes. open up her eyes. Try to get, so she could understand my views a little bit, you know where I was coming from. So yes, I think that, you know, that really helped also. (#M1-7)

The counseling experience helped Matt (M1) see the issues from a different perspective. He talked about the value of having a third party there to mediate the conversation as well as to point out things that were helpful to him. Debbie (W1) said, "That is superb as far as lots of support [referring to counseling]. And, to have a counselor that's not, that never picked sides and really focused on us as a couple and what we could do, definitely helped us" (#W1-6). The role of the counselor as a neutral third party who did not pick sides and believed the couple could survive in their relationship was important for Debbie (W1).

Andrew (M6) and Melanie (W6) also found significant value in counseling. She observed:

Counseling was important. . . . The marriage counseling was a big part of it too. At least from my perspective, it made me think about what was going on in the relationship and it helped me to see that it takes two. Even though it wasn't me that went out [on the relationship], it still takes two to work at it. . . . It made me look at myself and see what are the things that I could do to make sure that this did not happen again. Also, to see his perspective and to know that we both wanted to work at it. (W6-8)

Each of them suggested that counseling was critical for them in the process of learning to see the other partner's perspective and work on communication skills.

At times it was important for couples to experience counseling together while at other times individual counseling was a significant element of the process. Matt (M1) talked about how important it was that they saw their counselor together regularly to keep them accountable. He said:

We had...again kind of, over the years, have seen this counselor a little bit with our ups and downs and when this came about, I mean we were on a regular basis where we were going to see her. And so, you know, she kept us working, you know, on a plan, and again dealing with everything that we had been going through. (#M1-7)

Similarly, John (M5) and Rhonda (W5) also sought counseling. John said:

We did counseling together, we did counseling apart, and I know that she had women friends who were very important to her, especially in the early times when we were going through some pretty heavy-duty stuff. We had counseling sessions together, and it was not a pleasant time. (#M5-7)

John (M5) indicated that going to a counselor together early in their marital difficulty was very hard because of all the raw emotions that were coming out. Though he found it somewhat helpful, he seemed to feel the individual counseling he and Rhonda (W5) did was more significant. Rhonda (W5) said, "We went together and then I went a little bit longer by myself. . . . I just went and that helped me to just keep talking stuff through" (#W5-6). She found her own work with the counselor beneficial even after John (M5) and her stopped going together. In addition to the use of trained counselors, some spouses found it to be helpful to discuss their marital situation with an ecclesiastical leader. John (M5) stated, "We had a priest that both of us loved and respected a lot. I talked to him. I know that Rhonda did too" (#M5-11). Sandy (W4) found that visiting with her parish priest allowed her to see a different perspective than the one she had. Helping individuals to reframe their perspective and understand things from a different view was one of the significant benefits that counseling offered the participants.

Participation in counseling, either individually or as a couple, was a common theme that recurred widely among participants and was identified as important by both men and women. Both women and men expressed the sentiment that they found counseling to be helpful in the reconciliation process, both in individual and marital sessions. Spouses expressed that it allowed them to better understand their partner's perspective and come to a middle ground, be accountable for their efforts in the relationship, and gain knowledge and skills that could be applied in making the marriage better.

Identifying Triggers

A seventh pattern that emerged as a valuable coping mechanism among participants was developing the ability to identify triggers that in the past had resulted in common arguments or areas of contention. This theme was predominantly identified by men in the study rather than women. In particular, this theme was associated with identifying "trigger sources" of a problem and the underlying causes so that problematic patterns of communication or behavior could be identified and avoided in the future.

One aspect of identifying and controlling negative triggers that affected the relationship dealt with communication issues. Matt (M1) discussed developing an awareness of what the "red flags" are in their relationship so he can stop the arguments before they happen. He stated:

I think now we've, we see those, you know, what do you want to call them, trigger points, or whatever...but if something's coming up, I mean, even if we're talking financial, budget, and we're sitting down at the table and we don't agree on something or whatever, and we can kind of feel that that tension is there and it's like, okay, it's time to stop. . . . Now's not the time to finish talking about this. So we know, before it escalates out, you know, and gets into the big shouting match, or whatever, and somebody goes stomping off...it's like maybe it's not the time to talk about it. So, yes, I think we've grown to that point where we know how to kind of talk and how to deal with that a whole lot better. (#M1-8-9)

In this case, both spouses have an understanding of negative triggers, and if needed they call off the conversation until they can talk about it calmly. Andrew (M6) remarked on becoming more aware of such triggers for himself and learning to improve his reactions and communication skills. He explained:

I never tried to antagonize her, but I think in the early days as we were first married I made some mistakes in communicating with her. I was still dealing with some of my anger issues from before. I would sometimes respond harshly when communications were not going the way they should. That was a mistake on my part and it took me a while to realize that. There was a lot of growing as we learned to understand each other. I needed to be able to understand what she meant when

she said something and put things in context. I had to learn to deal with my own anger issues, and I did go through anger management subsequent to that. It helped me to determine what were the things that caused me to react the way I do. I am one who it takes a lot to get angry, but when I get angry I get scary. I learned how to listen to myself and determine if I'm going into an area of danger, and what are the steps that I take to bring the temperature back down to defuse it. (M6-7)

The learning process associated with this coping strategy required spouses to become more self-aware and proactive in noticing triggers that could lead to unhealthy reactions or couple arguments.

In addition to communication issues, identifying triggers that could be harmful in the relationship was associated with modifying behaviors that had been harmful to the relationship. This seemed relatively common when infidelity had impacted the relationship. For example, John (M5) talked about warning signs that he had to be aware of in order to remain faithful to his wife. He said:

Some of this stuff is long enough ago that it's not dredging up the past, but it is good every once in a while for me to think about what was going on and where I allowed this to happen. I can know the warning signs myself so it doesn't happen again. (#M5-12)

Being conscious of his past experiences allows him to keep himself accountable to his relationship and the promises he made to his wife. He said, "I realize this is a part of myself that I have to be careful—just be aware of it and not let it happen again" (#M5-13). For John (M5), this process was not about identifying triggers that would save them from an argument, but instead it acted as a check and balance system to continue his fidelity to his wife. It also allowed his wife Rhonda (W5) to be reassured in his fidelity and not feel as if she had to constantly be questioning him. His attention to possible concerns helped her also so that she did not feel insecure in the relationship. Another participant, Andrew (M6).

noted that he took steps to be aware of danger areas and minimize concerns about extramarital associations:

I picked up a lady [for church] and made sure that one of my boys was with me to take her, simply because I know that Melanie is concerned about that and so I ask, "Is this something that Melanie would be comfortable with?" If it is not something that she would be comfortable, then it is not worth it. She is more important than anything else. (M6-12)

For situations in which a spouse feels that trust has been violated, the process of rebuilding trust can be supported as the spouse who changed their behavior identifies triggers of concerns and takes steps to minimize future difficulties.

The process of identifying triggers and minimizing possible concerns was a theme articulated among both men and women, but it appeared to be more important for men than women. Men spent more time talking about how they can use this process as a preventive measure to avoid relationship challenges, which was important to them in not revisiting the threat that plagued their marriage. While this was more common among men in the study, again it may have been that the types of issues raised were fairly specific to the small sample in this study and a larger sample would yield a differing pattern of results.

Communication

Another significant pattern which was a useful coping strategy noted throughout the narratives was the importance of improved communication in the process of marital reconciliation. Participants talked about learning to communicate with each other in a way that allowed their partners to feel understood and validated. Communication issues were commonly identified as a relational concern and improving communication was a key strategy for healing the relationship.

For both men and women, communication difficulties arose at times because they did not fully realize some of the difficulties in how they communicated. Ryan (M2) realized that he was unintentionally mistreating his wife through the way he was communicating with her. He would do something wrong and then somehow convince his wife that it was her fault. When he realized this was happening he talked to her about it. He said:

The real issue was that we weren't communicating together, but you, she ends up being the one to apologize for doing something wrong. So, um, we had this discussion and from that point on it was, okay, we were both really aware of, alright, there is not a right or wrong in this situation, it's just what we're dealing with and we have a choice to either blow up and separate or blow up and work it out. (#M2-4)

He felt that talking with his wife was a very important aspect of his relationship. Mary (W2) expressed how she felt that she and Ryan (M2) could talk about anything, no matter how hard the topic of conversation was. She appreciated that they were able to process through the hard stuff by communication and know that they could come out well on the other side of the conversation. Melanie (W6) indicated that she found value in learning to communicate more clearly with her spouse:

I could be saying something that he didn't actually understand. Giving my perspective and having [the counselor] help him to see my perspective [was important], but also for her to help me in seeing his perspective [was helpful]. Sometimes, even though we may be saying the same thing, we are looking at it differently. I felt like there was somebody there that helped us to look at each other's perspective and work through things. (W6-9)

She felt that she was a "closed person" and they did not share feelings in her family, so learning to open up to her spouse and help him understand her feelings was important for their reconciliation efforts.

Another aspect of communication that spouses felt it was important to learn focused on listening and being attentive to what the other person had to say in the relationship.

Debbie (W1) discussed what their relationship looked like when they did not communicate with each other. She said:

And I think the speed bumps can be handled by recognizing how you handle that stressor. And I know how I handle it. I don't handle it well at all and communication is so huge, because the times that Matt recognizes that I'm under stress and he doesn't say anything and neither one of us talks about it or addresses it, it just festers and it builds and then it's awful. And we know, we know that it's going to be awful. And we always ask each other why, why did we wait so long to talk or to get it fixed? (#W1-3)

She recognized that ignoring the problem just created a bigger problem. She also noted that after they started addressing things with each other, the problems were not as bad as they had been. She mentioned how important it is for both partners to get a chance to speak their mind and how surprised she was when she stopped and actually listened to what her partner, Matt (M1), had been saying. She stated:

And we've said it all over the years, how much communication is important and to give the other person a chance to speak. I tend to, for me, I like to talk so it's never ever a problem, but to think that you know what someone else is feeling or thinking about is to pause and give that silence and let the other person say [it], because many at times at counseling I would be totally shocked at some of the things he'd say, and all along he was trying to say things and I wasn't listening. I was too caught up in my own thoughts. And not, I think, for myself just that: to learn, to listen, and to be there for each other. (#W1-7)

Debbie (W1) emphasized that improved communication was not only about learning how to talk to her husband, but also actually listening to what her husband had to say. She said that she learned a lot when she just stopped and listened. Matt (M1) indicated that learning how to communicate with his wife made him more aware of the words he should use and how to listen in a way that she appreciated. He explained, "I think we're more in tune to each other, a little bit, you know. . . . She loves to talk. I mean if something's bothering her.

she has to talk. . . . And sometimes I just have to sit back and listen to her" (#M1-8).

Listening and other kinds of attentive communication practices were important elements of the communication process for participants to learn.

A further dimension of improving communication that was discussed by participants was using communication for building and healing the relationship. For example, Matt (M1) realized that he did not have to fix all of Debbie's (W1) worries and problems, and that sometimes communication was just about being there for his spouse. During their time of reconciliation, John (M5) had a hard time hearing what his wife had to say. He stated:

Early on she would just say that we needed to go for a ride together and she needed to talk, and those were usually a chance for her to really, just, they were really cathartic for her and they were really painful for me. That is neither here nor there, but it was a chance for her to express her hurt and anger and sense of betrayal. (#M5-7)

It was therapeutic for Rhonda (W5) to be able to lay all of her feelings out for John (M5) and he learned that he needed to hear it, no matter how hard it was. Rhonda (W5) talked about the communication deal they worked out together to make it through the process of reconciliation. She stated:

One of the things that we did . . . he had the right to do this too but he never used it. I had the right to call "going for a walk" if I just needed to talk or needed to get an answer from him about something. I could ask to go for a walk and we'd go out and walk around the neighborhood and I could ask him anything that I wanted to ask, about his relationship with her or about our relationship, and he would answer me. He had to look me in the eye and answer me, and not be "put upon" about that request. That was the deal we made about working it out. (#W5-5)

She needed to get the answers to the questions she had about his infidelity and this was a way that she felt she could better process and move on. She talked about how much she appreciated his openness with her and how much respect it showed that he looked her in

the eye when he answered her hard questions. It showed his sincerity and opened the lines of communication between them. John (M5) further commented on the value of open communication and said that now they have a really good time talking to one another. He said:

It was so important that we realized that we enjoy each other's company. We laugh a lot and that's a big thing for us, just to enjoy each other's sense of humor, and we'll go out to dinner and we'll talk. We actually don't just sit there and eat and then go to a movie or something, but we actually enjoy to communicate. I think that has gotten stronger. When you first start a relationship it tends to be easy, at least it was for us, but then you hit that middle period, and now we're in a good period again and we have been for ten years or more. (#M5-6)

It took some time for John (M5) and his wife to get back into their stride of being able to enjoy each other's company, and it took hearing a lot of hard information from both of them to reach that point. Rhonda (W5) talked about what she learned regarding the importance of communication from their experiences: "It's okay to be open with each other and to really listen. You don't need to be afraid of saying things to each other. We don't use fighting words or anything, but when I have to talk to him about I know that I can do that, and he can talk to me" (#W5-12).

Whether improved communication involved fixing problematic patterns in communication, learning to listen to one's spouse, or using communication to enhance closeness in the relationship, improved communication was an important coping mechanism in facilitating the reconciliation of both men and women. Both reflected that it was something that they learned was more important going through reconciliation and good communication is a preventive measure to avoid similar threats in the future.

Hobbies

The ninth theme that participants identified as a useful coping mechanism during the reconciliation process was how finding time for their own individual hobbies and activities bettered their relationship. This theme was common for both men and women in the study. Participants talked about how important it was for them to have their own interests and make time for those interests.

One of the reasons that participants said time for personal activities or hobbies was valuable is because it helped to take their mind off of the problems within their marriage and allowed more patience to work through those problems. Jessie (W3) talked about the activities that she enjoyed doing that helped her find some peace within herself. She stated:

Writing is such a wonderful outlet, or even listening to relaxation CD's, and sleep CD's, we have those, they are fabulous outlets too. And, like at night before I go to bed, I like, I love, I like the show 'I Love Lucy' so I'll watch one of those and have it, I love Chamomile Tea because it relaxes the nervous system, so I have a cup of that. I do my journal, and I talk to God and I sleep like a baby. (#W3-8)

She talked about how important it was for her to do these things for herself and how that helped with her facing the struggles in her marriage. Continuing stress takes a toll on spouses in the marital relationship and these activities seemed to be stress-reducing activities that were unique to each spouse. Jessie (W3) also talked about some community activities she does. She said, "You know, I bowl on Monday nights, which is one thing that I get to do that I like, and I take our kids to lessons on Tuesdays and I teach Catechism on Wednesdays" (#W3-7). These activities provide outlets for her to stay connected to the things that are important to her. Her husband, Mike (M3), talked about the hobbies he likes to do as well that give him time for himself. He said, "Well, I mean I have my hobbies, and like I said E-bay and baseball cards and stuff. I took a class at the Rec Center every once a

month so. Just did a lot of reading" (#M3-3). Melanie (W6) found it helpful as her husband supported her in taking time away from mothering so that she could participate in community activities with friends. Such activities played a role in reducing stress and enhancing the happiness of individual spouses, which helped with the happiness in the marriage relationship.

Pursuing a personal hobby or outside activity also played a role in allowing spouses to feel support from each other. Sandy (W4) talked a lot about how her husband keeping busy helped him deal with many of the problems they had been going through, and how she found it helpful as well. She said:

Actually, he got into something all different. He, he started volunteering a lot. He did homes for the Habitat (for Humanity). He volunteers for a church. He volunteers in the community and he also gives away bicycles. He's got about 1,000 and he gives them all over the state. About 300 a year, so then he got to see that there are other families that were worse off than we were and it made a big difference to him. And being a grandfather also changed him (#W4-2)

She noticed how large an impact it had on her husband to busy himself with things he found important and believed in, so she worked to support his interests. She also found it impactful for herself as well. She stated:

I went around the state and talked about how farm families could survive a farm failure. I worked with NDSU. And that helped me and then we became care takers of 80 acres of tree research, so we kind of went from farming our land to taking care of somebody else's land, and it didn't look like there was a future or there'd be a future, so that was one of the major ones, I think. (#W4-2)

It was important for Sandy (W4) to feel useful again. She had been a housewife for so long that she needed something outside of the home to help her find her happiness again. In his situation, John (M5) rediscovered his love for golf and talked about how it was such a big part of his life before he and his wife faced some of their challenges. He said that getting

back to that and having his wife support him in that was a huge factor in their reconciliation process. He stated:

I used to golf a lot even though I don't so much anymore. She just never got that and never paid any attention to it, but it used to be a pretty important part of my summer and my time off from band and music. I do remember her talking about that and [her] saying that she needed to accept more of some of these things, like sports or watching a Twins baseball game. (#M5-10)

John (M5) noted that even though he does not play as often as he used to, just knowing that his spouse understands the importance of his interests was enough for him. Similarly, Rhonda (W5) talked about the importance of reconnecting to her own interests outside of her relationship and her family. Support for a spouse's interests could thus be seen as a larger signal of generosity toward one another in the relationship, which was important for the healing process to occur.

Men reported that reconnecting to their hobbies had a significant impact on their relationship and their feelings about themselves in the relationship. Somewhat in contrast, women noted that it was important but they also found other aspects more helpful to their reconciliation process. The value of rediscovering and pursuing personal hobbies or outside interests seemed to come down to finding a piece of independence again and having an identity outside of the relationship.

Dating

A final theme of significance among useful coping strategies emerged as many participants talked about the importance of making time for each other and nurturing their couple relationship. Specifically, participants often did this by going on dates, setting aside specific time throughout the week, and doing things they enjoy together. This theme was

seen throughout the narratives and it received emphasis from both the men and women in the study.

Difficulty in the marital relationship can leave spouses feeling distant or alienated from each other. The process of making couple time and using dates to re-connect and nurture the relationship seems to help spouses in overcoming that difficulty. As an example, Matt (M1) talked about an elaborate present that he got for his wife for Christmas that was a play off of the "12 Days of Christmas." He got her 12 individual dates that were pre-planned and spread out throughout the year. He recalls:

We are trying to, you know, we try, especially. I mean...try and go out on a date and I try and be a little more of the...what's the word I want to use, the one who initiates it. So that she doesn't have to always to come up with it. One great thing that I did last Christmas, just to get her, as far as motivation, I made actually her Christmas present last year and it was called the 12 Days of Christmas...And on each one...you got an envelope and it's, each one was sealed up and each one of those envelopes she gets to open up, you know. Day 1, or whatever. Date number one. It was 12 dates, is what it was. So date number one was just, you know maybe something simple, like I gave her, I don't know, I've got my list or whatever, but it was like, I took her out for a cup of coffee. It was just a coffee date. So she would open [it] up, you know, and she would text me and say, "okay, date." and we would go out (laughing), we'd make a date. And then the thing was that she can't open up the next one until the first...the date is done. So she has no idea what all 12 are. So we've been, actually over the year, been working this through. She still not to the 12th one yet, so right now we're actually at ah...the last one...the one we got coming up here right now is a theater type date. We're actually going to go see Laurie Line, so it's a concert type of theater date, but we've gone out to a movie, we've done a picnic, you know. Just things like that. (#M5-9)

Not only did Matt (M1) make spending time with his wife a priority, but he also made it special for her, which is something that she expressed she needed more from him. He was intentional about all the gifts that he gave her and made sure each one was something that she would enjoy and that they would enjoy together. He wanted to bring some romance and spontaneity back into their relationship. His wife, Debbie (W1), also talked about how much she enjoys the time they make for each other. She said, "It's like to go away for a

weekend and to have that, let's get away from work and home and the dog and just focus on us. So, little things like that are important" (#W1-8). She needed special time together that is away from the daily grind of their normal life to refocus on their relationship. Dating activities and time together allowed spouses some time to recharge their marital battery.

In addition to re-connecting in the relationship, dating activities served to remind spouses of the fun and enjoyment possible in the relationship and why they married one another in the first place. Both Mike (M3) and Jessie (W3) talked about how much they now enjoy the time that they make for each other. Mike (M3) said, "We do that [date night] once a month. We do dinner, dancing, whatever. We definitely need that release there. The adult time" (#M3-10). With three kids, Mike (M3) talks about the importance of having time as adults and as a couple and calls it a release. Jessie (W3) talks about the activities they enjoy doing together. She stated:

Oh yeah, we go to the Hawkeye football games together. I have season tickets. And we go to one Cubs game a year together. You know, we try and get out once a month for just a date night or something, so, yeah and we like to watch...there are certain shows we like to watch on TV, like, 'Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmer' and these paranormal shows, we both kind of like that stuff, you know, so we do those things. (#W3-9)

She talked about the joy they get out of going out into the community and spending time together. Making time for each other was something that Rhonda (W5) and John (M5) also talked about as meaningful to their reconciliation. Rhonda stated:

We have done a lot more to make time for each other and to have fun together. "Date night" kind of stuff over the years. Actually, we have a number of traditions that we have started, so that every year when something rolls around we celebrate it. That has been good and it involves celebrating our marriage. Our anniversary now is just absolutely sacred. We have made a pledge that we will travel every year together. We go abroad or travel together. Part of the tradition of that is planning it. (#W5-6)

She spoke of all the traditions that she and her husband have created that mark the momentous times and the seemingly insignificant times that they want to make special.

John (M5) talked about how much he and his wife have a passion for traveling and how they have now made that a priority in their life together. He stated:

We travel together now. We actually have a thing, and it's hard to enforce, but we try to travel abroad once a year. For all of the "big" things like the anniversaries or the birthdays we travel, because that is something both of us really enjoy and we travel really well together. So, last year when I turned 50 we went to Norway for two weeks, and this year for our 25th anniversary we're going to go down to Oaxaca, Mexico for a week, and then next year when she turns 50 we're going to figure out where we want to go. For us, those kind of things are really, really helpful for keeping us strong and keeping our commitment to each other. (#M5-5)

John (M5) talked about how much traveling does for their relationship and how setting up trips gives them something to look forward to and enjoy together as a couple.

Both men and women indicated that making time for each other and continuing their marital courtship was important to them in re-connecting within the marriage and healing during the reconciliation process. Spouses indicated attention to this coping strategy is something they are intentional about in their relationship to ensure that they stay connected. Men and women noted similarly that when they did not nurture their couple relationship it could not sustain itself.

Perceptions of Gender Patterns in Marital Reconciliation

There were a number of clear gendered themes that were seen throughout the narratives, in particular, how gender played a role in the spouses' perceptions of the marital relationship during and after reconciliation. There were a few themes that were identified among women and also key themes that emerged among men. This section of findings will discuss some of the differences and similarities that men and women exhibited in their description of the reconciliation process.

Women and Patterns in Marital Reconciliation

First, I will discuss some key themes that women experienced in their marital reconciliation process. There were four themes identified by women as important factors that they noticed as being important to them throughout the reconciliation process or took from the experience. The four themes are: (1) Actions speak louder than words; (2) Independence/Inner strength; (3) Female role expectations; and (4) Uncertainty of partner's feelings.

Actions Speak Louder than Words. The first theme noticed in reading through the narratives and conducting a more careful gender-sensitive analysis was that women needed to see some actions behind the words they were hearing from their partners. Women needed proof that a marital partner means what they say and watched for solid evidence that would allow them to stay committed or regain trust. In other words, they had a need for the partner to meet a certain threshold of credibility or responsibility in their commitment for the relationship to continue. As an example, Debbie (W1) felt that Matt (1) was not proving that he wanted to be with her. After she left the home they shared, she wanted to see some kind of expression of his commitment to the marriage and to her. She stated:

When I said I was moving out, he kept saying, "You're not committed to our marriage. I'm committed. We made, we took vows! It's a commitment. We don't leave each other." And to me those were empty words, because what is commitment? And through the process of counseling, to see him willing to work on our finances and go to a financial workshop with me, and our counselor made us sign a little contract with each other, that every Sunday, 2:00 p.m. we would talk about the budget. It's easy when 2:00 comes to, both of us want to avoid it, because that's a stressor for us. But to see him say, "You know what? It's 2:00 and we're going to set the timer on the stove and a half hour were done." Whether we're done or not, just to get us used to talking about things that are uncomfortable for us.

(#W1-6)

It was very important for her to see him make a commitment to work through their issues with finances with her and stay committed to it. In their context, it was not enough that he was telling her that he wanted to relationship to work. She needed to see credible evidence of actions that would go beyond mere words. Her husband noticed how significant it was for him to show her his commitment and started planning dates that allowed them to re-connect. He said:

When Debbie had moved out I would, we would try to, maybe set up a time when we could go for coffee or whatever and go and meet some place. So I would try and make those, you know, times special, you know when I would go and just be, you know, thinking about the times when we were dating before and stuff or whatever and opening up doors for her and stuff, you know? Just getting back to the romantic side that I know she wanted, you know. And that, you know, the little things, that mattered most to her. The things that, to me, didn't really make a difference, but after looking at some [and] reading some of the books or whatever, it's like that really does matter to them, you know. It's like, okay! You know? And so I would try and pick up some of those little things and go from that point. So I was more, more in tune to, I was trying to be more in tune to her needs, on what, you know, she needed and everything at that point. (#M1-5)

He acknowledged that while these things were not important to him, he knew they were to his wife and so he made it a priority. In this process, women exhibited a desire for their spouses to have a genuine understanding of their needs in the relationship and provide evidence that this understanding was translated into action.

Melanie (W6) felt that she needed to see Andrew (M6) make a significant effort to show her that he was committed to their relationship. She said:

Well, he was the one at the beginning that wanted to work on it and was willing to go and get counseling before I was willing to do that. So, I guess that gave me hope. He was actually doing something to show that he wanted the relationship to work, even before I was willing to go to counseling. He had gone a few times before I was willing to go to the marriage counseling, and so to me he was actually doing something that showed he wanted to work on the relationship. (#W6-11)

His actions allowed her to feel more confident in her decision to stay in the marriage. She said:

I think that by his actions, seeing that he really wanted to work on the relationship and he really wanted the marriage to work, that process allowed me to see that he really did want to work on it. It was going to take both of us. It can't be just him working on the relationship, it has to be both of us working on the relationship, and it is a process of forgiveness. It is seeing that actions speak louder than words. To see that action of him doing what he needs to do for him to be forgiven, and as I see him doing those things that he needs to do to be forgiven, then I have the same duty or responsibility to forgive him for those trespasses just like you should forgive anybody. (#W6-13)

In a different example, Rhonda (W5) talked about how important it was for her to be able to ask her husband questions about his infidelity and get honest and open answers from him. Although this process was not comfortable or easy for him, he engaged in the conversations and was responsive to her request. She said that it showed her that he was committed to reassuring her that he was not going to falter again, even if the process made him very uncomfortable. In addition, he started doing things for her as well that showed her that their relationship was important to him. She stated, "He is good about buying me flowers, marking my openings [for a show], and things like that. He cares about the relationship and that is something; he 'cares for' the relationship" (#W5-9). She has seen clear evidence of a renewed commitment from him that has helped her to regain her trust in him and their relationship. In both these and other cases in the study, the female spouse was considering the decision whether to leave or continue the relationship due to a betrayal. It may be that the context of the marital situation also had an influence on the dynamics discussed here. However, the pattern that women indicated in which credible actions speak louder than mere words in the reconciliation process seemed to hold true across varying contexts.

Independence/Inner Strength. The second theme identified in the study analysis was women finding independence or inner strength through the trials in their relationship and their response to the situation. Many of the women involved in the study all identified that through the threat to their marriages and the process of reconciliation they have found inner strength and a sense of newfound independence that they reconnected with or discovered was there all along.

In addition to discovering this inner strength and sense of independent identity, women in the study noted that continuing to nurture and explore this independence and inner strength beyond the reconciliation process was important to them. Jessie (W3) found strength in herself that she was not aware that she had before her trials. After going through suspected infidelity and emotional abuse, she found an inner resiliency that helped her work through her feelings and the problems that she and her husband were having. She recalled, "I learned that I am strong and I am resilient" (#W3-7). Debbie (W1) also noticed a change in herself. She said:

I think that I'm so much more different than when we first got married, and I was very needy and now I'm very strong and very independent and I'm not afraid to do things on my own. So, I don't rely on Matt for a lot of the things that I did back in our marriage. (W1-6)

She now knows what she is capable of handling and that she does not always need to rely on her husband to take care of her. She said, "I recognize I can do a lot more things on my own, if I wanted to. I don't want to, but yet (laughing) I know that I can" (#W1-7). She identified that if the relationship ended she would have the strength to be alright, but that was not the decision that she or her husband wanted.

Women noted that gaining a stronger sense of inner strength and independent capacity was empowering for them in the relationship. Sandy (W4) was a single parent

when her husband was an over-the-road trucker. She quickly found that she was capable of doing many things that she had never done before. It was hard for her when her husband would come back home and he expected her to have the same patterns as before. She noted:

Doing, being in charge of everything and then when he came back off the road I had to relinquish that role, and when he again was in charge and that was extremely difficult, because I had gotten very independent. (#W4-5)

This experience actually helped her through the threat in their marriage, as she was able to depend on herself more and not feel totally lost without him. It gave her an increased confidence in dealing with marital concerns and exhibiting her ability to handle challenges. John (M5) recognized the strength that his wife Rhonda (W5) had throughout his transgressions and going through the reconciliation process in their marriage. He said:

Coming out of that period and just knowing that she was so strong, in that she could live with that type of past, and I know that she is strong and she was then too. [It was the awareness] that she could handle that. (#M5-12)

Her husband acknowledged how much strength and character it required in her to be able to go through that experience with him and for them to make it out the other side. In his case, he relied on her inner strength as a critical resource for both of them to be able to pass through the reconciliation process together. Rhonda (W5) also talked about finding an inner peace that she could connect to through meditation and taking time for herself. She began making herself a priority and identifying her needs in the relationship. The sense of personal empowerment she gained has remained in her life and she values it as a part of herself that was not as strong before their reconciliation experience.

Female Role Expectations and Stresses. A third theme that was noted throughout the narratives was how women in the relationships often experienced a significant strain in

the expectations and stresses between work and home life. Some of the women in the study identified that feeling overwhelmed with their role as a wife, mother and juggling a part- or full-time job led to being disconnected with their partner. Women described how their couple relationships suffered and they further reported feeling unappreciated by their partners.

Feeling overwhelmed with expectations and needs in managing the demands of family life was a common challenge for women that affected their relationship. For example, Jessie (W3) felt that she was constantly doing something for someone in their family and that her husband did little to help ease the stress she was under. She stated:

I like being a wife. I like having my children. I feel like it's a privilege to be married. It's a privilege to have children. I like all of that. I like, you know, if I just had a little more help, or even if I was just told "thank you" once in a while or given a hug or given a kiss once in a while. I wouldn't have a problem with any of it. That's part of my job as a wife, but it's like when I get off work, my full-time job, I have a second one at home that I have to do. (#W3-7)

Jessie accurately reported feeling the burden of the "second shift" that has been identified as common for women in family relationships. For Jessie (W3) it was not the duties that she had that upset her, but instead it was the feeling of being under-appreciated. Debbie (W1) reported feeling a similar strain in her role as wife and mother. She said:

I think it was about 10 years ago, I felt, I was just getting discontented with marriage. It seemed like all I was doing was taking care of the house, the kids and working. And I just, one night I just woke up and felt like I needed a breather. Not that I, I never said I wanted a divorce, I just felt, I just need to have some space and time to think through just, "What is our life all about? Is this all there is?" Kind of a thing. (#W1-2)

Her feelings of being unappreciated had led her to an overwhelming sense of being smothered. She felt she had to reconsider her life situation and the choices she was making and priorities she had. It should be noted that women who identified these concerns were

not unwilling in any way to carry out family expectations, but they indicated a need for greater appreciation and participation by their male partners.

Another aspect of living with female role expectations and stresses in family life was associated with simply managing the continuing demands of parenthood and providing for the family. Being left to tend their ten children due to her husband's work in trucking, Sandy (W4) felt some feelings of resentment when her husband would leave for long periods of time for work. She said, "That was a hard time in our marriage too, where he was gone 3 weeks at a time and I was left with whatever, like trying to figure out how to get off the farm when there's straight snowstorms" (#W4-5). The bitterness she had towards her husband for leaving her alone with the responsibilities of parenting and working caused some strife in their marriage, even though he was doing his job and also providing for the family. The demands of managing family life can place spouses in separate worlds of experience, with women primarily assuming responsibility for nurturing children and maintaining a household. Melanie (W6) articulated the need for her spouse's active involvement in the household for their relationship to improve:

[It helped for him] to be involved at home and help with household chores and the children, so that we would have more time as a couple. It took time for me to realize that he really did want this to work and that he was understanding my issues as a mother in trying to raise these two little kids and all that that entails (being tired, etc.). Being supportive of our family. I think he was involved, but I think that he became more involved in helping and doing the things so that we would have time together, and so that it wasn't just me doing everything. (#W6-10)

She felt that things improved when he became more attentive at home and would focus on taking responsibility for care of their children, as an example, so that she could get away for personal time or do other things. Thus, having a spouse be more attentive to the family

role expectations and stresses placed on them as women and taking greater responsibility for sharing those demands was important to women in the study.

Uncertainty of Partner's Feelings. A final theme that emerged as significant in the narratives was women's inability or their uncertainty in conveying their partner's perceptions of the reconciliation process. It was interesting to ask women how they felt their partner perceived different aspects of the reconciliation process.

In general, most of the women did not feel like they knew exactly how their partners felt about such things as motivation for staying together. This was due at times to the simple fact that they did not feel they knew a partner's feelings on the topic. In addition, if the women did not have certainty about the exact answer then they did not feel comfortable answering the questions and being incorrect or wrongly speaking on the behalf of their partner. When asked if she thought her husband would identify the same turning points that she did, Debbie (W1) responded, "It was probably different. I think for me it was being that he was willing to work, work at it. And I'm not real sure what his was" (#W1-5). When she answered the question it was as if she would not dare to assume what he would say. Melanie (W6) answered multiple questions about her husband's feelings by indicating she was uncertain because they had not talked about such items. For example, while she believed that their motivations were similar for staying together, she was uncertain because she had never asked him that particular question.

At other times the uncertainty emerged because the women felt that their spouses did not communicate much about their feelings regarding the relationship or reconciliation. For Sandy (W4), it was hard to know what he felt because her husband just did not talk about some of his feelings very often. She said:

He, he doesn't share so much his hopes and dreams, like I'll say to him, "What would you like to do," or "What would you like..." he gets sort of...he'll say, "Well, I don't even know myself yet." And then I'll say to him, "Well, maybe you should because life's getting short." You know? (#W4-4)

Sandy (W4) felt that there were many areas in their life where he was unwilling to share his feelings or thoughts with her, which left her feeling less connected to him. Jessie (W3) also talked about how it was hard for her to always understand how her husband is feeling about things. She said in response to a question about his perceptions, "Don't know. I can't read him. I don't know. I'm not sure what his hope is at this point. so...I don't know [in reference to whether she thought her husband found similar hope that she did]" (#W3-7). She said that in other areas of their life, not knowing how he was feeling about their relationship left her constantly questioning his commitment to their relationship. Thus, women sometimes answered the question in a manner that inferred they were unsure of the answer because their partner was hard to read or closed off.

The questions posed to women in the study asking them to reflect on a spouse's thoughts or feelings were perhaps somewhat more challenging to consider, as they dealt with aspects of the reconciliation process such as personal turning points or sources of hope or motivations to remain together. While conversations about the relationship in the reconciliation process are not unusual, it may simply be that higher-order conversations about the reconciliation experience itself are not particularly common among men and women.

The themes identified associated with the experience of women in the reconciliation process seem to reflect their interpersonal journey through the threat to their marriage and their decision to reconcile with their partner. The themes reflect what they learned about

themselves and what they are capable of as individuals, in addition to identifying some of the needs important to them as women in marriage.

Men and Patterns in Marital Reconciliation

There were also a number of central themes that men experienced in their marital reconciliation process. There were three themes identified by men as important factors that were important to them in the reconciliation process. The three themes are: (1) Understanding the needs of their partner; (2) Taking the relationship for granted; and (3) Misjudging their partner's perceptions.

Understanding the Needs of Their Partner. The first theme identified as important among men in the study was the importance of developing a greater understanding of their partner's needs. When men discussed what they took away from the experiences they have had with reconciliation, men in this study talked about how they felt they had a better understanding of what their partner needed from them and their relationship to feel loved and satisfied.

Being aware of the needs felt by a partner and also being attentive to those needs was a learning point for men in the relationship. At times this process involved being more attentive to little things that communicated love while at others it involved learning to listen with patience. The identified needs included where men learned they needed to be more attentive included communication, time together, assisting with children and the household, and other areas. Matt (M1) knew that his wife needed him to be more attentive and to make her feel special. He started being intentional about the time they spent together and how he planned their dates. He said:

Just getting back to the romantic side that I know she wanted, you know. And that, you know, the little things that mattered most to her. The things that, to me, didn't

really make a difference, you know, but after looking at and reading some of the books or whatever, it's like that really does matter to them, you know. It's like, okay! You know? And so I would try and pick up some of those little things and go from that point. So I was more in tune, I was trying to be more in tune to her needs, on what she needed and everything at that point. (#M1-5)

Matt (M1) perceived that the relationship improved as he started paying attention to what his spouse was telling him she needed from him, and actually began putting those ideas into action in their relationship together. He also started to understand and apply what she needed from him for support. He stated:

I'm more careful with...you know, with the words, I think about things a little bit more before I talk to her and say, or if I'm going to do something, just to make sure that I don't say something that I'm going to regret. And then, I can also, my wife Debbie, she loves to vent. She loves to talk, I mean if something's bothering her, she has to [talk]. She's not looking for an answer, per se, from me, she just needs to get it out. And sometimes I just have to sit back and listen to her. She just wants somebody to sound off to, you know, and I've learned that I don't need to say something back. I don't need to fix it, you know, she's just looking for somebody just to hear her talk and at the end just give her a big hug, you know, and she feels a lot better. (#M1-8)

He learned how to communicate with her in a way that will be most effective for him to get his point across and for her to receive it. He also learned that he does not always have to have the answers to ease her concern, and that just listening and offering comfort is all that she was looking for in their communication.

In his relationship John (M5) knew that in order for he and his wife to reconcile their marriage, he was going to have to understand what she needed from him. They would go on walks or car rides and she would ask him questions about what had happened during his affairs and he would answer them as honestly as he could, even though it was really hard for him to tell her about the things he had done. He stated:

Early on she would just say that we needed to go for a ride together and she needed to talk, and those were usually a chance for her to really, just, they were really cathartic for her and they were really painful for me. That is neither here nor there.

but it was a chance for her to express her hurt and anger and sense of betrayal.
(#M5-7)

He understood that she needed those answers and that time to let him know how she was feeling in order for them to mend their relationship. In another example, Andrew (M6) noted, "Some of the changes that I made [involved meeting her needs], and the main thing is that I let her know that I love her constantly. That was something she was never very secure about it" (#M6-15). The reconciliation process sometimes thus hinged on a man's ability to learn and then respond willingly to specific partner needs that were perhaps being unmet.

Understanding and responding to the partner's needs in the relationship could thus include general relationship dynamics (courtship, communication, etc.) or specific needs associated with the reconciliation process (discussion of financial concerns, etc.). The important element of this theme for men was the willingness to learn and be responsive to identified partner needs.

Taking the Relationship for Granted. A second theme identified in analyzing the experience of men in the study occurred as they reflected back on how their relationship was before the reconciliation with their partner. Men in the study commented that they felt that they had been taking their partner for granted. This recognition served to facilitate an understanding in the men interviewed of their role in contributing to the difficulties their wife felt in the marriage relationship.

In their reflections, men in the study felt that they could have been more in tune with their partner's needs and that would have led to more satisfaction in their marriages. This observation fits directly with the previous theme of understanding and responding to

partner needs. Matt (M1) talked about how intentional he is now about the needs of his wife and how it used to be very different. He said:

I didn't realize a lot of things on, you know, how much I took for granted, ...over the years, you know, what I just basically took for granted from my wife and so forth and all the things that she has done or whatever. (#M1-8)

He recalled the time that she moved out of their house and how he reacted to that. He said that he could not believe that she actually left and he thought that he would call her bluff.

He stated:

I mean this time she packed up and, I remember the day that she left and stuff or whatever, she packed up her suitcase and stuff or whatever, and I think we had had an argument or whatever and she goes, "I'm going over to my friend's house and stuff and I got a place to stay," and I let her go! And...and that was very...I mean at the time I didn't think she was going to do it, so I called her bluff on it, per se, and that's. I mean, she left! You know, and at that point there she just, she said I'm not coming back until things are right and stuff. And when she walked out the door she goes, she always asks me, "Why didn't you stop me? Why didn't you stop me?" Well, I didn't, didn't think she was going to do it. And I didn't want, you know, I think at that point it's like, well I'm not going to beg you to stay back here, you know, if you want to leave, go and stuff or whatever. I thought, you know, she'd hop in and get to the end of the driveway or go around the block, and then she'd come back home. She never did, you know, so that was...that was the eye opener for me, you know, at that point. (#M1-6)

He said that he quickly learned that she meant what she said this time and did not return home for a while. He said, "I'm sitting here and you know in this big house all by myself and that was an eye opener for me. That was, that was I think what woke me up completely and stuff, or whatever at that point" (#M1-3). Matt (M1) felt that he had taken the fact that she would always be around for granted, and then one day she was not there anymore and it made him realize what they had together.

Mike (M3) also talked about how this experience of marital difficulty and reconciliation made him look back and recognize what he had and what it would mean if they were not together anymore. He saw that his wife felt unappreciated and how he

contributed to her feeling that way and wanted to remedy it. John (M5) thought about how close he had come to ruining their relationship and losing his wife in the process. He said, "It was a while ago now but sometimes I still just sometimes say to myself, 'Oh, my God. I almost blew it. I really, really almost blew it'" (#M5-13). He found himself almost paralyzed by the thought that he and his wife could potentially not have made it through the threat and what that would mean for his life, simply because he had taken the relationship for granted. Andrew (M6) further commented, "As I chatted with my friends about the challenges that they had, I found that my problems were nothing, putting them in the context of what other people were going through. I am very fortunate to have the wife that I do and the family that I do. . . . I learned to look for those things [she does] and not take them for granted. Those little things are ways of telling me that she loves me" (M6-10).

Cultivating sincere appreciation for a partner's contributions to the marital relationship on a continuing basis was thus a stepping stone toward reconciliation for men. As women discussed feeling overwhelmed with family demands, a portion of this emerged due to the feeling of being taken for granted in the relationship. For men, then, adjusting their perspective to appreciate a spouse's efforts and communicate that was an important theme in reconciliation

Misjudging Partner's Perceptions. The last theme that was noted throughout the narratives regarding the experience of men was not something that was explicitly talked about by the participants. Instead, this pattern was noticed by the interviewer when comparing the men's understanding of their partner's perspectives to their partner's actual perspectives. It became clear that men in the study overestimated their partner's overall perception of the threat and the reconciliation process. Comparing and contrasting the

men's stated perceptions with the women's responses, it was observed that how men viewed their partner's experience often was not congruent with how their partner identified her own experience. This pattern implies that there are often separate gendered processes and perceptions going on about the same experiences in the same relationship. This is perhaps a topic for further exploration in future study of gender influences in the marital reconciliation experience.

Similarity in the Reconciliation Experience

There was one common theme that stood out throughout the narratives across both genders. This theme was that the processes of reconciling their marriage ultimately made the participants perceive their marriage as stronger than it was prior to the threat and the reconciliation experience. Thus, both male and female participants identified a change in their relationship for the better as a result of going through the rigors of the reconciliation experience.

Jessie (W3) felt as though she and her husband Mike (M3) had been through a lot in their years of marriage and it started right at the beginning of their marriage. She said that going through the work to get their marriage back on track has definitely strengthened their marriage. She stated, "Yeah, I think it's maybe made us stronger and I would hope it would make Mike appreciate me a little bit more" (#W3-8). Mike (M3) also talked about how you have to make a decision to better your marriage and work at it if that is what you ultimately want. He said, "Well, we both went through this together to save our marriage so, if you want to keep it going you have to..." (#W3-8). Both spouses talked about how their marriage benefited from the trials they went through.

Ryan (M2) talked about his relationship getting stronger by pointing out its fragility. He realized that their relationship stability is not guaranteed and it is something that needs to be maintained in order to be successful. He said, "I think it has strengthened our relationship by providing more insecurity" (#M2-9). It was an interesting perception in that through dealing with marital instability he found greater strength in the relationship and motivation to maintain it. His wife, Mary (W2) said that she felt that they were able to be open with each other and look at how important it is to be focused on the relationship, because it is easy to be distracted from what each truly values. Matt (M1) felt that there was a better way to strengthen a marriage rather than facing a threat to it, but he was glad they made it through their experience. He said:

And I think again over [it] all, [and] we've brought ourselves back together in a stronger sense, you know, because of that. I wouldn't wish that on anybody for them to do that stuff to make their marriage stronger, but ours actually, you know did...I think ended up that way. (#M1-2)

While it was not the easiest path to strengthen a marriage, it was what it took to rehabilitate their relationship. His wife, Debbie (W1) said, "That was just rejuvenating for our marriage, I think. It just took us to a whole better, it was...just brought us close again" (#W1-2). Sometimes realizing the disparity between what their marriage was and what it could be served as motivation to continue working on a healthy relationship.

Making it through reconciliation was something that was an overwhelming process for John (M5) and his wife Rhonda (W5). John (M5) said:

I know that these are pretty dramatic terms, but it was that big, and to reconcile that and to be able to stay together and really overcome it and feel strong in our marriage now . . . it was a rough few years there and we made it. (#M5-4)

Rhonda (W5) said:

It is a much better marriage now, much more intimate, both sexually intimate and sharing our lives and enjoying each other. Just enjoying each other. We are much more able to talk about what we want out of life. (#W5-11)

Both spouses indicated that what they overcame seemed insurmountable when they were going through it, but both also feel that they are in a better place in their marriage now than they were before the threat happened. Asked about the value of the experience, Rhonda (W5) observed, "I am in a much better marriage now than I was before this happened. It didn't have to deteriorate that far, I suppose, but again I'm in a much better marriage now than I was even "pre-affair" stage" (#W5-12). Andrew (M6) and Melanie (W6) also struggled through the reconciliation process following an episode of infidelity, and each spouse agreed that the relationship was significantly better after the process than it had been before. Andrew (M6) stated, "The love that we have today is much different than the love that we had when we first got married" (#M6-18). Despite its rigors and the many challenges occurring with a reconciliation process, both men and women in the study felt positive they had committed to remain in the relationship and had emerged with a stronger relationship and significant growth as individuals.

This discussion of themes in the reconciliation process that exhibit the influence of gender on partner perceptions and experiences has not been exhaustive. It is likely that further exploration is possible and it seems clear that gender does play a substantial role in how spouses undergo the process of reconciliation. Men and women are human beings with similar needs, desires, and hopes in the context of marriage. As a result, many of the patterns identified and discussed are common between men and women. However, men and women also differ and some of their unique perceptions and priorities are also reflected

in the patterns discussed wherein gender seems to play a more prominent role in the reconciliation experience.

Summary

There is little known about marital reconciliation and how couples undergo and overcome the threat of divorce or separation in their marriage. There is even less known about how the construct of gender influence the perceptions and experiences of reconciliation among men and women. The findings that emerged in this study were helpful to understanding the process of reconciliation in marital relationships. The last question asked of the participants was what gave them the interest and willingness to participate in the study. Overwhelmingly, the participants answered that they want to help other couples in the same situation. They expressed the "underground" nature of reconciliation and that no one wants to talk about the struggles that exist in marriages or admit that they exist in their own marriages. The participants were hopeful that their participation in this study, and the results derived, would significantly contribute to research regarding how married couples can prevail over marital problems, and, in turn, can provide useful information for the development of resources or programs to support healthy marriages.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

The participants in this study all came with their own backgrounds, individual and familial struggles, and varying degrees of experience regarding how they were affected by the threat of separation and divorce in their relationship. Regardless of the differences, each participant shared his or her story with the researchers to establish a contextual understanding which served as the foundation for understanding the phenomenon of marital reconciliation among men and women.

The findings of this study provided more information on the construct of marital reconciliation and the key patterns that represent the experiences of the participants. Given the small amount of research on this topic and how gender shapes its perception, this study has only scratched the surface on how it can be understood theoretically and empirically. This study served as an exploratory beginning that will, however, give a better understanding as to what factors contribute to the threat of separation and divorce, the processes that occur in marital reconciliation, coping mechanisms and resources that were helpful in navigating the process, and how gender plays a part in the perceptions of men and women of the marital reconciliation process. This chapter provides a brief overview of the findings and their implications.

Overview of Marital Reconciliation Findings

Participants all identified key factors that contributed to the threat of separation and divorce in their marriages. These factors included family or origin influences, life stressors, history of problems, infidelity, mental illness, and issues with children. The most common themes identified by participants were life stressors, a past history of relationship problems, and infidelity. Participants identified challenges associated with outside stressors on their

relationship or how trust or disconnection had become a problem in their marriage. When trust is broken in a relationship, it is hard for a relationship to recover. Participants identified how much work it was to regain the trust of their partner and how it is a continuing process that is still happening to some extent. Mackey and O'Brien (1995) identified five processes that need to be present to promote a satisfying marriage and the relational value of trust was one of them. Without trust in a relationship, satisfaction is hard to obtain (Mackey & O'Brien, 1995).

Disconnection between partners is not as detrimental to a relationship, but it still requires work to overcome. Johnson (1996) suggested that creating a connection requires changes in patterns of how couples deal with each other. Our participants reported that becoming reconnected took intentionality and is not something that always maintains itself. Much of the research that is done on what factors can lead to a divorce discuss characteristic interactions in the relationship, such as criticism, contempt, defensiveness, or stone walling (Gottman, 1994), but do not address the events that contribute to those characteristics. As a collective group, it was clear that the participants experienced a wide variety of marital complexities. Although they shared both similar and different experiences, all of the participants were able to overcome the marital threats and essentially turn their marriages around.

Infidelity shakes the very core of a relationship and diminishes all trust that existed. Our participants talked about how their own or their partner's infidelity impacted their relationships and what they did to overcome this threat to their marriage. Researchers recognize what variables predict infidelity, but still know a limited amount about how infidelity influences the marital relationship (Duncombe, Harrison, Allan & Marsden,

2008). The participants in this study were able to find hope and a reason to forgive their partner's marital transgressions and feel they are in a better relationship because of resolving the issue. One positive benefit of the findings which emerged from this process was a more clear understanding of how couples may successfully resolve the challenge of infidelity.

With the limited number of participants in the study, we did not see a significant gender influence on the factors that contributed to the threat of separation or divorce, which may or may not represent the findings that would emerge from a study done with a larger and more diverse population.

Our first research question examined what the concept of marital reconciliation meant to each participant. Some answered with a general definition while others gave their perspective based on their specific experiences. We saw that participants either saw reconciliation as a problem in their marriage that they worked to rectify or an outcome of the resolution process. Even though most participants talked about the work they put into getting their marriage back on track, some simply saw the resolution of the problem. Some saw the continuation of their marriage as reconciliation in itself. This is similar to the phenomenon that Hopper (2001) found with people making sense of their divorce. People recreated their idea of what their marriages were to fit the framework of their beliefs that marriage is forever. Some people preferred to see their divorce as an "undoing" of their marriage, rather than an ending (Hopper). The same seemed to be true for people's view of reconciliation. It was as if the work they put into making their marriage work was the means to an end, and since it has been resolved the rest of the experience is re-storied to fit

the current state of their marriage rather than how it may have been when the threat was happening.

We also asked participants to define what a turning point would mean to them in the context of their marriage. Again, some answered in a general sense of the definition and some gave an answer that was specific to their relationship. Both definitions implied a change to their current relationship that allowed them to work towards reconciliation. There were many identified factors that participants saw as a defining change in their relationship that allowed them to move forward. Worthington (2001) defined it as a restoration of "trust in a relationship in which trust as been damaged" (p. 157). The most significant themes throughout the narratives that emerged as turning points were realizing their own commitment to the marriage, seeing a commitment from their partner, regulating mental health problems, finding hope, and forgiveness. The most common themes were realizing their own commitment to their marriage, seeing that same commitment coming from their partner, the history that participants had with their partners, and forgiveness. The participants' recommitment to their marriages as well as feeling their partner's commitment to the marriage allowed them to make the necessary changes it took to realign their marriage. This is congruent with the research that has already been done in looking at what factors make for a satisfying and stable marriage. Stanley and Markman (1992) found that people who identified a value of commitment to their marriage and to its long-term success find their marriages happier and tend to have lower divorce rates. Waite et al. (2002) also found that couples with commitment have a greater sense of devotion to both the relationship and their partner. Commitment was also identified as the most important characteristic in fostering a long-term successful marriage by Fenell (1993). Men in our

study expressed that they found commitment from their desire to remain married. They often spoke about the good times that they had in their marriage, which is congruent with the research that found that men benefit from marriage whether it is satisfying or not, whereas women only benefit from a marriage that they find satisfying (Hess & Soldo, 1985).

Many participants noted that their commitment stemmed from looking back on their history with their partner and not wanting to "throw it away." Participants felt that they had been through so much together, good and bad, and felt that walking away from that would be giving up too much. Buehlman, Gottman, and Katz (1992) found that spousal views of their marital history significantly predicted divorce. For example, if a couple were to only focus on the negative aspects of their relationship then divorce is more likely. It would perhaps be interesting to see if the opposite would occur as well. If couples viewed their past as filled with mostly positive experiences or sought to focus on positive dimensions of their history, would that process encourage them to continue on with their marriage and reconcile versus divorcing when a threat to their marriage occurs? This concept suggests an interesting direction for future studies to investigate.

Forgiveness was something that was also identified as a turning point and important in the process of reconciliation. Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) found that forgiveness has been found to lead to greater emotional and relational health. Fenell (1993) found that forgiveness is one of the most important factors contributing to marital longevity and satisfaction. Our participants identified forgiveness as an important process that they needed to go through in order to fully reconcile their marriage and found it very healing to their relationship.

There were similarities and differences in the turning points that were identified by men and women. Both men and women found that their beliefs about marriage and divorce influenced their motivation to stay in the marriage and identified it as a turning point in their relationship. They also both identified that marriage takes work to maintain and were willing to put forth that work to save their marriage. This is consistent with the Marital Work Ethic Theory, which states that couples identify a problem and work together to fix it, or in essence they "out-work" the problem that is afflicting them until it is resolved (Waite et al, 2002). Men and women also discussed that the history they have shared together was worth saving their marriage for. The desire to stay married seemed to be more prevalent among men than women, with men often talking about the good times in their marriage despite the threats that they faced. This pattern was congruent with Hess and Soldo's (1985) research as mentioned previously.

Coping mechanisms and resources were important in the reconciliation process for all of the participants in the study. Many were identified, but there were common themes that emerged across the narratives. The resources and coping mechanisms that were identified as important were participants' faith, journaling, educational reading, social supports, introspection/self-work, counseling, recognizing triggers, communication, hobbies, and dating. We did not ask participants what resources they did not find helpful, because we wanted to focus on what worked for them and not what held them back. While all participants had varying levels of success with these resources and also used the resources in a slightly different manner, they all found certain resources to be helpful on some level.

There were gender differences and similarities that existed in what each participant found most helpful to them among coping resources and strategies. Both genders found faith, counseling, communication, and making time for each other as important resources in reconciling their marriages. Fenell (1993) reported a strong sense of spirituality as an important characteristic in fostering a successful marriage. Robinson and Blanton (1993) also identified religious orientation as well as communication as important factors in marriage. Women found journaling and social supports to be significant things that helped them get through the threat and help make their marriage satisfying again. Men found educational reading, introspection/self-work, identifying triggers, and hobbies as most helpful to them. Waite et al (2002) identified three ethics that couples used to overcome their problems. One of those ethics was the personal happiness ethic, which did not involve the couple working through their problems, but instead focused on the spouse finding ways to create their own happiness, which in turn created a happier marriage (Waite et al). This pattern seems true for getting involved in hobbies or other personal activities. It allowed the participants to find their own happiness which helped with their own marital satisfaction.

Looking at these themes it can be suggested that women need an outlet to express their feelings and help them through challenging processes, while men look inward and seek private resources to help them deal with their thoughts and feelings. It was also interesting to see that men found preventive measures to ensure their relationship would not falter again, like identifying what triggers upset the relationship and finding hobbies that satisfy themselves.

Lastly, we looked at how men and women perceived the dynamics of gender regarding their marital relationship during and after reconciliation. This section allowed the participants to reflect on their overall experiences of the reconciliation process and what they took away from it. Gender has a large impact on how we perceive the world around us (White & Klein, 2002) and societal expectations and roles are placed on each gender within society and family relationships (Jaggar & Rothenberg Struhl, 1978). These patterns formed a paradigm for the gender-sensitive analysis that was conducted in the study.

There was one common theme that both genders discussed and that was how this experience has strengthened their marriages. Most of the participants expressed that they feel their marriage is better than it was pre-threat and felt that they went through the threat for a reason, although they wished they could have strengthened their marriage without having to go through all the hurt and pain that the threats caused.

Women identified key themes throughout their experiences through reconciliation that expressed sentiments of the interpersonal journey that they went on and what they discovered about themselves along the way. The themes identified by women as important to them in the reconciliation process were that actions spoke louder than words, the independence and strength they found within themselves, the challenge of female role expectations, and uncertainty to a degree about their partner's perceptions of the experience. Most commonly, women discovered that they had a strength within them that they did not know existed because until the threat they never had to rely on it. They also expressed that they discovered who they were separate from the relationship and vowed to hold on that independence throughout the rest of their marriage. The role burden that women expressed was something that women found to put strain on their relationship. This

is similar to the research that Hochschild (1989) found. The "second shift" theory and women's role overload often leads to decreased marital satisfaction and increased marital conflict (Hochschild, 1989). Women in the study identified that having help from their partner and feeling appreciated decreased the feeling of burden.

Men identified themes that reflected what they learned about their partner, rather than what they learned about themselves. The themes identified as important for men were understanding the needs of their partner, taking their partner for granted, and misjudging their partner's perceptions of their reconciliation process. Most commonly they talked about how they took their partner and their relationship for granted. They expressed sentiments of the realization that they came close to losing their partner and the relationship and made changes to ensure that the relationship stayed intact. Also, when researchers compared the man's interview to his partner's interview, it became clear that men's perceptions of their partner's perceptions were misjudged. What women reported as what they found hopeful in their marriage or what gave them motivation to stay in the relationship were sometimes wrongly understood by their partners. It was interesting that all the key themes for men indicated a better understanding of their partner and what the partner meant to them. Bernard (1972) observed this same effect when he noticed that marriages often held two diverse views of the same marital relationship: "his" and "hers." According to Bernard, men and women often express different subjective experiences of their marriage, which tends to reflect the gender differences that seem to exist between men and women.

Study Implications

As researchers theorize about marital dissolution it is often not thought of as a multi-track process. This study has shown that couples have experienced multiple paths from marital dissolution to reconciliation. Factors that worked for one participant may not be as effective for another participant. These findings may help researchers look at the construction of a marital relationship in a different way, not only looking at what makes a marriage successful or unsuccessful, but also at what helps couples through hard times in their marriage. The study provides an opportunity to explore further research regarding marital reconciliation. For example, it would be useful to study this phenomenon across different socioeconomic contexts among participants, as well as across differing contexts for reconciliation (infidelity, financial troubles, etc.).

Educational programs to strengthen relationships have begun adapting to become more specific to the couples' issues. This study has found that there are a variety of resources and coping mechanisms that participants found helpful. Marital enrichment programs may use the findings of this study to incorporate what men and women specifically found helpful to their reconciliation process. Most enrichment studies focus on the couple as a unit, which is often the most important work. This study may imply that there should be some curriculum that is designed for men and women separately, allowing them to process separately in ways they gain from most, as well as together as a couple.

It was also clear in the findings that counseling, both individual and marital, was a helpful resource for participants facing a threat to their marriage. The findings of this study could be used in practice to help better understand what people find helpful when facing a threat to their marriage and how gender plays a part in that. Counselors can use this

information to better understand how the process of marital reconciliation works and what is helpful to each partner in the relationship. This study showed that women found help in social supports and journaling, while men find it more helpful to do introspective work through reading and processing internally. Counselors may be able to tailor their work with men and women specifically to what each finds most helpful.

Study Limitations

There were four main limitations in this study. The first limitation is that this study only interviewed heterosexual couples in order to measure the construct of gender differences, so this study can only speak to heterosexual couple relationships. The second limitation is that this study only interviewed eleven participants (six women and five men). Because of this, the data is limited to a small sample. Although there was a large amount of data accrued by the participants, a larger sample size would obtain more categorical information. This could lead to a greater amount of findings that could contribute to the research on marital reconciliation. Also, with a larger sample size, it is possible that the same patterns found in this study may not hold true. The third limitation is that transferability is limited. Because the sample size is largely homogeneous, the study findings may not represent a more diverse sample. The last limitation is selection bias in people who self-select to tell their story, either due to personality (more open), extreme circumstances in their personal relationship, or past experience in counseling, making them more open to sharing their experiences and a greater comfort level.

Future Research

While marital reconciliation is an area of research that is not extensively understood, how gender plays a part in the process and perceptions of marital reconciliation

is even less understood. The findings of this study showed some gender differences in the ways men and women cope and the resources they use to help them reconcile, as well as some differences in their perceptions of the reconciliation process. However, it should also be noted that many key themes discovered were of equal significance in the experience of both women and men. Future studies should further seek to understand the full extent of these gender differences and similarities between men and women. This study shows that while there are differences in the coping mechanisms, resources and how the process is perceived, there are similarities in the factors that contribute to the threat and the turning points that happen. It would be interesting to learn why there are differences in the perceptions of the same experience, but the factors that lead to that experience are similar. It would imply that a crisis feels like a crisis no matter what your gender, but how the overall experience is perceived is specific to gender.

Future studies would also benefit from a larger sample size. It would be interesting to see how the patterns play out in a larger, more diverse sample. A larger sample would generate more information on the marital reconciliation process and what factors are affected by gender and what seem to be prevalent across gender. While the influence of gender on the marital reconciliation process is under-researched there is room to gather more information for a better understanding.

Conclusion

There is extensive research on marriage and coupled relationships, yet little is known about how couples face threats to their relationship and what they do to overcome these threats. This study scratches the surface on how gender shapes the perceptions of marriage and reconciliation. Study findings showed the factors that contributed to the

threat, the turning points that helped participants make the decision to reconcile, coping mechanisms and resources participants found helpful in the reconciliation process, and how gender shaped participant perceptions of the reconciliation process. This study also examined each of these constructs through a gendered lens. Further research is needed and will assist in the understanding of marital reconciliation and how gender impacts the perception of the process. As this research is conducted this topic will become more understood and information will be available to help marital counselors and marital enrichment programs who aid in mending threaten marriages.

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APPENDIX A. STUDY OUTLINE AND MATERIALS

Marital Reconciliation

Allyson Rachel Hanten
North Dakota State University

Study Overview

Welcome to the Marital Reconciliation Study. I appreciate your willingness to respond to the request for participants and to consider working with me to explore the issue of marriage and couple well-being. This study will assist us in answering important questions about how couples manage challenges and work to build healthy, functional relationships in marriage.

Materials Included

The materials included for you in this packet include the following:

- Letter of Explanation
- Brief Study Outline
- Outline of Study Questions
- Informed Consent Documents- please sign and date
- Personal Information Form- please sign and date

The letter of explanation, brief study outline, and outline of study questions are yours to keep so that you might have a better understanding of the study and its purposes.

The informed consent documents and personal information form need to be completed by you in order to participate in the study. The informed consent documents outline your rights as a study participant and ensure that your participation is informed and voluntary. The personal information form allows us to understand your basic background information. If you choose to participate, please complete these and they will be collected when the study interview is conducted.

Marital Reconciliation

Letter of Explanation

Dear _____:

Thank you for your interest in participating in the Marital Reconciliation Study. I appreciate your consideration and response to the request for participants and to consider working with me to explore the issue of marriage and couple well-being and how that is perceived according to gender.

As you are aware, this study is seeking to understand how married couples experience and overcome the threat of separation or divorce in a marriage relationship and how they experience that according to gender. It is designed to learn from couples in stable marriage relationships who at one time, in the past, encountered the threat of separation or divorce.

To participate in the study, you need to:

- One or both spouses have had to experience the threat of divorce or separation at a point in time in the past history of your marriage
- Have felt stable in their marriage for 18 months to two years post threat of separation or divorce
- Are a heterosexual married couple
- Have been married a minimum of three years total.
- Are willing to participate in a couple interview for one to two hours that will involve sharing your thoughts and experiences about the study topic

If you are willing to participate in this study, you can confirm this by contacting me again (612-270-5588 or Allyson.Hanten@ndsu.edu) or Dr. Sean Brotherson (701-231-6143 or sean.brotherson@ndsu.edu). Also, you can wait for me to confirm this by a follow-up phone call.

Couples who participate in this study should be aware of the following points regarding the study participation:

- Participation is voluntary and all information collected will be kept strictly confidential. Any information shared in research projects or educational programs as a result of the study will not identify participants by name and steps will be taken to ensure anonymity.
- Participating couples will receive a gift certificate or \$25 in cash for participation.
- The time and location of the study interview will be determined according to your convenience.

- The study interview will be tape recorded for research purposes and the material will be transcribed. All identifying information will be changed and taped material will be destroyed once transcribed.
- Couples who are interested may receive a copy of any research findings or personal interview transcripts upon request.

As noted earlier, Marital Reconciliation study is intended to learn from couples in stable marriage relationships who at one time in the past encountered the threat of separation or divorce. This study will help us to understand reconciliation in marriage relationships, what differences exist between males and females in the perception of this reconciliation, and what resources or sources of support are helpful to couples.

If you are willing to participate, please do the following:

- Review enclosed materials.
- Complete the enclosed informed consent documents and personal information form.
- Confirm by phone or email contact your willingness to participate.
- Arrange a time and location for your study interview.

Thank you again for your willingness to consider this opportunity. The information and knowledge that is gained through your participation will be invaluable in developing understanding and resources that can be of assistance to couples who face challenges within their marriage.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Dr. Sean Brotherson or me. I will contact you to confirm your interest and possible interview time within a short period. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Ally Hanten
North Dakota State University
612-270-5588
Allyson.Hanten@ndsu.edu

Dr. Sean Brotherson
North Dakota State University
701-231-6143
sean.brotherson@ndsu.edu

Marital Reconciliation Brief Study Outline

Study Background

The Marital Reconciliation study is derived from the concerns about the high rate of divorce and marital difficulty in America today. Studies show that the likelihood of a couple's marriage to end is between 40 and 45 percent. Linda Waite, of the University of Chicago, conducted a study that showed that two-thirds of unhappily married individuals who avoided separation or divorce rated themselves as happily married five years later. What is not yet understood is how this happens.

Study Focus

The focus of this study is to learn from couples that have experienced the threat of separation or divorce but successfully remained together. Also, we are interested in looking at the gender differences in the perceptions of the reconciliation process.

It is not uncommon for couples to consider separation or divorce at some point in their marriage. Also, it is common for couples to go through periods of difficulties and then move toward more stability. Even though this is known, very few people have talked with couples who have gone through this experience and asked them specifically about what happened, how they dealt with the challenges to their marriage, and what ideas they have about resources, sources of support, or other issues regarding marital reconciliation.

This study will involve in-depth couple interviews with husband and wives who have experienced this issue and have thoughts and experiences to share with others. The interview may involve a discussion of the couple's experience, issues they dealt with, turning points in the relationship, coping strategies, how they feel their experiences differed, and examples of support or resources, and suggestions for other couples.

APPENDIX A Marital Reconciliation INT DOCUMENT

Outline of Study Questions

Study Questions

Some of the questions that will be pursued in the study and that you may wish to think about include the following:

- Your life currently
- The history of your marriage before the threat of separation or divorce
- Your experience as a couple in dealing with the threat of separation or divorce in your relationship
- The turning point(s) in your marriage, when separation or divorce seemed to be the only option
- Ways you overcame this challenge to your relationship or how you held onto hope for your relationship
- Support or resources you found helpful or useful to you
- How this experience impacted your relationship
- A comparison of your relationship pre-threat vs. post-threat of separation or divorce

APPENDIX B. INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Understanding the Process of Reconciliation in Marriages Threatened by Separation or Divorce INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study to understand marriages threatened by separation or divorce being conducted by Ally Hanten, a Master's student at North Dakota State University and Dr. Sean Brotherson, an associate professor also at North Dakota State University.

Basis for Participant Selection

You have been selected because you contacted or were referred to the researchers as having experienced the threat of separation or divorce in your relationship and overcame that threat. You have voluntarily indicated your willingness to be part of the study. There will be 10 to 12 couples selected to participate in this study.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to understand how couples approach and overcome the threat of separation or divorce in a marital relationship. Another purpose is to discover what types of resources or support such couples perceive or suggest as most helpful when the relationship is threatened by separation or divorce. Lastly, we are looking at the gender differences in the perception of the reconciliation process. From this study, the ultimate goal is to design an educational program for couples experiencing threats of separation or divorce as a supportive resource to help them overcome their marital challenges and function at optimal levels.

Explanation of Procedures

The researchers will conduct one semi-structured interview ranging in length from one to two hours. Interviews will be conducted primarily in the participants' place of residence at their discretion. If a participant chooses not to conduct the interview at the place of residence, an alternative location will be determined. Overall, the time and location of the interview will be determined by participants at their convenience.

Potential Risks and Discomforts

Participants may experience slight discomfort during the interview process. This is because details of a difficult time for the couple involving the threat of separation or divorce will be shared. The participants can be assured that all information shared will be strictly confidential.

Potential Benefits

Participants may experience valuable benefits from this study. Participants may find it helpful to share their experience because they successfully overcame a challenge in their marriage. Although all information is strictly confidential and the identity of participants is

protected, information gained from the interviews will be an aid for other couples experiencing the threat of separation or divorce to successfully overcome challenges.

Alternatives to Participation

Because this is a unique opportunity to share experiences and enhance the help the understanding of the marital reconciliation process, the alternative to participation is to not participate. The opportunity to share experiences involved in this research to satisfy the goals of this study are not available in an alternative format.

Assurance of Confidentiality

Confidentiality will be maintained at all times. The interviews will be tape-recorded by permission for resource purposes. All paper forms and tapes will be kept in a locked office, and only the investigator and designated staff assisting with the project will have access to the information. Tape-recorded interviews will be kept on file for a period of five years and then destroyed. Identifying information for participants will be changed, including usage of pseudonyms. A code number will be assigned to each couple participating in the study. These code numbers will appear at the top of the transcribed interviews. This is strictly for the purpose of the researcher to identify the couple in each interview. Only the researchers will have access to identifying code numbers. A master list relating code numbers to participants' names will be maintained in a locked file or locked office. Data and records created by this project are the property of the University and the investigators. You may have access to information collected from you by making a written request to the principal investigator.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal From the Study

Your participation is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your present or future relationship with North Dakota State University. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time.

Compensation

Couples who participate will receive a gift certificate or \$25.

Offer to Answer Questions

You should feel free to ask questions now or at any time during the study. If you have questions about this study, you can contact Ally Hanten at 612-270-5588 or at Allyson.Hanten@ndsu.edu or Dr. Sean Brotherson at 701-231-6143 or Sean.Brotherson@ndsu.edu. If you have any questions about the rights of human research participants, contact the NDSU IRB Office, 701-231-8908.

Consent Statement APPENDIX C. PERSONAL INFORMATION FORM

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have willingly decided to participate, having read the information provided above. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Please answer each question completely. Your answers will be kept confidential. When

Printed Name of Participant Signature of Participant Date

complete this form or one can be done for both of you. Thank you.

Name(s) of Couple

Printed Name of Investigator Signature of Investigator Date

Address and Phone Number

Occupation

Current Age(s)

Level(s) of Education

Age(s) When Married

Number of Children

Current Working Status

Length of Marriage

Ethnic Background

Faith Community (if any)

APPENDIX C. PERSONAL INFORMATION FORM**Marital Reconciliation
Personal Information Form**

Please answer each question completely. Your answers will be kept confidential. When completed, keep this until the interview and then give it to the researcher. Each spouse can complete one form or one can be done for both of you. Thank you.

Name(s) of Couple

Address and Phone Number

Occupation(s)

Current Age(s)

Level(s) of Education

Age(s) When Married

Number of Children

Current Working Status

Length of Marriage

Ethnic Background

Faith Community (if any)

Please provide a brief description of your experience of the threat of separation or divorce and overcoming that challenge (may use the back of the sheet).

Marital Reconciliation

Personal Information Form

— Prompting Questions for Interview

Please answer each question completely. Your answers will be kept confidential. When completed, keep this until the interview and then give it to the researcher. Each spouse can complete one form or one can be done for both of you. Thank you.

Name(s) of Couple

What is your name?

Address and Phone Number

Occupation(s)

What is your address and phone number?

What is your occupation?

Current Age(s)

Level(s) of Education

What is the highest level of education you received?

Age(s) When Married

How old were you when you were married?

Number of Children

Current Working Status

Do you have any children? If so, how many?

Are you currently employed?

Length of Marriage

Ethnic Background

How long have you been married?

What is your ethnic background?

Faith Community (if any)

Are you involved in a faith community? If so, which one?

Please provide a brief description of your experience of the threat of separation or divorce and overcoming that challenge (may use the back of the sheet).

APPENDIX D. PROMPTING QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS

Marital Reconciliation Personal Information Form Prompting Questions for Interviews

Please answer each question completely. Your answers will be kept confidential. When completed, keep this until the interview and then give it to the researcher. Each spouse can complete one form or one can be done for both of you. Thank you.

Name(s) of Couple

What is your name?

Address and Phone Number

Occupation(s)

What is your address and phone number?

What is your occupation?

Current Age(s)

Level(s) of Education

What is the highest level of education you received?

Age(s) When Married

How old were you when you were married?

Number of Children

Current Working Status

Do you have any children? If so, how many?

Are you currently employed?

Length of Marriage

Ethnic Background

How long have you been married?

What is your ethnic background?

Faith Community (if any)

Are you involved in a faith community? If so, which one?

Please provide a brief description of your experience of the threat of separation or divorce and overcoming that challenge (may use the back of the sheet).

APPENDIX E. INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Interview Schedule

Section I - Introduction and Informed Consent

Thank you so much for being willing to meet and talk with me today. I am excited to learn about your thoughts and experiences regarding marital challenges and dealing with them as a couple. This interview should last about 1 to 2 hours. Specifically, I'd like to visit with you about your experience as a couple in dealing with marital challenges, including the prospect of separation or divorce, and your thoughts and perceptions regarding how you have overcome such challenges and things that were important to you in that process of helping your marriage relationship.

First, do either of you have any questions about this process before we proceed? (I will resolve questions if presented before moving on).

We need to go over and have each of you sign an informed consent form to proceed. I will give you a copy to keep in your records and I will take a signed copy for the project.

- Informed Consent - Introduce and take 5-10 minutes to go over the project and informed consent document in detail.

As you have been told, at some point we may wish to use the information that you have provided during our interview in presentations, papers, or projects done as a result of this research project. Your privacy will be thoroughly protected and in order to ensure confidentiality your names and any other identifying information details will be changed.

Other Items to Complete

Please fill out and give back to me the following two forms (need to be provided):

- Participant Compensation form (to receive \$25 or gift certificate)
- Participant Personal Information Form

Provide these forms to couples to be completed if they have not already been completed beforehand or provided.

Section II - Couple Interview

Now I'd like to visit with you together as a couple. With your permission, I'll be tape-recording our interview for research purposes and also taking some notes. If at any time you do not want something to be recorded, just let me know and we can turn the recorder off during that time.

- Introduction – Spend about 15-20 minutes interviewing the couple about the different sections on the Personal Information Form and learning about their personal history and their history as a couple. Ask them to tell about meeting, marrying, and the chronology of their relationship in brief to the present time.

Research Question #1 - What does marital reconciliation mean to each partner? How do men and women experience marital reconciliation differently or similarly? Are factors involved in the reconciliation process similar or different for men and women?

- #1 – Can you tell me about your life currently and a little bit of history to put our conversation in context?
- #2 – What does the term “marital reconciliation” mean to you?
- #3 – Can you share the story of your experience as a couple in dealing with marital challenges, or the threat of separation or divorce, in your relationship?
 - Were there particular issues you dealt with and, if so, how did you overcome those? Individually? As a couple?

Research Question #2 - What does the term "turning point" mean to each partner? Have they experienced turning points important in their reconciliation process? If so, are they similar or different for men and women?

- #4 - What does the idea of a "turning point" in your relationship mean to you?
- #5 - Can you share any particular times or turning points in the relationship when things became more challenging? Can you share any particular times or turning points in the relationship when things became better?
 - Do you feel like the turning point was the same for your wife/husband?

Research Question #3 - What type of resources and coping mechanisms do men and women use in the reconciliation process? Are they similar or different for men and women?

- #6 - Can you explain how you coped in ways that were helpful to overcoming the threat of divorce and related challenges?
- #7 - Can you share examples of sources of support or resources that were helpful or meaningful to you? Individually? As a couple? Why?

Research Question #4 - How do men and women perceive the dynamics of gender regarding their marital relationship during and after the reconciliation process?

- #8 - What do you see as your husband/wife's role in the process of getting your relationship back on track?
- #9 - What were your motivations to stay in the marriage? Do you feel like you had the same motivations to make your marriage succeed as your wife/husband? Were there similarities or differences you noticed?
- #10 - What was it about your relationship that gave you hope? Was your husband/wife able to find that same hope or was it different?

- #11 – Did you learn anything about yourselves or about your marriage going through this experience that is important to you? Do you feel it changed you or the relationship significantly?

Conclusion

Ask the following questions to conclude and thank the participants:

- What was this experience like for you?
- Why were you interested in or willing to participate in this project?